Teaching speech acts as a way to develop Students' communicative competence

by **Tran Thanh Du** (*Thu Dau Mot University*)

ABSTRACT

This study only deals with the range of functions of speech acts that the English language may serve all with a view to raise teachers' and students' awareness of the roles that the communicative intentions, the utterance functions and the interactive context play in the acquisition of language in general and in develoing students' communicative competence in particular. With the aims beforehand, the study tries to analyse and present speech acts and implications for teaching and learning these aspects effectively. With reference to speech acts and their linguistic functions in the English language, this study can serve as a reference material for those who are interested in carrying out more research in this field.

Keywords: *communicative competence, speech acts, English language teaching*

1. Introduction

When we learn a foreign language, we aim at developing the ability to communicate in that language. Recent classroom studies on interlanguage pragmatics have found that teaching pragmatics is generally beneficial to second or foreign language learners in the way that it can help them develop their communicative competence (Kasper, 1997; Kasper & Rose, 1999). So far, these findings are made largely in the areas of speech acts as "of all the issues in the general theory of language usage, speech act theory has probably aroused the widest interest" (Levinson, 1995, p.226). Embedded in the theory of communicative competence, speech act theory can provide constitutive rules for conversations. When we use a piece of language in conversation, we do things or have other things for ourselves: we apologize, promise, request, thank and so on. With certain

knowledge of speech acts, it is easier for communicators to perform and achieve a variety of goals in a conversation. The acquisition of the concepts underlying speech acts may be a prerequisite for the acquisition of language in general (Bruner, 1975; Bates, 1976). These are the reasons why the study of speech acts is of utmost importance in developing communicative competence for foreign language learners.

To analyse speech acts and their realisations in communication, the study makes use of two main methods in linguistic studies: (i) descriptive analysis and (ii) document analysis with the corpus being the language used in daily communication.

Descriptive analysis is implemented through the use of verbal descriptions of linguistics features to depict speech acts and their realisations in communication. Bases on descriptions about the literature review and the actual use of the speech acts, conclusions about speech acts and their communicative values are made.

Document analysis is implemented through the review and analysis of the notions of speech acts and their related phenomina for notable conclusions drawn out at the end of the study. The data collected are, therefore, almost qualitative.

2. Speech act theories

2.1. Communicative competence and pragmatic competence

The notion of communicative competence has been a driving force in second language teaching and learning. In fact, there are lots of definitions concerning this notion and the components that make up this kind of competence is perceived differently among linguists.

Campell and Wales (1970) and Hymes (1972) conceptualised communicative competence in terms of knowledge of rules or grammars and rules of language use appropriate to a communicative situation. In the view of Hydes (1972) communicative competence involves not only the knowledge about language forms but also the knowledge of what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in any given situation.

Canale and Swan (1980) subsumed under communicative competence three such competences later extended by Cana (1983) to four: (i) grammatical competence, (ii) sociolinguistic competence, (iii) discoursal competence, and (iv) strategic competence. In this model, pragmatic competence is represented as sociolinguistic competence described as encompassing both appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of use.

According to Levinson (1995), communicative competence "tends to include at least two components: a code component, which describes a language user's knowledge of syntactics, morphology, semantics, lexis and phonology, and a use component, which describes a language user's ability to use language appropriately for a purpose within a given context" (p.63).

According to Niezgoda and Rover (cited in Casper & Rose, 2001), pragmatic competence "consists of sociolinguistic and illocutionary competence, with the former pararelling sociolinguistic competence and the latter corresponding to pragmalinguistic competence" (p.65). It is obvious that to communicate effectively, learners of English also need sociocultural information on how to interpret and respond to different sociolinguistic behaviors of native English speakers such as greeting, requesting and so on.

No matter what kinds of ideas people may have about communicative competence, pragmatic competence is one of the essential components of commuinicative competence. Whether definitions scholars may provide they all seem to aggree on the need of pragmatic knowledge towards their communication success. As the objective of language teaching and learning is mainly to develop communicative competence for students, it is important that we should pay a certain amount of attention to developing pragmatic knowledge for learners of the language.

2.2. Speech events and the context of interaction

2.2.1 Speech events

A speech event is "an activity in which participants interact via language in some conventional way to arrive at some outcome" (Yule, 1998, p.56). Levinson (1995) defined speech event as "an culturally recognised social activity in which language plays a specific and specified role" (p.79). A speech event "may include an obvious central speech act and other utterances or circumstances surrounding and leading to that central action" (Yule, 1998, p.57). For example, in the production of a "request" lots of utterances are produced surrounding that "requesting" speech event as in the following interaction (Yule, 1998, p.7):

Him: Oh, Mary, I'm glad you're here.

Her: What's up?

Him: I can't get my computer to work.

Her: Is it broken?

Him: I don't think so.

Her: What's it doing?

Him: I don't know. I'm useless with computer.

Her: What kind is it?

Him: It's a MAC. Do you like that?

Her: Yeah.

Him: Do you have a minute?

Her: Sure.

Him: Great!

With the central speech act of "request", the interaction above only performs the function of requesting in real communication.

2.2.2. The context of interaction

Concerning the use of speech acts, the context of utterance should be taken into consideration. Treated as one of the elements of speech events, context can "decide the kinds of speech acts as well as the interpretation of an utterance as performing a particular speech act" (Yule, 1998, p.48). The context of interaction may include the social distance between participants, their relative status, and the formality of the interaction. In most of linguistic communities, differentness in social context lead to the use of different styles**.** For example, people who are close friends or intimates are more imperative. The following sets of utterances will give clear illustrations for this:

Set 1: Roll over!

Set 2: Shut up your food!

These utterances were all produced within a family and therefore would cause no offence there.

In most cases, superiors tend to use imperatives to subordinates. These are orders or suggesstions from the teacher to his pupils:

Open your book at page 46.

Shut the window!

Stop talking, please!

Due to their higher status and authority, the teacher can certainly use direct expressions of their meaning to address his students, to get things done.

The same utterance can be interpreted in different ways based on the context of interaction or speech events. Searle (1969) assumed that context must play a critical role in the determination of what action the speaker intend to be performing. For example, the utterance "The tea is really hot" (Yule, 1998, p.48) can be interpreted as a complaint in the case of a wintry day when the speaker reaches for a cup of tea, believing that it has been freshly made, but it does not go as he wishes. However, changing the circumstances to a hot summer day, with the speaker being given a glass of ice tea by the hearer, this utterance can be interpreted by a praise.

In many cases, there are more than two interpretations of a speech act that can be found in the utterance. It should be noted that it is the speech context that can give clues to the accurate interpretation of the speech act involved.

In the view of Yule (1998), "circumstances such as interactional contexts are embedded in speech events" (pp.47-48). This factor plays a very important role in the choice as well as the interpretation of the speech act that the speaker or language user is trying to perform.

2.3. Spech acts

2.3.1. Definitions of speech acts

In the process of using a piece of language for communicative purposes, people do not only produce utterances containing structures and lexical items, they perform actions via these utterances, These actions are generally called speech acts which are "commonly given more specific labels such as apology, complaint, compliment, invitation, promise or request" (Yule, 1998, p.47). As it is stated by Nunan (1993) "speech acts are simply things people do through language - for example, apologizing, complaining, instructing, agreeing and warning" (p.65). When communicating with each other, the speaker mormally expects the act that he or she intends to perform will be recognised by the hearers, producing some changes in the real world. A speech act is an utterance "which has both a literal meaning and a particular illocutionary force" (Paltridge, 2000, p.16). According to Austin's theory of speech acts, "when a sentence is uttered, three kinds of speech acts are silmultaneously performed" (Austin, 1962, p.236).

Locutionary act: Locutionary act is the basic act of utterance that produces meaningful linguistic expressions. In producing "It's raining", we are actually producing a locutionary act because there is some kind of meaning embedded in the uttarance.

Illocutionary act: When we produce an utterance, we aim at producing some kinds of functions in mind. The illocutionalry act is performed via the communicative force of an utterance. For excample, we utter "It's hot in here" to make a statement, a request, an offer or some other communicative purposes. According to Austin (1962), illocutionary acts can have a variety of effects ranging from transactional effects to interactional effects.

Perlocutionary act: Perlocutionary act is the actual result of the locutionary act (Peccei, 1999; Austin, 1992). This act is performed on the assumption that the hearer will recognise the effects you intended. This kind of acts brings about the effects on the audience by means of making the utterance. Going back to the utterance mentioned above, when producing this piece of utterance, the speaker in fact intended to get the hearer to open the window.

It is no doubt that in analysing a speech act, we need to make a distinction among the locution, illocution and perlocution. Just as different locutions can have the same illocution force, the same locution can have different illocutionary forces depending on the context.

2.3.2. Implicit and explicit illocutionalry force

In speech, the illocutionary force of an utterance can be performed in two different ways: implicitly and explicitly (Cruise, 2000). In the first type of case, the illocutionary force is commonly spoken of as indirect speech acts as it has been presented in the precious parts. In the second type, there is a specific linguistic signal whose functions

are to encode the illocutionary force. The illocutionary force in this case produces indirect speech acts. Yule (1998) called these signals illocutionalry force indicating devices (or FIDI for short).

According to Cruise (2000), there are two main kinds of linguistic signals: lexical and grammatical. These signals are conventionally associated with illocutionary acts (Brown & Yule, 1983). The lexical signals include the use of so-called performative werbs such as *warn, beg, thank*, as in the following examples:

I *beg* you not to leave soon.

I *thank* you for staying here with me.

The grammatical signal system includes the use of different grammatical structures, stress or intonation patterns to indicate different kinds of illocutionary forces as in the case of the following utterances:

You wrote the article. (declarative)

Did you write the article?   (interogative)

Write the article!   (imperative)

2.3.3. Classifications of speech acts

There are many ways of catagorising speech acts. The following two ways seem to be prominent in the field of linguistics:

a) In terms of functions

Concerning the functions of speech acts, Janet Holmes (1995) and Searle (1976) proposed a system of five different catagories a follows:

Directives:

Directives attempt to direct the addressee to perform or not perform an act, such as ordering and requesting or suggesting. Directives can be negative or positive, direct or indirect. For examples:

Clear the table! (direct directive)

Could you lend me the pen, please? (indirect directive)

Don't touch that. (direct directive)

In using directives, the speaker "attempts to make the world fit the words via the hearer" (Yule, 1998, p.55).

Assertives or representatives:

This kind of speech acts is to describe states or events in the world including asserting, boasting or claiming. These kinds of speech functions "state what the speaker believes to be the case or not" (Yule, 1998, p.54). For examples:

The earth is flat.

It was a warm sunny day.

In using a representative or a assertive, the speaker "makes the words fit the world" (Yule, 1998, p.54).

Commissives:

Comissives are used to commit the speaker to a future course of action, such as promising or threatening. For examples:

I'll be back.

We will not do that.

In using a commissive, the speaker "undertakes to make the world fit the words" (Yule, 1998, p.54).

Expressives:

Expressives are used to express the speaker's attitudes and feelings about something, such as thanking, pardoning and congratulating. Expressives are usually made on the basis of the speaker's experience in the world. For examples:

I'm feeling great today.

I'm really sorry.

In using expressives, the speaker "atempts to make the words fit the world" (Yule, 1998, p.54).

Declarations or performatives:

Declarations or performatives are "kinds of speech acts that change the world via the utterances" (Yule, 1998, p.54). They are used to change the status of the person or object refered to by performing the act successfully, such as christening or sentencing. For examples:

Priest: I now pronounce you husband and wife.

Although the precise label given may be different, these functions of speech acts are recognised by many linguists. Each category has its distinctive characteristics. However, "they seem to be very fundamental functions of language, perhaps because they drive from the basic components of any interaction - the speaker, the addressee and the message" (Homes, 1995, p.287).

Concerning the direct realisation of speech acts, Peccei (1999) summarised some linguistic features of the utterances which are recognised as typical for certain types of speech acts as follows:

TABLE 1. Linguistic features of Speech act catagories as suggested by Peccei (1999)

Speech act catagories	Typical expressions	Examples
Declaratives	Declarative structures with speaker as subject and a performative verb in simple present tense	We find the defendant guilty. I resign.

Representatives	Declarative structures	Tom's eating grapes. Bill was an accountant.
Expressives	Declarative structures with words referring to feelings	I'm sorry to hear that. This beer is disgusting!
Directives	Imperative sentences	Sit down! Fasten your seatbelts!
Rogatives	Interrogative structures	Where did he go? Is she leaving?
Commissives	Declarative structures with speaker as subject and structure time expressed	I'll call you tonight. We are going to turn you in.

b) In terms of structures

Based on structures, speech acts can be classified into two distinct types: direct speech acts and indirect speech acts (Yule, 1998).

A direct speech act is one that is produced with a "direct relationship between a structure and a function" (Yule, 1998, p.55). For example, when producing a declarative sentence as in "It's cold in here" to make a statement, he is actually producing a direct speech act.

An indirect speech act is one that is produced with an indirect relationship between a situation and a function. In an indirect speech act, one speech act is performed indirectly through the performance of another spech act. In this sense, if the speaker uses the above utterance to make a request, he is actually making an indirect speech act. Examples of indirect speech acts can be found most often in the use of an interrogative form to make a request. For example, in uttering "Can you open the window?", the speaker is not expecting for the answer "yes" or "no" from the hearer but what he really wants the hearer to do is to do the act of "closing the window". In English, an indirect speech act is closely related to a certain amout of politeness. In most cases, requests that are more indirect are considered to be more polite.

2.3.4. Conditions for successful speech act performance (also called filicity conditions)

For the successful performance of a specific spech act, certain circumstamces or conditions must be taken into consideration. Most often, a speech act can be effectively performed in the following conditions (Searle, 1969; Cruise, 2000):

►*Content conditions* requiring that the words of the sentences should be concerned with the intended speech acts and carry the intend of the act.

►*Prepatory conditions* requiring a recognised context for the act being carried out.

►*Sincerity conditions* requiring the speech acts should be sincere in his or her utterance and have appropriate beliefs or feelings.

►*Essential conditions* basically defining the act being carried out.

A typical example of these kinds of conditions will be shown clearly in the table below about the effects of felicity conditions on requests and warnings by Searle (1969):

TABLE 2. The effects of felicity conditions on requests and warnings by Searle (1969)

Conditions	Requests	Warnings
Propositional contents	Future act A of H	Future event E
Preparatory	1. S believs H can do A 2. It is not onvious that H would do A without being asked	1. S thinks E will occur and is not in H's interest 2. S thinks it is not obvious to H that E will occur
Sincererity	S wants H to do A	S believes E is not in H's best interest
Essential	Counts as an attempt to get H to do A	Counts as an undertaking that E is not in H's best interest

3. Teaching implications

The study has presented speech acts as well as their realisations in different communicative contexts. In this section, the study aims at addressing readers' attention to the inplications for teaching and learning these aspects of pragmatics in Vietnamese educational contexts. Overall, these aspects are teachable and have been proved to be useful in developing communicative abilities for the students. Therefore students should be provided with useful insights into how to use speech acts successfully. From the literature related to the speech act theries, there are several guidelines that should be taken into consideration for the success of teaching these pragmatic features in communicative classes in Vietnamese contexts as followed:

(i) Explicit teaching is more effective than implicit teaching

Explicit teaching is a system of step-bystep instructional approaches in which teachers examine the individual elements they are planning to teach and continually check for student understanding. Two essential instructional approaches within the explicit teaching system are direct instruction and modeling (Ashman, 2021)

It has been widely accepted that explicit teaching appears to be more effective than implicit teaching in falicitating the acquisition of second language pragmatic routines that requires a higher formality of the linguistic expressions. Also, the fact that learners in the explicit group used the routine expressions under study more often in authentic situations than implicit learners may suggests that success of conscious training by explicit teaching (Yumiko Tate Yama, cited in Rose & Kasper, 2001). To make students have appropriate use of speech acts, the teacher should offer detailed explanations in combination with clear examples of the speech acts under discussion.

(ii) Authentic materials and meaningful practice are very important in teaching speech acts

The use of authentic materials in an English language teaching environment, providing the methodology is carefully considered, is significant and highly recommended by a number of authors (Widdowson, 1990; Kelly et al, 2002)

In teaching speech acts as well as other aspects of pragmatics, it is of crucial importance that students should be exposed to real communication among native speakers of the target language or to communicate with them. A survey by Yukimo Tateyama (cited in Rose & Kasper, 2001) reveals that "most students indicated the instruction as well as materials provided were helpful" (p.218). In many cases, students don't have a chance to contact with these people. It is then necessary for teachers to resort to different kinds of authentic materials concerning the points under discussion. Teachers should determine and adapt materials to develop learners' pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge as well as pragmatic competence. Authentic materials such as films, tapes, books, videos, supporting roleplays can provide learners with clear communicative contexts and appropriate guidelines in using appropriate kinds of speech acts. These materials can make students' language more natural.

Toghether with the use of authentic materials, meaningful practice should also be included in teaching these aspects. Teachers can take in use model dialogues, which are short and authentic to illustrate speech acts in a variety of contexts or they can ask learners to act out dialogues or roleplays in given contexts, using appropriate kinds of speech acts. Here are some meaningful activities (tests) for the practice of speech acts in the language classroom

Example 1: How would you say if you want to?

A. Congratulate someone.

B. Call someone' attention to the TV set.

C. Forbit someone to enter the room.

Example 2: Decide if each of the following sentences is interrogative, imperative or declarative:

A. You can pass the milk.

B. Why don't you pass the milk?

C. Have you got the milk?

D. I could use the milk.

E. Get me the milk!

F. Send the milk down here.

Example 3: Look at the following pairs of utterances. What differences did you notice between the utterances in each pair? (Peccei, 1999)

A. I promise to be there./ I'll be there.

B. I admit I was foolish./ I was foolish.

C. I warn you, this gun is loaded./ This gun is loaded.

D. I apologise./ I'm sorry.

Example 4: In each of the following dialogues, decide whether the second speaker's utterance is a representative, a commissive or a directive (Peccei, 1999):

a. Jane: Coco's sick.

   Steve: I'll take her to the Vet.

b. Mike: What's the weather like in Dalas?

   Annie: It's raining.

c. Ed: Tha garage is a mess.

   Faye: Clean it up!

(iii) Combine speech acts with other contextual clues

If teaching pragmatics is beneficial and the context of interaction plays an important role in interpreting a speech act, we would expect that the teaching of contextualisation clues should not be an exception (Ohta, cited in Rose & Kasper, 2001). Contextualisation clues are defined as "constellations of surface features of message form…by which speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows" (Gumperz, 1982, p.131). Contextualisation clues can operate at the following levels of speech production:

Prosody: intonation, stress, pitch and pitch register shifts

Paralinguistics: rhythm, pauses, hesitation, latching and overlapping, and other "tone of voice"

Code choice: as in code or style switching at linguistic levels which includes phonetic, phonological or monosyntactic options

Lexical forms or formulaic expressions: opening or closing routines, metaphoric expressions

A contextualisation clue is generally "a powerful tool for sense making in social interaction" (Cook, cited in Rose & Kasper, 2001, p.82). To teach an appropriate speech act, it is necessary to teach students a range of coocurring contextualisation clues that constitute that speech act. It is also important to "instruct students to pay attention to the relationship between linguistic forms, the acts it performs and the social contexts in which that particular meaning is foregrounded" (Cook, cited in Rose & Kasper, 2001, p.101).

(iv) Contrasive analysis between students' own language and the target language would be beneficial

In order to make students remember the strategies concerning the acquisition of speech acts, the teacher had better to encourage students to make a comparision between English strategies and Vietnamese strategies. Students can profit from a direct

comparison of their native language with the language to be learned, thus making their implicit knowledge of the differences explicit. It is important for instructors to have knowledge of linguistic, pragmatic, discoursal and cultural structures of the target language as well as those of the students' native language and evaluate what needs to be explicitly taught in class.

(v) Incorporating testing of pragmatics in language testing

It has often noted that "the contents and forms of language teaching are significantly influenced by the contents and forms of linguistic testing" (Rose & Kasper, 2001, p.9). It can be said that testing is inseparable from language teaching and learning process. Testing helps educators have an essential tool to systematically collect information on an actlual state of the subject being assessed. From that, it provides an practical evidence based on the obtained information and then suggests solutions to improve the quality of education.

In instructional contexts where formal regular testing is performed, pragmatic ability is not often included as a regular and important component of language tests. In other words, "tests of pragmatic ability are still far and few between in foreign language teaching and learning" (Rose & Kasper, 2001, p.9). There are number of things that we should do to tackle with this problem. According to Levinson (1995), one way is to examine the pragmatic properties of existing tests, such as oral proficiency, interviews, in order to evaluate how capable these tests are of assessing pragmatic ability. The important thing is that we as language teachers should develop principles, instruments and procedures specifically for the assessment of this kind of ability.

So far, different teaching techniques for the successful teaching of speech acts have been proposed. In order to apply these techniques sucessfully, it is of utmost importantce to equip teachers with pragmatic knowledge as well as sociolinguistic knowledge in the process of training language teachers.

4. Conclusion

This study has presented different kinds of spech acts and their functions as well as their realisations in communication. As any utterance that serves a function in communication, speech acts can increase our awareness of the close relationship between discourse analysis and language teaching and learning. With the efforts from the author, theories of speech acts and and teaching implications related to these aspects are clearly stated in the study. It is clearly shown that the teaching and learning of speech acts can be considered as important factors contributing to the development of students' communicative competence. In language teaching, English teachers should therefore incoroporate speech acts in language classroom and language testing as much as possible.

References

Ashman, G. (2021). *The power of explicit teaching and direct instruction.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. (ESSA Level IV).

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bates, E. (1976). *Language and context: The acquisition of pragmatics*. NewYork: Academic Press.

Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bruner, J. (1975). *The ontogenesis of speech acts*. Journal of Child Language. 2.1-20.

Campbell, R., & Wales, R. (1970). *The study of language acquisition*. Inj.: Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.).

Canale, M. & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics,* 1, 1-47. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/I.1.1

Cruise, A. (2000). *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics*. OUP.

Gumperz, K. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. CUP.

Holmes, J. (1995). *An Introduction to sociolinguistics*. Longman.

Hymes, D. (1992). *On Communicative competence*. Inj.: Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.).

Kasper, G. (1997). *Can pragmatic competence be taught*? http://www.lll.hawaii. edu/nflrc/ networks/nw6.

Kasper, G. & Rose, K. (1999). Pragmatics and second language acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics,* 19, 81-104.

Kelly, C., L. Kelly, Offner, M- & B. Vorland (2002). *Effective ways to use authentic materials with ESL/EFL students*. The Internat TESL Journal, VIII.

Levinson S. C. (1995). *Prgmatics*. CUP.

Nunan, D. (1993). *Introducing discourse analysis.* London: Penguin English.

Paltridge, B. (2000). *Making sense of discourse analysis.* Gold Coast: Antipodean Educational Enterprises.

Peccei, J.S. (1999). *Pragmatics*. Routledge.

Rose, K.R. & Kasper, G. (2001). *Pragmatics in language teaching*. CUP.

Searle, J.R. (1969). *Speech Acts: An assay in philosophy of language*. CUP.

Searle, J.R. (1976). *The classification of illocutionary acts.* Language in Society.

Widdowson, H.G. (1990). *Explorations in applied linguistics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yule, G. (1998). *Pragmatics*. OUP.