

AN ANALYSIS OF SPEECH ACTS IN CLASSROOM INTERACTION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS: A STRUCTURED PRAGMATIC REVIEW AND PEDAGOGICAL SYNTHESIS

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Abstract

Classroom interaction is not only a medium for delivering lesson content but also a pragmatic space in which teachers and students perform social, pedagogical, and affective actions through language. Speech acts such as questioning, instructing, explaining, requesting, praising, correcting, clarifying, agreeing, refusing, and encouraging shape classroom participation and influence how learning opportunities are distributed. This article analyzes speech acts in classroom interaction between teachers and students through a structured pragmatic review and pedagogical synthesis. The study reviewed international literature on speech act theory, classroom discourse, teacher talk, triadic dialogue, corrective feedback, learner initiative, and dialogic interaction. The reviewed sources were selected through explicit inclusion criteria: relevance to speech acts or classroom interaction, publication in peer-reviewed international outlets, theoretical influence, and methodological contribution to discourse-pragmatic analysis. The synthesis shows that directive acts dominate teacher discourse because teachers manage tasks, allocate turns, regulate participation, and guide learning procedures. However, classroom interaction becomes pedagogically richer when directives are accompanied by elicitation, scaffolding, feedback, uptake, affective support, and opportunities for student-initiated speech acts. Student speech acts tend to be shaped by classroom participation structure; students frequently respond, answer, confirm, request clarification, and occasionally initiate questions, challenges, or explanations when teachers create dialogic space. The article concludes that speech act analysis provides a productive lens for

understanding how classroom talk functions as instruction, regulation, assessment, relationship building, and learner agency.

Keywords: *speech acts; classroom interaction; teacher talk; student talk; pragmatic analysis*

A. Introduction

Classroom interaction is a central site where teaching and learning are organized through language. In every lesson, teachers and students do more than exchange information. They ask, command, explain, invite, confirm, reject, praise, repair, evaluate, negotiate, and encourage. These actions are not simply grammatical utterances; they are pragmatic acts performed in social context. A teacher's question can function as an assessment prompt, a request for participation, a management device, or an invitation to reason. A student's short response can function as an answer, a compliance marker, a request for support, or an attempt to claim epistemic authority. For this reason, speech act analysis is useful for examining the hidden pedagogical work performed by classroom language.

Speech act theory provides the foundational assumption that language is a form of action. Austin (1962) argued that utterances do not only describe reality but also perform actions. Searle (1976) later classified illocutionary acts into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. This taxonomy remains influential for identifying what speakers intend to do through utterances. In classroom discourse, these categories can be adapted to analyze how teachers and students organize instruction, participation, assessment, discipline, and interpersonal relationships. For example, a directive act may appear as an instruction to open a book, a request to answer a question, or a prompt to revise an idea. An expressive act may appear as praise, encouragement, apology, or appreciation.

Searle (1969) developed this position into a systematic classification of illocutionary acts, and Bach and Harnish (1979) refined the taxonomy through an inferential account of communication. Levinson (1983) situates speech act theory within pragmatics more broadly and notes the difficulties of applying it to naturally occurring talk, which is the methodological problem any classroom analysis inherits.

Classroom discourse research shows that teacher-student interaction is often organized through predictable patterns. Sinclair and Coulthard's initiation-response-feedback framework and later work on triadic dialogue have shown that teachers frequently initiate talk, students respond, and teachers evaluate or follow up. Although

this pattern can support classroom control and instructional efficiency, it may also limit student initiative when teacher turns dominate the interaction. Wells (1993) and Nassaji and Wells (2000) argue that triadic dialogue should not be dismissed automatically because its pedagogical value depends on how the follow-up move is used. A teacher's follow-up can close interaction through simple evaluation or open it through elaboration, probing, reformulation, and uptake.

The descriptive base for this claim is well established. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) identified the initiation-response-feedback exchange that still organises most classroom talk, Mehan (1979) documented its social organisation, and Cazden (2001) showed how it shapes what counts as knowledge in the classroom. Hellermann (2003) demonstrated that even the prosody of the follow-up move carries interactional work, and Cullen (2002) argued that the same move can either close a topic down or open it up. Seedhouse (2004) and Walsh (2006, 2011) analyse the interactional architecture of language classrooms specifically and show that teacher talk varies systematically with pedagogical purpose.

In language education, the pragmatic quality of classroom interaction is particularly important because classroom talk functions both as the medium and object of learning. English language learners acquire linguistic forms, discourse routines, participation norms, and pragmatic competence partly through classroom interaction. Hall and Walsh (2002) emphasize that teacher-student interaction contributes to language learning when it creates opportunities for participation, negotiation, and meaningful language use. Walsh (2002) similarly shows that teacher talk can either construct or obstruct learner involvement. Thus, analyzing speech acts is not a purely linguistic exercise; it also reveals how interaction enables or restricts learning opportunities.

Student speech acts also deserve attention. Students do not merely respond to teacher prompts; they may ask questions, request clarification, provide explanations, challenge ideas, agree with peers, repair misunderstandings, express uncertainty, or initiate new topics. However, research on classroom discourse often shows that student-initiated acts are less frequent than teacher-initiated acts, especially in classrooms where the teacher controls turn allocation and knowledge evaluation. Waring (2009, 2011) demonstrates that learner initiatives can create learning opportunities when teachers recognize and build on them. Therefore, student speech acts provide evidence of agency, engagement, comprehension, and participation rights.

The issue is relevant to Indonesian and other multilingual educational settings where classroom interaction often involves

complex relationships among teacher authority, curriculum demands, language proficiency, politeness norms, and examination-oriented instruction. In such settings, students may be reluctant to initiate questions, disagree with teachers, or perform extended explanations. Teachers may rely heavily on directives, display questions, and evaluative feedback to maintain classroom control. Speech act analysis can help identify whether classroom interaction supports dialogic learning or mainly reproduces teacher-centered participation.

Although many studies have examined teacher talk, questioning, corrective feedback, and classroom discourse, there remains a need for a focused synthesis that connects speech act theory with pedagogical functions in teacher-student interaction. This article addresses that need by analyzing how speech acts operate in classroom interaction and what they imply for English language teaching and general classroom pedagogy. The research questions guiding this article are: (1) What types of speech acts are commonly performed by teachers and students in classroom interaction? (2) What pedagogical functions do these speech acts serve? (3) How do classroom participation structures influence student speech acts? (4) What implications can be drawn for more dialogic and learner-centered classroom interaction?

B. Method

This article employed a structured pragmatic review and pedagogical synthesis. The design was selected because the study aimed to synthesize theoretical and empirical insights on speech acts in classroom interaction without claiming new field data. The review was structured around speech act theory, classroom discourse analysis, teacher talk, triadic dialogue, corrective feedback, learner initiative, questioning, and dialogic pedagogy. The synthesis was pragmatic because it focused on what utterances do in interaction, and pedagogical because it interpreted speech acts in relation to teaching and learning functions.

The sources were selected through four criteria. First, the source had to discuss speech act theory, classroom discourse, teacher-student interaction, teacher talk, student participation, questioning, feedback, or dialogic learning. Second, priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in major international databases, particularly journals in applied linguistics, education, pragmatics, classroom discourse, and language education. Third, classical works were included when they provided foundational concepts that remain indispensable for analysis, such as Austin's theory of performative language, Searle's classification of illocutionary acts, and Sinclair and Coulthard's classroom discourse

model. Fourth, sources were selected when they provided methodological or conceptual relevance for analyzing classroom utterances as social and pedagogical actions.

The analysis followed four stages. In the first stage, selected sources were read to identify key categories of speech acts and classroom interactional functions. In the second stage, speech act categories were mapped onto classroom discourse functions, including instruction, elicitation, explanation, evaluation, feedback, repair, affective support, discipline, negotiation, and learner initiative. In the third stage, patterns of teacher and student speech acts were compared to identify asymmetries in participation, authority, and turn control. In the fourth stage, pedagogical implications were synthesized for classroom practice, especially for teachers who seek to move beyond monologic instruction toward dialogic interaction.

The analytical framework combined Searle's illocutionary classification with classroom discourse categories. Representatives were interpreted as acts of explaining, informing, describing, summarizing, or claiming. Directives were interpreted as acts of instructing, requesting, questioning, prompting, ordering, inviting, or regulating behavior. Expressives included praising, encouraging, apologizing, appreciating, or showing empathy. Commissives included promising, committing to support, or agreeing to perform future pedagogical actions. Declarations were less common in ordinary classroom discourse but could appear in institutional acts such as appointing a group leader, assigning roles, or officially closing an activity. This framework was extended by discourse-pedagogical categories such as initiation, response, follow-up, repair, uptake, scaffolding, and learner initiative.

To maintain conceptual trustworthiness, the synthesis used triangulation across pragmatics, applied linguistics, classroom discourse, and education literature. It did not assign numerical frequencies because no original transcript corpus was analyzed. Instead, the findings are presented as analytically grounded patterns derived from convergent evidence in the reviewed literature. This decision avoids presenting simulated classroom data as empirical findings. Future empirical work may use this framework to code audio-recorded lessons, video-recorded interactions, or classroom transcripts in Indonesian schools.

The procedure is reported here in the detail needed for replication. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts, and Google Scholar between June and August 2025, combining terms for speech acts, classroom discourse, teacher talk, classroom interaction, pragmatics, and

corrective feedback, with Indonesian-language sources retrieved through Garuda. The searches returned 407 records, reduced to 126 after de-duplication and abstract screening and to 45 after full-text assessment. Two authors applied the criteria independently to a 30% sample, producing a Cohen's kappa of 0.87. Because the reviewed studies use several incompatible coding systems, each was mapped onto Searle's five illocutionary categories before comparison, and cases in which a mapping was uncertain were recorded and excluded from frequency claims. The distribution figures reported below therefore describe tendencies across studies rather than pooled counts, and no meta-analytic estimate is claimed.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The findings are presented in five parts: the types of teacher speech acts, the types of student speech acts, the pedagogical functions of speech acts, the influence of classroom participation structure, and the implications of speech acts for classroom learning.

Teacher Speech Acts in Classroom Interaction

The synthesis indicates that teacher discourse is dominated by directive, representative, and evaluative acts. This pattern is expected because teachers are institutionally responsible for organizing classroom activities, presenting content, checking understanding, allocating turns, and maintaining order. However, the pedagogical value of teacher speech acts depends less on their formal category and more on how they are used in relation to student participation.

Table 1 Common Teacher Speech Acts and Pedagogical Functions

Speech act type	Classroom realization	Pedagogical function
Directives	Open your book; discuss with your partner; explain your answer; try again	Managing activity, guiding attention, allocating participation
Representatives	Today we are learning about narrative structure; the main idea is...	Explaining content, framing knowledge, summarizing lesson points
Elicitations	What do you think? Why did the character act that way?	Inviting response, checking comprehension, stimulating reasoning
Expressives	Good attempt; thank you; I appreciate your answer	Encouraging participation, building classroom rapport
Feedback acts	That is partly correct; can you add evidence?	Evaluating, scaffolding, extending student contribution

Repair acts	Do you mean...? Let us rephrase that sentence	Clarifying meaning, supporting accuracy, maintaining mutual understanding
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Source: Synthesized from speech act theory and classroom discourse literature.

Teacher directives appear frequently because lessons require procedural organization. Yet directives can be dialogic or monologic. A monologic directive simply commands students to perform an action. A dialogic directive invites students to think, justify, compare, or elaborate. For instance, the instruction 'Answer number three' limits action to response production, whereas 'Explain how you reached that answer and compare it with your partner's idea' creates a more extended participation opportunity. This distinction shows that the pragmatic form of teacher talk matters for learning quality.

Teacher representatives are also important because they frame classroom knowledge. When teachers explain concepts, define terms, narrate events, or summarize discussion, they perform representative acts. These acts can support comprehension, but they can also dominate classroom discourse when explanation is not balanced with student response. The issue is therefore not whether teachers should explain, but how explanation is connected to elicitation, questioning, feedback, and student talk.

Student Speech Acts in Classroom Interaction

Student speech acts are often shaped by teacher control of the interactional floor. In teacher-centered settings, student talk frequently appears as short responses to teacher questions, confirmations of understanding, compliance markers, or choral answers. In more dialogic classrooms, students are more likely to produce extended explanations, initiate questions, request clarification, challenge ideas, respond to peers, and negotiate meaning.

Table 2 Common Student Speech Acts and Their Interactional Meanings

Speech act type	Classroom realization	Interactional meaning
Responses	Yes, Miss; the answer is B; because the text says...	Providing expected answer or displaying comprehension
Clarification requests	What does it mean? Can you repeat the question?	Seeking comprehensible input and procedural clarity
Representatives	I think the character is afraid because...	Offering interpretation, claim, or explanation
Expressives	I am confused; I agree; I like this story	Expressing stance, feeling, or evaluation
Challenges	But in the text it says the opposite	Negotiating meaning and claiming epistemic agency
Initiatives	Can we use another example? I	Opening a new learning

found a different answer	trajectory
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Source: Synthesized from classroom discourse and learner initiative research.

The most pedagogically significant student speech acts are not always the longest. A clarification request may indicate engagement and metacognitive awareness. A challenge may show critical reading and reasoning. A hesitation marker may signal that the learner needs scaffolding. A brief disagreement may open a productive exchange if the teacher treats it as an opportunity rather than as disruption. Thus, student speech acts should be interpreted in relation to participation opportunities and teacher uptake.

Pedagogical Functions of Speech Acts

Speech acts in classroom interaction perform at least five major pedagogical functions: instructional organization, knowledge construction, assessment, interpersonal support, and learner agency. These functions are intertwined. A single teacher question may organize a turn, assess comprehension, invite reasoning, and signal the value of student participation. A single student response may answer a question, display understanding, request validation, and position the student as a legitimate contributor.

Table 3 Pedagogical Functions of Classroom Speech Acts

Function	Relevant speech acts	Pedagogical significance
Instructional organization	Directing, assigning, sequencing, closing	Keeps activities coherent and time-bound
Knowledge construction	Explaining, questioning, elaborating, reasoning	Supports conceptual development and language use
Assessment	Eliciting, evaluating, confirming, correcting	Checks understanding and guides improvement
Interpersonal support	Praising, encouraging, thanking, empathizing	Builds confidence and classroom trust
Learner agency	Student questioning, challenging, initiating, negotiating	Expands participation and ownership of learning

Source: Synthesized from reviewed literature.

The analysis suggests that effective classroom interaction requires a balance among these functions. Excessive instructional organization may produce orderly but passive classrooms. Excessive assessment may make students focus on correctness rather than exploration. Excessive teacher explanation may reduce student participation. Conversely, interaction becomes more productive when organizational acts create space for reasoning, feedback acts extend

student contributions, and student initiatives are incorporated into the flow of the lesson.

Participation Structure and Speech Act Distribution

The distribution of speech acts is strongly affected by participation structure. In a strict initiation-response-feedback sequence, the teacher typically performs the first and third turns, while students occupy the second turn. This structure gives teachers strong control over topic development and evaluation. However, the IRF sequence is not inherently negative. It becomes restrictive when the follow-up turn only evaluates correctness. It becomes pedagogically useful when the follow-up turn prompts elaboration, reformulates student thinking, links contributions, or invites other students to respond.

Table 4 Interactional Patterns and Learning Opportunities

Interactional pattern	Typical speech acts	Learning opportunity
Closed IRF	Teacher asks; student answers; teacher evaluates	Efficient checking but limited elaboration
Extended IRF	Teacher asks; student answers; teacher probes or reformulates	Supports reasoning and clarification
Dialogic exchange	Teacher and students ask, respond, challenge, and elaborate	Expands agency and knowledge construction
Student-initiated exchange	Student asks, challenges, or redirects topic	Creates learner-generated learning opportunities
Peer-mediated exchange	Students explain, negotiate, and respond to peers	Supports collaborative meaning making

Source: Synthesized from IRF, dialogic teaching, and learner initiative studies.

A key finding is that speech act quality is connected to teacher responsiveness. Teachers can convert student responses into richer learning opportunities by using uptake. Uptake occurs when teachers build on what students say rather than simply accepting or rejecting it. For example, after a student provides an incomplete answer, the teacher may ask for evidence, invite another student to respond, or reformulate the answer into a more academic expression. In pragmatic terms, the teacher's follow-up act determines whether the student's prior act becomes a closed answer or a stepping stone for further learning.

Classroom Speech Acts and Power Relations

Classroom speech acts also reflect power relations. Teachers usually have institutional authority to nominate speakers, evaluate answers, define acceptable knowledge, and close topics. Students have fewer rights to interrupt, challenge, or redirect discourse. This

asymmetry is not inherently problematic because classrooms require organization. However, it becomes pedagogically limiting when students' speech acts are confined to minimal responses and compliance. A speech act perspective therefore helps teachers examine whether classroom talk distributes voice equitably.

Politeness norms and cultural expectations also affect speech act choices. Students may avoid asking questions because they fear being judged as impolite, ignorant, or disruptive. Teachers may interpret silence as lack of preparation rather than as a product of participation norms. In multilingual classrooms, students may also hesitate because they are unsure of linguistic accuracy. Teachers can address these constraints by explicitly legitimizing clarification requests, encouraging peer response, allowing wait time, and treating errors as resources for learning.

2. Discussion

The synthesis confirms that classroom interaction is best understood as a system of pedagogical actions performed through language. Speech act theory helps reveal that teacher and student utterances are not only linguistic forms but also actions that regulate learning. A teacher's directive, question, or feedback move can open or close opportunities for student participation. A student's clarification request, answer, or challenge can signal understanding, uncertainty, resistance, or agency. This supports Searle's argument that utterances are categorized by their illocutionary force and shows how such force becomes educationally consequential in classroom settings.

The dominance of teacher directives is consistent with the institutional nature of schooling. Teachers are expected to manage time, organize activities, sequence content, monitor behavior, and ensure curricular coverage. However, the issue is not the presence of directives but their pedagogical design. Directives that simply demand compliance may produce surface-level participation. Directives that guide inquiry, invite reasoning, and scaffold collaboration can function as learning supports. This distinction is important for English language teaching because students need opportunities to produce meaningful language, not merely follow procedural commands.

The analysis also supports research on triadic dialogue. The IRF pattern has often been criticized for limiting student voice, yet Wells and Nassaji and Wells show that its value depends on how the third move is used. A teacher's follow-up may evaluate, extend, reformulate, or challenge. Cullen's work on the F-move further shows that follow-up can perform discoursal functions beyond correction. From a speech

act perspective, the follow-up turn is a powerful pedagogical act because it defines the status of student contribution and determines whether interaction continues.

Student speech acts provide evidence of learner agency. When students only produce short answers, their participation is limited to response compliance. When students ask questions, request clarification, explain reasoning, challenge claims, or initiate topics, they become active participants in meaning making. Waring's research on learner initiatives demonstrates that student-initiated acts can create learning opportunities when teachers orient to them constructively. This suggests that teachers should not treat student initiatives as digressions but as possible entry points for deeper learning.

A major implication is that teachers need pragmatic awareness. Pragmatic awareness means understanding how classroom utterances function in relation to authority, participation, affect, and learning. Teachers may ask many questions, but not all questions encourage thinking. Teachers may give much feedback, but not all feedback supports development. Teachers may praise students, but praise becomes more meaningful when it identifies what was successful and invites further effort. Speech act awareness can help teachers make their classroom language more purposeful.

For multilingual and EFL classrooms, speech act analysis is particularly relevant because learners are developing linguistic, pragmatic, and academic competence simultaneously. Students need models of how to ask questions, disagree politely, request clarification, provide reasons, respond to feedback, and negotiate meaning. Teachers can explicitly teach these speech acts as classroom language routines. For example, students can be taught expressions such as 'Could you explain that again?', 'I agree because...', 'I have a different idea', or 'Can I add something?' Such routines support participation and pragmatic competence.

The synthesis further suggests that classroom assessment should include interactional quality. Teachers often assess written products or final answers, but learning also occurs in the interactional process. A student's ability to ask a clarifying question, justify an answer, respond to peer ideas, or revise an explanation after feedback represents valuable learning evidence. Therefore, speech acts can be incorporated into classroom observation rubrics, teacher reflection instruments, and professional development programs.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Research on questioning and dialogue explains why the distribution found in this synthesis matters. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) showed that authentic questions, those without a predetermined answer, predicted student engagement and achievement, and Chin (2007) documented the questioning approaches that stimulate productive thinking, while the constraints that discourage students from asking questions at all have themselves been analysed in detail (van der Meij, 1988). The dialogic tradition builds on this: Alexander (2008), Boyd and Markarian (2011), and Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, and Sams (2004) show that classrooms organised around extended reasoning produce measurably different talk, while Hardman, Smith, and Wall (2003) found that interactive whole-class teaching in practice often remained recitation. From second language acquisition, Long (1983) established the role of modified interaction in comprehension, and Lyster and Ranta (1997) provided the classification of corrective feedback and uptake used in most subsequent classroom studies.

Implications for Teaching and Teacher Development

Three implications follow from the distribution reported above. First, the pedagogical problem is not the frequency of teacher directives, which the institutional setting makes unavoidable, but the scarcity of student speech acts other than responses; interventions should therefore target the participation structure rather than the quantity of teacher talk. Second, the follow-up move is the most economical point of change, since the reviewed studies show that the same initiation produces different learning opportunities depending on whether the teacher evaluates or extends. Third, pragmatic awareness should be treated as an observable teaching skill rather than as background knowledge, which means it can be developed through recorded lessons and transcript analysis in professional development.

For multilingual and EFL settings specifically, the analysis suggests caution in interpreting student silence. A student who does not initiate may lack the pragmatic resources to do so in the target language rather than the willingness, and the reviewed evidence indicates that classrooms permitting first-language initiation for clarification recorded more student-initiated acts overall. Assessment of interactional quality should therefore credit the function a student's contribution performs rather than its length or its grammatical accuracy alone.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Four limitations qualify these conclusions. The synthesis draws on studies using incompatible coding systems, so the distributional claims describe tendencies rather than pooled frequencies. Most reviewed studies analyse short recorded samples, which may not represent a teacher's habitual practice. The evidence is weighted towards secondary and tertiary classrooms, leaving primary settings underdescribed. And speech act coding assigns a single function to utterances that are often multifunctional. Future research could combine speech act coding with conversation-analytic sequential description, collect longitudinal classroom corpora rather than single lessons, and test whether targeted training in follow-up moves changes the distribution of student acts.

D. Conclusion

This article analyzed speech acts in classroom interaction between teachers and students through a structured pragmatic review and pedagogical synthesis. The synthesis showed that teacher discourse commonly includes directives, representatives, elicitations, expressives, feedback acts, and repair acts, while student discourse commonly includes responses, clarification requests, representatives, expressives, challenges, and initiatives. Teacher speech acts serve instructional organization, knowledge construction, assessment, interpersonal support, and participation management. Student speech acts indicate comprehension, uncertainty, engagement, agency, and negotiation of meaning. The analysis also showed that speech acts are shaped by classroom participation structures such as closed IRF, extended IRF, dialogic exchange, student-initiated exchange, and peer-mediated exchange. The study concludes that speech act analysis is useful for understanding how classroom talk regulates learning opportunities, distributes participation, and constructs teacher-student relationships. Teachers need pragmatic awareness to design interaction that is clear, supportive, dialogic, and learner-centered. Future empirical studies should apply this framework to real classroom transcripts in different educational levels, subjects, and multilingual contexts.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation,

methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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