Pragmatics and Speech Act in Classroom Communicative Interaction

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Abstract- In the present society, pragmatics and speech acts are vital linguistic compendiums that can help us in the present dispensation. This is because pragmatics has to do with the use of language in human communication as determined by societal conditions. Since human beings communicate through the use of language, it then becomes imperative to have knowledge of the pragmatic functioning of language. Also, in communication, we carry out many acts through the process of speech. In other words, we are ‘doing’ things with words. Whether we greet, invite, warn and so on, we are performing an act. So, in human interaction, pragmatics and speech act are vital in our communicative process since interaction will include both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors by breaking away from the strict, local paradigm of grammar. This is where the notion of context comes in. This paper, therefore, looks into the concepts of pragmatics as well as speech act so as to throw light into their functionality in the classroom setting.

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I. Introduction

Human beings are noted for performing different actions in different ways with a view to fulfilling their goals. One vital tool that man uses to carry out his assignment is language and perhaps, that is why Austin (1962) comes out with his famous book: Doing Things with Words. In other words, language is very functional and the practical aspect of it is very pertinent. The fact is that human beings, by their nature, sometimes do not explicitly express their intentions in communicative encounters; the study of the pragmatics of human communicative endeavors therefore becomes important if we must make sense out of the different communicative interactions among human beings. This engagement is even more crucial in a teaching-learning context, owing to the importance of communication and language used to the success of teaching and learning. Pragmatics is the study of the way humans beings make use of their languages to communicate. It can be said that pragmatics studies language use in human communication as determined by the conditions of society. The study of pragmatics explores the ability of language users to match utterances with contexts. According to Stainaker, pragmatics is 'the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed' (1972: 383). A learner of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show equivalent pragmatic competence. The consequences of practical failure, unlike the case of grammatical errors, are often interpreted on a social or personal level rather than a result of the language learning process. A growing number of studies exist that describe language use in various communicative meetings, and these studies have yielded crucial information on the nature of interactions underway. However, there is lack of literature on the nature of verbal interaction in the classroom context. This is why this study sets out to look into the speech functions of classroom communicative interactions so as to facilitate the understanding of both implicit and explicit utterances of teachers and students in the classroom setting.

II. Speech Act

Different scholars usually view the functionality of language from different perspectives, thereby giving room for different meanings and interpretations. The concept of speech act has been a current and interesting one in language study. However, from different ways through which this theory has been viewed, there has been what looks like a consensus in its description. Speech act has to do with certain acts performed when something is said or when an utterance is performed. Speech act theory, as introduced by Oxford philosopher, J.L. Austin (1962) and further developed by American philosopher J.R. Searle, considers the types of acts that utterances can be said to perform. Speech act is a technical term in linguistics and the philosophy of language. The contemporary use of the term goes back to Austin's doctrine of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Speech acts are commonly taken to include such acts as promising, ordering, greeting, warning, inviting and congratulating. A Speech can be analyzed on three levels: A locutionary act, the performance of an utterance: the actual utterance and its ostensible meaning, comprising phonetic, phatic and rhetoric acts corresponding to the verbal, syntactic and semantic aspects of any meaningful utterance; an illocutionary act: the semantic ‘illocutionary force’ of the utterance, thus its real, intended meaning; and in some instances, a further perlocutionary act: its actual effect, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring, or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something, whether intended or not (Austin 1962).
a) Illocutionary acts

The idea of an illocutionary act is central to the concept of a speech act. There are numerous opinions regarding how to define 'illocutionary acts' and these types have the examples of promising, ordering someone, and bequeathing. Searle's, "speech act" is often meant to refer to the same thing as the term 'illocutionary act' which Austin had initially introduced in his work published posthumously in 1962. According to Austin's preliminary informal description, the idea of an "illocutionary act" can be captured by emphasizing that "by saying something, we do something", as when someone issues an order to someone to go by saying "Go!", or when a minister joins two people in marriage saying, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." (Austin would eventually define the "illocutionary act" in a more exact manner). An interesting type of illocutionary speech act is that performed in the utterance of what Austin calls performatives. Typical instances of these are "I nominate John to be President", "I sentence you to ten years imprisonment", or "I promise to pay you back." In these typical, but rather explicit cases of performative sentences, the actions that the sentences describe (nominating, sentencing, promising) are performed by the utterances of the sentences themselves.

b) Classifying illocutionary speech acts

Searle (1975) has set up the following classifications of illocutionary speech acts:

Assertive: Speech acts that commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, e.g. reciting a creed.

Directives: Speech acts that are to cause the hearer to take a particular action, e.g. requests, commands and advice.

Commissives: Speech acts that commit a speaker to some future action, e.g. promises and oaths.

Expressive: Speech acts that express the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition, e.g. congratulations, excuses and thanks.

Declarations: Speech acts that change the reality in accord with the proposition of the declaration, e.g. baptisms, pronouncing someone guilty or pronouncing someone husband and wife.

c) Indirect Speech Acts

In the course of performing speech acts, we ordinarily communicate with each other. The content of communication may be identical, or almost identical, with the content intended to be communicated, as when a stranger asks, "What is your name?" However, the meaning of the linguistic means used may also be different from the content intended to be communicated. One may, in appropriate circumstances, request Dele to do the dishes by just saying, "Dele ...dishes!", or someone else can promise to do the dishes by saying, "Me!" if he feels that Dele is reluctant. One common way of performing speech acts is to use an expression which indicates one speech act, and indeed performs this act, but also performs a further speech act, which is indirect. One may, for instance, say, "Dele, can you open the window?" thereby asking Dele whether he will be able to open the window, but also requesting that he does so. Since the request is performed indirectly, by means of (directly) performing a question, it counts as an indirect speech act.

Indirect speech acts are commonly used to reject proposals and to make requests. For example, a speaker asks, "Would you like to meet me for coffee?" and other replies, "I have a class." The second speaker used an indirect speech act to reject the proposal. This is indirect because the literal meaning of "I have a class" does not entail an outright rejection. This poses a problem for linguists because it is confusing to see how the person who made the proposal can understand that his proposal was rejected. Following substantially an account of H. P. Grice, Searle suggests that we can derive meaning out of indirect speech acts through a cooperative process out of which we are can derive multiple illocutions; however, the method he proposes does not seem to solve the problem accurately. Sociolinguistics has studied the social dimensions of conversations. This discipline considers the various contexts in which speech acts occur.

d) Searle's theory of 'indirect speech acts'

Searle has introduced the notion of an 'indirect speech act' which in his account is meant to be more particularly, an indirect 'illocutionary' act. Searle describes indirect speech acts as follows: "In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer." An account of such act, it follows, will require such things as an analysis of mutually shared background information about the conversation, as well as of rationality and linguistic conventions".

In connection with indirect speech acts, Searle introduces the notions of 'primary' and 'secondary' illocutionary acts. The primary illocutionary act is the indirect one, which is not literally performed. The secondary illocutionary act is the direct one, performed in the literal utterance of the sentence.

Example:

1) Speaker X: "We should leave for the show or else we'll be late."
2) Speaker Y: "I am not ready yet."

Here, the primary illocutionary act is Y's rejection of X's suggestion. The secondary illocutionary act is Y's statement that she is not ready to leave. By dividing the illocutionary act into two sub-parts, Searle
proposes that we can understand two meanings from the same utterance all the while, thereby knowing the correct meaning one is to respond to. The two meanings are very thin and difficult to separate. However, with his doctrine of indirect speech acts, Searle attempts to explain how it is possible that a speaker can say something and mean it, but additionally mean something else. This would be impossible, or at least it would be an unlikely case, if in such a case, the hearer had no chance of figuring out what the speaker means (over and above what she says and means). Searle’s solution is that the hearer can figure out what the indirect speech act is meant, and he gives several hints as to how this might happen. For the previous example a condensed process might look like this:

**Step 1:** A proposal is made by X, and Y responds by means of an illocutionary act (2).

**Step 2:** X assumes that Y is cooperating in the conversation, being sincere, and that she has made a statement that is relevant.

**Step 3:** The literal meaning of (2) is not relevant to the conversation.

**Step 4:** Since X assumes that Y is cooperating; there must be another meaning to (2).

**Step 5:** Based on mutually shared background information, X knows that they cannot leave until Y is ready. Therefore, Y has rejected X’s proposition.

**Step 6:** X knows that Y has said something in something other than the literal meaning, and the primary illocutionary act must have been the rejection of X’s proposal.

Searle argues that a similar process can be applied to any indirect speech act as a model to find the primary illocutionary act. His proof for this argument is made by means of a series of supposed “observations”.

e) **Searle’s theory of analysis**

To generalize this sketch of an indirect request, Searle proposes a program of analysis for indirect speech act performances. He makes the following suggestions:

**Step 1:** Understand the facts of the conversation.

**Step 2:** Assume cooperation and relevance on behalf of the participants.

**Step 3:** Establish factual background information pertinent to the conversation.

**Step 4:** Make assumptions about the conversation based on steps 1–3.

**Step 5:** If steps 1–4 do not yield a consequential meaning, then infer that there are two illocutionary forces at work.

**Step 6:** Assume the hearer has the ability to perform the act the speaker suggests. The act that the speaker is asking to be performed must be something that would make sense. For example, the hearer might have the ability to pass the salt when asked to do so by a speaker who is at the same table. Still, he might not have the ability to pass the salt to a speaker who is asking the hearer to do so during a telephone conversation.

**Step 7:** Make inferences from steps 1–6 regarding possible primary illocutions.

**Step 8:** Use background information to establish the primary illocution.

With this process, Searle concludes that he has found a method that will satisfactorily reconstruct what happens when an indirect speech act is performed. What all these have shown is that a lot of actions of different types can be performed when we make use of speech and these actions can be interpreted so as to find out the meaning or meanings that such an utterance might have. Erler (2010) is another interesting material that has dealt with the speech act of forbidding. The linguistic analysis done in the work has also corroborated what the earlier scholars have done on the function that speech act can perform.

## III. Methodology

For data, audio-recordings of eight lectures were collected from the Department of English, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria. The Department of English was purposively selected because it has the largest number of students in the college and the importance of the English language to the field of study. Apart from being the language of instruction, the English Language is one the two units that form the Department of English (the second is English Literature). The audio-recordings, two from each level, were transcribed, cleaned and subjected to pragmatic analysis. The analysis was carried out using a top-down approach. This required a holistic understanding of the data and categorizations based on the features that hold across the data.

## IV. Data Analysis and Findings

### a) Representatives

Representatives encompass speech acts that indicate the state of affairs. By uttering such speech acts, the speaker is committed, in varying degrees, to the truth of the expression. The representative speech acts found in classroom communicative interactions include stating, explaining, affirming, reminding. These will be explained and exemplified in the subsequent sections.

### b) Stating

Stating here involves expressing a proposition that is generally held as accurate. Usually, the speaker recalls such propositions from generally held opinions or universal truths. The instances of stating in the data are
direct speech acts. This means that the locutionary acts as well as the illocutionary force correspond.

*Excerpt 1*

Mr B: Priscilla Alen defines “language testing as the practice and study of evaluating the proficiency of an individual in using a particular language effectively.”

In excerpt 1 above, the lecturer, Mr B, clearly defines language testing as submitted by a particular scholar, Priscilla Alen. The definition stated here is taken mainly as truth with most scholars preoccupied by language testing; thus, Mr. B performs the speech act of stating the definition of language testing.

*Excerpt 2*

Dr. P: Style is a nebulous concept as it lends itself to different definitions; it is different things to various scholars...there is the notion of style as choice. This perspective is hinged on the belief that language is infinite and there are several options available for language users from which they choose a variant.

Excerpt 2 also exemplifies the speech act of stating, and similar to excerpt 1 above, excerpt two is a direct speech act of stating. Dr P conveys a popular opinion about the concept of style which is that it is enigmatic and there is no generally acceptable definition of style. He further explains by stating one of the perspectives of style (style as a choice). He states the general belief on which the notion of style as choice is premised.

c) **Affirming**

To affirm is to attest to a proposition or to lend credence to a statement. Affirming, as observed in the data, can be performed verbally or through extra-linguistic means such as nodding of heads.

*Excerpt 3*

Dr. P: First, let us have the course outline dictated... Item 7 on the course outline is “Register”. Under that, we have the following items: field, tenor and mode of discourse.

Students: ((confused)) Mode or mood?

Dr. P: Mode. Not mood. Some of you are wondering what have field, tenor and mode got to do with stylistics?

Students: Yes.

The speech act of affirming in Excerpt 3 above is performed by the students in their second turn. The students affirm to Dr. P that they are confused at the mention of “field”, “tenor” and “mode” in a course like Stylistics which does not seem to have anything to do with the concepts mentioned. Dr. P reads the students’ confusion, first, through the non-linguistic signal and second, through the students’ question, “mood or mode?” Consequently, Dr. P tries to confirm his observation by saying “…some of you are wondering what has a field, tenor and mode got to do with stylistics” and the students affirm the statement in their response “yes.” Apart from the verbal means of performing the speech act of affirming, instances of performing the speech act of affirming through non-linguistic means also abound in the data.

d) **Informing**

The speech act of informing requires the speaker notifying his/her interlocutor of a course of event or filling in the interlocutor with information.

*Excerpt 4*

Mrs Y: By next week Thursday, we would have gone halfway the items on the course outline and by then, we should be preparing for our first test.

*Excerpt 5*

Dr. P: As a way of revising what we did in 'Introduction to Linguistic Stylistics', what is style?

A student: Style refers to the different ways people do things.

Dr. P: Yes. Right. But is that all?

Another student: Style refers to how individuals do things differently from others.

Dr. P: Yes. But there is more to style than this. ((silence))

Dr. P: I am begging to see why most of you do not get the grades you desire at the end of the day. The problem is in the way and manner you answer the exam questions. This question constitutes one of the questions you answered in the last exam. And if all you have written centers on what you are telling me now, there is no way you will have good grades. Fine. It is good you start your discussion of style by giving the everyday, non-technical definition of style. But you do not end it there. What does style refer to in stylistics? That is what you have failed to mention now...

e) **Directives**

Directives generally refer to the speech acts by which the speaker commits the hearer to an action. They include questioning, warning, commanding, requesting, cautioning, and so on.

f) **Cautioning**

This speech act which may take the form of warning, admonishing, advising, rebuking or reproving involves the speaker disapproving an undesirable act or behavior by the interlocutor. This speech act is performed directly and indirectly.

*Excerpt 6*

Dr. X: Would you want me to give you more time to talk, laugh and enjoy yourselves? ((pauses)) should I allow you have more time to talk?

Excerpt 6 is an example of an indirect speech act in that the structure of the locutionary act and the illocutionary act do not correspond. Though couched in an interrogative form, Dr. X does not mean to ask the
students whether they would need more time for frivolous chats. Instead, Dr. X desires a less rowdy class, thus he calls that the class be silent. The act is understood by the students as the speech act of cautioning. This is why the students keep quiet instead of giving a verbal response.

g) Questioning

Questioning is the act of demanding verbal response from a poser. Questions are asked for several reasons which may include one, to learn new things; two, to test the knowledge of an interlocutor; three, to get the perspective of an interlocutor on a particular topic. In the classroom setting, the speech act of questioning can be performed by both the teachers and the students. Usually, when asked by the teachers, questions are for the purpose of testing the students’ knowledge of a topic or to ascertain the students’ level of understanding. They could also be used to check students’ attentiveness. On the other hand, students usually ask questions in order to learn new things or for the purpose of clarifying. This speech act is performed both directly and indirectly.

Excerpt 7

Dr. X: What are the different meanings of “bank” that you know?

Excerpt 8

Mrs D: We have defined a phrase as a group of words without a subject and a finite verb, right?

Students: Yes

Mrs D: And I have given examples such as “a woman”, “Three black birds”, “the cars in front of the Dean’s block”, “my father’s friend”…so give me your own examples. Remember, do not use the examples that we have already given.

A student: “The young man in white shirt.”

Mrs D: Yes. Good one.

Another student: “The woman is pregnant.”

Mrs D: “The woman is pregnant. She is correct, right?”

In Excerpt 7, the speech act of questioning performed by Dr. X requires the students to respond verbally by explaining the different meanings of bank that they know. This is different from the purpose of questioning in the two instances where the speech act occurs in Excerpt 8. In the first line of Excerpt 8, Mrs D uses questioning to ascertain that she has a common ground with the students on what a phrase is. Instead of taking for granted the assumption that the students know what a phrase is, she inquired to ascertain the assumption. Also, in the last line of Excerpt 8, the ironic question asked by Mrs D is to the end of testing the students’ knowledge of phrases. A student has wrongly given a simple sentence as an example of a phrase. To test whether the other students genuinely know what a phrase is, Mrs D deliberately deludes the students with her question “she is correct, right? This is done with the expectation that those who truly know a phrase will outright disagree.

h) Requesting

Requesting is the act of demanding that specific actions be carried out by the interlocutor.

Excerpt 9

Mrs Y: Okay, stay up. Please, come over here. I want you to face your friend. I am going to give her just two minutes. She will discuss with you a particular topic I am giving to her now: the food I like best. Two minutes.

Excerpt 10

Dr P: Last week, we started our discussion on the features of dramatic conversation. Today, we are moving the context which is one of the features of real conversation as well as that of dramatic dialogue… I want two people that can act well to come out. ((One male and one female stepped outside))

Dr. P: I will give you a short script which I will want you to act out in a few minutes…. ((to the female student)). You are the wife and he is your husband. I want the two of you to be in a hot argument and some point you tell your husband “you are crazy.”…

Excerpts 9 and 10 exemplify the speech act or requesting and they both require the lecturers, Mrs Y and Dr. P to ask the students to carry out some actions. In Excerpt 9, Mrs Y requests a student to discuss the topic “The Food I like Best” to her friend. Similarly, in Excerpt 10, in order to explain the term ‘context’ to the class, Dr. P requests two students to take up the roles of actors. In the two examples above, the speech act of requesting is explicitly stated, with the lecturers identifying the actions they want the students to carry out.

V. Conclusion

This paper examined the speech functions of the utterances made in the context of teaching and learning in the Department of English, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria. The academic endeavor is based on the fact that the utterances of humans in communicative encounters perform specific functions which may or may not be explicitly stated. The study identified the specific speech acts of stating, informing, affirming, cautioning, requesting, questioning and promising which are classified under representatives, directives and commissives. Of all the categories of speech act, the representative category of speech acts dominates classroom communicative interaction in Adeyemi Federal University of Education. In addition to this, the data is also replete with questioning which falls under directive category of speech acts. The preponderance of questioning and
the representative category of speech acts resonates
the goal of the discourse under discussion. In the
classroom setting, the teachers who control both the
topic and turn-taking and who largely dominate the
classroom discourse use expressions that enable them
to instruct, educate, teach, assess teaching and
learning and get feedback.

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