

The Use of Directive Speech Act and Their Influence on Student Engagement

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Abstract

The language used by teachers in the classroom plays an important role in encouraging student engagement, especially in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This study aims to analyze the use of directive speech acts by English teachers and how these forms of speech affect student engagement in the classroom. This study refers to Searle's classification of illocutionary acts which groups directives into several types, namely: commands, requests, suggestions, advice, instructions, and warnings. In addition, Walsh's theory is used as a basis for analyzing student engagement from three dimensions: interactional, affective, and cognitive. This study uses a qualitative case study approach, with data collection techniques in the form of observation, audio recordings, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. Observation instruments were prepared to record the types and styles of directive delivery, as well as students' responses to the speech. The results of the analysis show that directives delivered politely and directly, such as suggestions or requests, tend to increase students' voluntary participation and cognitive engagement. In contrast, directives that are direct commands or warnings often produce passive or limited responses. These findings emphasize the importance of teachers' language use strategies in creating interactions that support student engagement. The implications of this research can be applied in teacher training and the development of English teaching practices in higher education contexts.

Key words: Directive Speech Act, Teacher Talk, Student Engagement

Introduction

Language in the context of learning does not only function as a means of delivering material, but also as a tool for performing social and pedagogical actions. This idea which states that utterances can be used to perform actions through illocutionary acts (Austin, 1975). Continuing the theory, (Searle J. R., 1969) classifies speech acts into five types, one of which is directive speech acts, which are utterances intended to make the listener perform an action, such as commands, instructions, requests, and suggestions. In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), directive speech acts are a dominant part of teacher discourse in the classroom. Teachers often use them to organize learning activities, give instructions, and direct students' participation. However, the effectiveness of these speech acts depends not only on their linguistic form, but also on their function in social interaction. (Flowerdew, 1988) emphasizes the importance of pragmatic competence in language teaching, both for teachers and students, so that communication in the classroom is more meaningful and effective.

More recent approaches to pragmatics, such as those proposed by (House, J. & Kádár, D.Z., 2021), invite researchers to view speech acts as part of interactional practices, rather than as separate utterances. In this framework, directive speech acts are understood as part of a social negotiation that can either build or hinder student participation, depending on how the utterance is constructed and understood.

Recently, the issue of student engagement has been highlighted in education, especially in foreign language classes. Many students show passive behavior, lack of motivation, and are not emotionally involved in learning activities. According to (Turnquest, K. N., Fan, W., Rangel, V. S., Dyer, N., & Master, A., 2024), student engagement consists of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, all of which play an important role in academic success. Furthermore, (Sadoughi, M., & Hejazi, S. Y., 2021) found that teacher support, especially through positive and empathic communication, can foster positive academic emotions that significantly increase student engagement. Thus, directive speech acts-when used appropriately and supportively-have the potential to be an effective form of emotional support in the learning process. In addition, psychological factors such as language mindsets (students' beliefs in their language abilities) and perceived instrumentality (students' views on the future usefulness of English) also influence their engagement. Research by (Eren, A., & Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, A., 2023), shows that students with positive mindsets and high instrumental motivation tend to be more actively engaged and perform better in language learning. This indicates that how teachers frame their speech acts also affects students' motivation and perceptions towards learning English.

Previous research, such as that conducted by (Walsh, 2002), has examined how teacher discourse can be constructive or inhibit student participation. However, these studies have not specifically discussed the function of directive speech acts and their relation to students' involvement in learning activities. Most of the previous studies focus more on the classification of utterances or interaction patterns in general, without linking language forms to students' affective responses and behaviors directly. Thus, there is a research gap that needs to be filled, especially in connecting teachers' use of directive speech acts with their impact on student engagement in the context of foreign language learning.

This study offers a contribution to the field of language learning pragmatics and EFL pedagogy by examining in detail how teachers use directive speech acts in classroom interaction, analyzing how the forms and delivery strategies of these speech acts affect student engagement and integrating classical theories (Austin, 1975) (Searle J. , 1976) and contemporary interactional approaches (House, J. & Kádár, D.Z., 2021), as well as affective and psychological dimensions of learning (Turnquest, K. N., Fan, W., Rangel, V. S., Dyer, N., & Master, A., 2024). The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, linking the dimensions of pragmatics, learning psychology, and classroom language teaching practices directly. Based on this background, this study is designed to answer two main questions; what types of directive speech acts are used by English teachers in classroom interaction, and how does the directive speech act affect students' engagement in learning activities.

Methods

This research utilizes a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore how an English teacher's use of directive speech acts affects student engagement in an EFL class at the university level. The case study design was chosen because it allows researchers to understand phenomena in depth in real-life contexts, particularly complex teacher and student interactions in classroom situations. This approach suits the purpose of the study which is to capture the dynamics of classroom discourse and students' responses to the teacher's directive utterances.

The research was conducted at a university in Indonesia, involving one main case: an English teacher and a group of undergraduate students enrolled in an intermediate level English course. The teacher selected had more than five years of teaching experience and was known to actively use interactive teaching strategies. The students involved were in their second semester of English education. This class was chosen because it was considered to have rich potential for observing the use of directive speech acts as well as natural variations in student engagement.

Data collection was conducted through several qualitative techniques in order to triangulate the data and increase the validity of the findings. A total of two observation sessions were conducted (90 minutes each) over two weeks. The observations focused on identifying and classifying the types of directive speech acts

used by teachers, as well as documenting students' responses both verbally and nonverbally. The researcher directly recorded classroom dynamics, interaction patterns, and the level of student participation. All observed classroom sessions were video-recorded to capture authentic language use in classroom interactions. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed to identify the linguistic features of directive speech acts, including form (imperative, interrogative, modal), intonation, and context of use.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers involved to explore the purpose of using speech acts, perception of student engagement, and classroom management strategies applied. The FGD involved three student volunteers from the observed class. This discussion aims to find out students' perceptions of the teacher's use of language, especially related to directive speech acts and how they respond or interpret them. The FGDs also provided space for students to reflect on their learning experiences and their level of engagement in class.

All data were analyzed using 2 analysis techniques, data generated from interviews and FGDs were analyzed using thematic analysis, while data generated from observations used discourse analysis.

Result

This section presents the research results obtained from various data sources, namely interviews with English teachers and students, focus group discussions (FGDs) with selected students, and classroom observations. The triangulation of data collection methods aims to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the use of directive speech acts in the classroom and their influence on student engagement. The research findings are presented in the form of themes that emerged from the data analysis, supported by direct quotes from participants and field notes during observations. These data show the pedagogical function of directive speech acts and how students respond to them in real classroom interactions.

1. Teacher's Interview Results

The findings in this study were obtained through in-depth interviews with a university English teacher. The interviews revealed various forms of directive speech acts used

in learning activities and how teachers adjust their communication strategies to increase student engagement. Some of the main themes that emerged from the interviews include:

1.1 Types of Directive Speech Acts Used

Teachers admitted to using various types of directive speech acts in their teaching, including commands, requests, suggestions, and instructions. At the beginning of the activity, teachers tend to give instructions or commands first, then continue with requests or suggestions depending on the needs of the interaction.

“I think the first one is a command, because I give them instructions. After that I ask for their opinions, then I give suggestions.”

1.2 Politeness Strategies and Language Adjustment

In giving directions, teachers are aware of the importance of using the right intonation and word choice (diction) to maintain politeness. Teachers often use words such as “please” to indicate a polite request and avoid the impression of being pushy.

“I choose vocabulary and intonation to direct or give instructions... ‘Please have a seat’ is more polite than ‘Sit!’”

1.3 Student Responses and Reactions to Directions

The teacher observed that students’ reactions to the speech acts she used varied, depending on the students’ understanding. One indicator that the teacher observed was the students’ facial expressions when receiving instructions.

“I could see their confused facial expressions. That was silent feedback... I reconfirmed by asking, ‘Do you understand what I mean?’”

1.4 Speech Acts That Increase Student Engagement

According to the teacher, forms of speech acts such as requests are very effective in increasing students’ cognitive engagement because they encourage them to think, process information, and respond actively.

“Requests can make them think more... even though they are afraid to answer, they still encourage them to process information.”

1.5 Strategies for Dealing with Student Misunderstanding

The teacher adjusted her language when students seemed to not understand the instructions by re-explaining, using synonyms, or paraphrasing until the students understood the meaning.

“I first see their reaction. If they don’t understand, I explain it again. If they still don’t understand, I paraphrase until they understand.”

1.6 Increasing Student Participation in Class Discussions

The teacher said that to increase student participation, she first gives the whole class a chance. If no one responds, she will call out the student’s name directly, but still with a supportive and non-judgmental approach.

“If no one answers, I tell them, ‘If no one answers, I will point them out directly.’ But I still give support and reassure them that it’s okay to be wrong, because this is a place to learn.”

2. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) Results

The FGD session was conducted to obtain direct perspectives from students regarding the teacher’s use of directive speech acts and its impact on their learning engagement in the English class. Several key themes emerged from the discussion:

2.1 Clarity of Instructions

Most students stated that the instructions given by the teacher (Ma’am Kris) were clear and easy to understand. This was mainly due to the teacher’s slow and structured delivery, which made it easier for students to follow directions.

“I enjoyed the class because Ma’am Kris spoke slowly, so I could understand all the information she conveyed.” – Nada

2.2 Positive Interaction and Space to Speak

Students felt that the teacher gave them the opportunity to express their opinions, rather than just receiving material in a one-way manner. They also appreciated the interactions built during the learning process, where there was no excessive pressure if they made mistakes.

“I like it because she provides interaction and not just delivers material. We are also free to express our opinions because she said there are no wrong answers in this class.” – Irfan

2.3 Comfort and Emotional Support

Teachers are considered to provide emotional support, especially to students who are quiet or less active. This makes students feel cared for and more motivated to participate.

“Ma’am Kris often pays more attention to students who are quiet, so we are not too sleepy or bored.” – Nadia

2.4 Obstacles in Understanding Instructions

Although most of the instructions were considered clear, there were some moments of confusion, especially when students were not familiar with a particular topic or when instructions were given quickly. For example, when the teacher asked students to return to their seats, some students did not immediately respond because they did not hear clearly or had not completed the previous task.

“I don’t think they were confused, but they haven’t finished their task.” – Student

2.5 Cognitive and Affective Engagement

Some students admitted that they still felt not very interested in the material because it was not their main interest (for example literature). However, they still tried to engage because of the teacher’s pleasant approach. Some students also stated that when they felt tired from the previous class, they became less focused. However, in general, the way the teacher built an interactive classroom atmosphere was able to maintain student engagement.

3. Classroom Observation Results

Based on the results of direct observation of teacher and student interactions in the classroom, various types of directive speech acts were found that were used by teachers in the learning process. These types of directive speech acts consist of commands, requests, suggestions, advice, instructions, and invitations. The following are the main findings:

a. Command

The teacher used command sentences such as "Make it simple", "Read the story together", and "The answers must be in a paper". All students immediately responded to these commands by obeying the instructions without protest or delay, indicating high compliance with explicit commands from the teacher.

b. Request

Requests were conveyed with polite words such as "Can you read this?", "Please answer the question", and "Please have a seat". Students' responses to these requests varied—some students carried out the request, while others did not respond directly. This shows that the form of the request is more open to interpretation and the level of student compliance is more dependent on their internal motivation or comfort.

c. Suggestion

The teacher gives suggestions such as "You can add deeper meaning and interest" or "We can associate the meaning". All students accept and follow this suggestion, indicating that suggestions are considered positive input that enriches their understanding of the material.

d. Advice

One form of advice given by the teacher is "It's fine to make mistakes". This advice has a positive impact because it helps create a supportive classroom atmosphere, where students feel safe to try even though they make mistakes.

e. Instruction

Instructions such as “Let’s start our class by praying together” or “Let’s find your group first” are followed by all students without any obstacles. This shows that the form of collective instruction using the word “let’s” is effective in directing class activities together.

f. Invitation

Sentences such as “Let’s talk about the purpose” are used to invite students to discuss. All students are involved in the discussion, indicating that this form of invitation is successful in encouraging interactive involvement between students.

g. Warning

No speech acts in the form of warnings were found during the observation session.

4. Student’s Interview Results

An interview with one of the students provided further insight into how directive speech acts are perceived and experienced personally. The student showed a very positive attitude towards instructions, comments, and advice from the teacher. He viewed all forms of direction from the teacher as a form of support and attention, which actually motivated him to become more courageous and confident. He said that the direction from the teacher helped him develop, especially compared to his past when he tended to be shy and reject challenges.

4.1 Preference for Directive Delivery Method

The student stated that he preferred questions or suggestions over direct comments, because this method felt more polite and gave him freedom. According to him, when the teacher delivered the direction in the form of a question, it felt like the teacher was asking permission, not forcing. This made him more comfortable and motivated to respond.

4.2 Step-by-Step Instructions vs. Freedom of Choice

When asked whether he preferred step-by-step directions or the freedom to choose for himself, the student emphasized the importance of balance. Clear directions make it easier to understand, but being given the freedom to decide also makes him feel more independent and confident. He felt that freedom of choice is part of the learning process to distinguish between good and bad.

4.3 Engagement and Emotional Response to Teacher Direction

This student confirmed that directive speech acts from the teacher actually increased her engagement in class. She felt more appreciated and present when the teacher paid attention through instructions or questions. However, she also admitted that there were certain situations—for example, when she was the only woman speaking in front of the class—that made her feel uncomfortable, especially because of unpleasant past experiences.

4.4 Confusion and Misunderstanding

She mentioned that written or indirect instructions, especially those delivered via LMS or WhatsApp, tended to be more confusing. In contrast, instructions delivered directly and verbally were easier to understand. She really appreciated teachers who did not wait for students to ask questions, but immediately explained in detail when they saw the class was silent or hesitant.

4.5 Reflection and Motivation

The student realized that advice from the teacher did not always immediately change behavior, because focus and motivation came from within herself. However, advice and suggestions from the teacher still provided moral encouragement or “little energy” that could help her recover from laziness or confusion when she remembered it later.

Discussion

This study aims to explore how an English teacher's use of directive speech acts affects students' engagement in a university-level EFL class. The results of the

analysis show that the form, delivery strategy, and social context of directive speech acts play an important role in shaping students' participation, both in behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects.

The teacher's use of various types of directive speech acts—such as commands, requests, suggestions, instructions, and invitations—indicates a pragmatic understanding in choosing utterances that are in accordance with learning objectives. The teacher consciously uses commands or instructions to organize the class and deliver assignments directly, while suggestions or requests are more often used to build a participatory and democratic learning atmosphere. This finding is in line with the concept of speech acts according to (Searle J. , 1976), which states that directives aim to influence the actions of the listener, in this case the students.

Furthermore, the teacher's choice of polite diction and intonation shows an awareness of the principle of politeness in communication. Phrases such as "please" or question forms such as "can you..." are used to reduce the impression of authoritativeness and create more egalitarian communication. This language strategy also encourages students' emotional engagement, because they feel valued, not pressured, and more comfortable responding. This is reinforced by students' statements stating that polite and non-coercive forms of direction make them feel more motivated and psychologically safe. This finding is consistent with research by (Sadoughi, M., & Hejazi, S. Y., 2021) which states that positive teacher communication can foster positive academic emotions, which ultimately have an impact on increasing student engagement.

Directive speech acts also play a role in building students' cognitive engagement. When teachers use open-ended questions or ask for personal opinions, students show more reflective and in-depth responses. They feel given space to think and develop their own views. In this case, directive speech acts are not only directive, but also encourage active intellectual participation. This finding strengthens the argument of (Turnquest, K. N., Fan, W., Rangel, V. S., Dyer, N., & Master, A., 2024), which states that cognitive engagement occurs when students are involved in high-level thinking activities, especially when they feel their opinions are valued and needed in the learning process.

In terms of behavior, instructions and commands that are conveyed clearly and firmly tend to be immediately followed by students. However, more open forms of direction such as requests or invitations provide space for students to choose, thus encouraging more active and dialogic interactions. Teachers also demonstrate the ability to adjust their speech acts based on students' facial expressions and nonverbal responses. When students appear confused or hesitant, teachers tend to repeat or re-explain their directions. This responsiveness shows the importance of teachers' pragmatic abilities in managing classroom communication effectively, as emphasized by (Walsh, 2002), that teacher talk can be constructive or even a barrier to participation depending on how language is used.

In addition to linguistic factors, student engagement is also influenced by personal and social aspects. Several students mentioned that they felt uncomfortable speaking in class, especially when they felt watched by the opposite sex or experienced certain social pressures. This condition shows that the success of speech acts in building engagement depends not only on the form of speech, but also on the teacher's sensitivity to the psychological conditions and social dynamics of students. This finding is in line with (Eren, A., & Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, A., 2023), who emphasized the importance of paying attention to mindset and affective factors in creating optimal learning engagement.

On the other hand, obstacles also arise in the context of indirect communication, especially when teachers provide instructions via text messages on digital platforms such as WhatsApp or LMS. Some students admitted to having difficulty understanding the meaning of written instructions that were not accompanied by verbal explanations. This shows that direct interaction remains essential in the learning process, especially for types of speech acts such as directives that are instructional and require clarification. Face-to-face interaction allows for negotiation of meaning, interpretation of context, and richer emotional responses than text-based communication.

Overall, these findings suggest that directive speech acts are an important teaching strategy, but their effectiveness is highly dependent on the teacher's pragmatic awareness, linguistic strategies, and social sensitivity. Directions that are delivered politely, openly, and tailored to the context.

Conclusion

This study aims to explore how directive speech acts used by English teachers in EFL classrooms affect student engagement. Based on the results of the analysis of observation data, interviews, and focus group discussions, it can be concluded that directive speech acts play a complex and significant role in shaping the dynamics of learning interactions. Teachers not only use directives to direct activities, but also consciously choose forms, diction, and intonation that are appropriate to the social context and student characteristics. A variety of speech acts such as commands, requests, suggestions, and invitations are used strategically to create communication that is not only informative, but also participatory and supports students' emotional comfort. The findings also show that student engagement—both behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally—can be increased through the delivery of directive speech acts that are polite, clear, and responsive to students' conditions. Teachers who are able to read the classroom situation and adjust their communication methods show higher effectiveness in building positive interactive relationships. Conversely, forms of directives that are too direct, unclear, or delivered without considering social factors can reduce the level of student engagement. In addition, external factors such as social pressure, students' personal experiences, and the medium of delivery (oral or written) also affect how directives are understood and received.

Thus, this study confirms that directive speech acts are not merely linguistic instruments to control the class, but are part of a pedagogical strategy that has pragmatic, affective, and social dimensions. The effective use of speech acts requires teachers' awareness of the social meaning of utterances, as well as the ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships in the teaching and learning process. This study contributes to the study of pragmatics in English teaching, while also opening up space for teacher training in developing more humanistic and contextual instructional communication skills.

Author Biography

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