



TYPES AND FUNCTIONS OF TEACHER SPEECH ACTS

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Annotation: *This article explores the various types and pragmatic functions of teacher speech acts within the context of classroom discourse. Drawing from speech act theory, sociolinguistics, and educational pragmatics, it examines how teachers use language to manage classrooms, deliver content, control behavior, foster interaction, and construct relationships. The study categorizes teacher utterances into major speech act types—such as directives, assertives, expressives, commissives, and declaratives—and analyzes their pedagogical roles. Furthermore, the article investigates how speech acts contribute to shaping power dynamics, social positioning, and learner engagement in diverse educational settings. Particular attention is given to how speech acts vary in form and function depending on factors such as age group, cultural context, subject matter, and teaching approach. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of discourse sensitivity and speech act awareness in teacher training and educational practice, arguing that effective communication is foundational not only for knowledge transfer but also for fostering inclusive, respectful, and engaging learning environments.*

Key Words: *Teacher speech acts, classroom discourse, pragmatics, directive speech acts, communicative function, discourse analysis, classroom interaction, educational linguistics, teacher talk, power dynamics, pedagogical communication, speech act theory.*

Introduction



Language is the primary medium through which teachers interact with students, deliver instruction, regulate behavior, and foster a productive learning environment. In this regard, speech acts—the fundamental units of communication in pragmatics—serve as a powerful tool in the classroom. According to Austin (1962) and later Searle (1969), every utterance performs a function beyond its literal meaning, such as making a request, giving a command, or offering feedback. In the educational context, these functions are crucial not only for the flow of information but also for establishing roles, building rapport, and maintaining control.

Understanding the types and functions of teacher speech acts is essential for analyzing classroom interaction and enhancing pedagogical effectiveness. Speech acts are not random linguistic choices; they are intentional communicative strategies that reflect the goals, attitudes, and values of the teacher. This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of teacher speech acts, drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical findings to examine how these acts operate and contribute to the learning process.

1. Theoretical Background: Speech Act Theory and Classroom Discourse

Speech act theory, initially proposed by J.L. Austin and further developed by John Searle, posits that language is performative—that is, speaking is a form of acting. Each speech act includes three dimensions: the locutionary act (the act of saying something), the illocutionary act (the speaker's intention), and the perlocutionary act (the effect on the listener). In the classroom, teachers utilize speech acts to perform various functions that go beyond content delivery.

In addition, classroom discourse is shaped by institutional roles, power asymmetries, and interactional expectations. As such, teacher speech acts are often marked by authority, structure, and pedagogical intent. Speech acts thus function both as a means of communication and as a tool for classroom management and socialization.

2. Types of Teacher Speech Acts

2.1 Directive Speech Acts



Directive speech acts are among the most frequent in teacher talk. These include instructions, commands, requests, suggestions, and advice. Their primary function is to get the student to do something, such as “Open your books,” or “Please read the next sentence.” The directness of such speech acts often depends on the teacher’s rapport with students and the classroom’s cultural norms.

2.2 Assertive Speech Acts

Assertives or representatives express beliefs, knowledge, or opinions. Examples include statements like “The earth revolves around the sun” or “That’s a good answer.” These acts serve to convey factual information, affirm student responses, or clarify concepts. They help frame the teacher as a knowledgeable authority while guiding students through content.

2.3 Expressive Speech Acts

Expressives reflect the speaker’s psychological state, including emotions and attitudes. In the classroom, these may take the form of praise (“Excellent work!”), disappointment (“I expected better”), or empathy (“I know this is difficult”). Such acts build relational trust and contribute to the socio-emotional atmosphere of the classroom.

2.4 Commissive Speech Acts

These speech acts commit the speaker to a future course of action, such as “I will check your homework tomorrow.” Though less frequent in classroom discourse, commissives help teachers build reliability and accountability, both key to establishing authority and trust.

2.5 Declarative Speech Acts

Declaratives bring about change through their utterance. For example, “You are late” can establish a disciplinary boundary, or “This ends our lesson” signals a structural transition. These speech acts reinforce institutional authority and manage classroom organization.

3. Functions of Teacher Speech Acts in Educational Contexts

3.1 Instructional Function



Speech acts are central to content delivery. Through a combination of assertives and directives, teachers guide learners through new concepts, provide examples, and monitor comprehension.

3.2 Managerial Function

Classroom management relies heavily on speech acts to maintain order and set expectations. Directives and declaratives are especially prominent in this domain, establishing routines, norms, and consequences.

3.3 Interpersonal Function

Expressive speech acts contribute to the relational dimension of teaching. Encouraging language, humor, and empathy foster a positive learning environment and student motivation.

3.4 Evaluative Function

Teachers use speech acts to evaluate student performance both formally and informally. Phrases like “Well done” or “That’s incorrect” are assertive and expressive at once, reinforcing desired learning behaviors.

3.5 Reflective Function

At more advanced levels, teachers may engage students in metacognitive discussions through speech acts that prompt reflection—e.g., “Why do you think that answer is correct?” These acts promote critical thinking and learner autonomy.

4. Speech Acts and Power Relations in the Classroom

Speech acts are inherently connected to social roles and power structures. The teacher’s authority is often encoded in the form, frequency, and directness of speech acts. For instance, the use of imperatives implies control, whereas indirect requests can suggest a more collaborative stance. Understanding the power implications of language helps educators create more equitable and democratic classroom environments.

5. Implications for Teacher Training and Practice

An awareness of speech act types and their functions can greatly enhance teachers’ communicative competence. Educators should be trained to:

Vary their speech acts based on context and learner needs.



Use inclusive and respectful language.

Foster dialogue through open-ended and reflective questioning.

Balance authority with empathy to create a supportive atmosphere.

By becoming more reflective about their language, teachers can improve student engagement, comprehension, and classroom climate.

Conclusion

Teacher speech acts are not merely linguistic expressions but essential tools for instruction, interaction, and classroom governance. Their types and functions span cognitive, emotional, and organizational domains, making them a central component of effective teaching. As classrooms grow more diverse and communicative demands become more complex, developing discourse awareness and pragmatic sensitivity is a professional imperative for educators. Further research on speech acts in multilingual and multicultural classrooms will deepen our understanding and support more inclusive pedagogical practices.

Teacher speech acts are central to the communicative fabric of classroom interaction, functioning as both instructional tools and mechanisms of classroom management, motivation, and rapport-building. This study has highlighted the diverse typologies and pragmatic functions of teacher speech—ranging from directives and expressives to metalinguistic scaffolding—demonstrating that teacher talk is a strategic and adaptive act shaped by pedagogical intent and contextual dynamics.

Effective teaching thus requires more than subject knowledge; it demands linguistic awareness and pragmatic sensitivity. Teachers must consciously craft their utterances to promote clarity, engagement, and inclusivity. Incorporating speech act theory into teacher training can enhance communicative competence and improve instructional outcomes.

Ultimately, understanding the types and functions of teacher speech acts deepens our appreciation of language as a pedagogical tool and opens pathways for more reflective, effective, and learner-centered teaching.



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