



Exploring Speech Act Patterns in Lecturer–Student Online Interactions

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to investigate the types of illocutionary speech acts most frequently produced by lecturers and students during online classroom interactions. Focusing on the illocutionary dimension, the study explores how language is used to convey intentions, requests, and social interactions in educational settings. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, analyzing interactions based on Searle and Yule's speech act theories. Data were collected from recorded online class sessions, transcribed, and systematically coded to identify patterns of speech acts. The findings indicate that directive acts are the most dominant, reflecting attempts by speakers to elicit actions from others. Assertive acts, which demonstrate the speaker's authority and provide information, were the second most frequent. Expressive acts, conveying emotions, attitudes, or respect, appeared less frequently, while commissive acts, related to commitments to future actions, were the least observed. These results highlight the central role of directive and assertive speech in managing online classroom interactions and facilitating effective communication. The study suggests that awareness of speech act patterns can enhance teaching strategies, improve student engagement, and reduce miscommunication in online learning environments.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential tool for human communication, serving as a connector that conveys intent, purpose, and emotion among individuals (Pawlik et al., 2022; Shams et al., 2024). It is entirely human and non-instinctive, allowing humans to express desires, ideas, and feelings through intentionally generated symbols. In society, effective communication is critical for building understanding, cooperation, and social cohesion. Misunderstandings in language use can lead to conflicts, misinterpretation, or inefficiency in social interactions. Therefore, understanding how language functions in various social

contexts is vital not only for academic purposes but also for everyday social life. Speech acts, as fundamental units of linguistic communication, play a crucial role in ensuring that messages are delivered with the intended meaning. By analyzing speech acts, researchers can provide insights into how humans perform actions through words, which can help improve communication practices in education, workplaces, and community interactions (Dai, 2026).

Despite its importance, language use often encounters challenges in daily social interactions, particularly in educational settings where communication is continuous and multidirectional (De León & García-Sánchez, 2021). Misunderstandings may arise because speakers do not always adjust their utterances according to the context, social norms, or cultural expectations. For instance, indirect requests or polite refusals may be misinterpreted by listeners unfamiliar with the cultural conventions of speech acts. Such communication problems can hinder the transfer of knowledge, collaboration, and mutual understanding (Whitehouse et al., 2021; O'Dwyer et al., 2023). In the classroom, ineffective language use can lead to confusion between lecturers and students, affecting the quality of learning. The complexity of online education further amplifies this problem, as digital communication reduces non-verbal cues and increases reliance on verbal expressions (Suen & Hung, 2025). Therefore, understanding speech acts in teaching and learning is not only a theoretical concern but also a practical necessity to enhance interaction and reduce misunderstandings in educational and social contexts.

In recent years, the widespread use of online classes has highlighted the role of speech acts in educational communication. Lecturers and students interact constantly, and the meaning of their utterances can vary depending on context, intention, and cultural norms (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2023). For example, when a lecturer gives instructions, the speech act may serve as a directive, an informative statement, or even an evaluative remark, depending on the situation. Similarly, students' responses may involve requesting clarification, agreeing, or expressing opinions, each reflecting different speech acts. These interactions demonstrate that communication is more than the exchange of words; it involves performing actions through language (Shumanov & Johnson, 2021). Observing online class interactions provides valuable insights into how speech acts function in modern educational settings, revealing patterns, challenges, and potential miscommunications. The online classroom thus serves as a rich site for examining the application of speech act theory in real-world discourse, highlighting the dynamic interplay between language, intention, and social context.

Previous studies have explored speech acts in various social and educational contexts, emphasizing their significance in understanding communicative behavior (Gweon, 2021). Initially, it was proposed that saying something is simultaneously performing an action, which was later developed into a systematic theory of speech acts. Speech acts are categorized into

locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts, each highlighting different aspects of meaning and intention. Other researchers define speech acts as actions manifested through speech, emphasizing their performative function. Cultural norms, rules, and social values influence the realization of speech acts in communication. These studies provide a foundation for understanding the mechanisms of language use and highlight the importance of context, intention, and cultural knowledge in interpreting utterances (Yi, 2026). However, most research has focused on face-to-face communication, leaving online educational interactions relatively unexplored.

While significant research has examined speech acts in classroom interactions, few studies have systematically analyzed them in online learning environments. Previous investigations largely addressed traditional, in-person classrooms, neglecting how digital platforms shape communication dynamics. Additionally, most studies emphasize general categorization of speech acts rather than exploring their pragmatic implications in online discourse. This gap suggests a need to understand how lecturers and students perform speech acts in virtual classrooms, particularly in courses where interaction is intensive. By focusing on online education, this research addresses a crucial gap, providing insights into contemporary communication challenges. Understanding these speech acts can help educators design clearer, more effective instructional strategies and guide students in appropriate communicative practices. This study contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge by bridging classical speech act theory with modern online classroom phenomena (Degen, 2023).

This study offers novelty by examining speech acts specifically in online courses, a context that has received limited attention in prior research. Unlike traditional classrooms, online environments rely heavily on verbal communication, making speech acts more critical for conveying intention, managing interactions, and avoiding misunderstandings. Furthermore, the study considers the influence of cultural norms, social values, and classroom conventions on how speech acts are produced and interpreted. By focusing on these dynamics, the research provides practical implications for teaching strategies, student engagement, and communication effectiveness in digital education. The findings are expected to inform both educators and learners on the importance of clarity, politeness, and intention in speech acts, enhancing overall classroom communication. Addressing this modern educational challenge ensures that speech act theory remains relevant and applicable in the rapidly evolving landscape of online learning.

The central research problem of this study is to investigate how lecturers and students produce and interpret speech acts in online courses, considering the influence of context, intention, and cultural norms. The study argues that

understanding these speech acts is essential for ensuring effective communication, reducing misunderstandings, and promoting successful teaching and learning outcomes. By systematically analyzing speech acts in online interactions, this research contributes both theoretically and practically: theoretically, by extending speech act theory to digital education; practically, by providing guidance for improving classroom discourse strategies. The study emphasizes that speech acts are not isolated linguistic phenomena but integral components of social interaction. Therefore, exploring them in online learning contexts is crucial to address contemporary communication challenges, offering solutions that benefit educators, students, and society at large by fostering clearer, more meaningful, and culturally appropriate communication.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore speech acts in online classroom interactions. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants, rather than attempting to control or manipulate contextual variables (Lim, 2025; Bazen et al., 2021). By focusing on the participants' experiences and actions, this approach provides a detailed and comprehensive picture of how speech acts are performed and interpreted in real-life online learning environments. The case study design is particularly suitable for investigating complex interactions within a specific setting, enabling the researcher to capture the nuances and meanings embedded in the communication between lecturers and students.

The research was conducted in an online classroom environment, specifically during discourse analysis courses, where interactions between lecturers and students are frequent and meaningful (Li & Zhang, 2022; Wang & Liu, 2020). The location was selected because online classes provide a rich context for observing speech acts, as communication relies heavily on verbal exchanges and written transcripts, with minimal non-verbal cues. Video recordings of these online classes were used as the primary data source. The data collection procedure included several steps: searching for relevant online class videos, creating accurate transcripts of the interactions, and systematically organizing the data for further analysis. This ensured that the data reflected authentic communication behaviors and contexts.

Data analysis followed a systematic process involving data reduction, data display, and verification. First, the transcripts were thoroughly read and relevant speech acts were identified and condensed to focus on meaningful interactions. Next, the data were categorized and analyzed using theories of illocutionary acts to interpret the functions and intentions behind each utterance. Finally, the

findings were verified through careful cross-checking to ensure accuracy and consistency in interpretation. The results were then presented in a comprehensive report that illustrates the patterns, functions, and significance of speech acts in the online classroom (Cheung, 2021), providing both theoretical insights and practical implications for teaching and learning in digital education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data analysis, several types of illocutionary acts were expressed by lecturers and students during the teaching and learning process in online classrooms. Speech acts are utterances that contain intentions or illocutionary power and can influence the listener or speech partner. These acts can be realized through sounds, words, phrases, sentences, or longer discourses that serve specific purposes. The analysis of the transcripts showed that the participants used speech acts in a variety of ways to convey meaning, provide information, request actions, express feelings, or commit to future actions (Khater et al., 2024). The findings revealed that the speech acts performed by lecturers and students could be categorized into four major types: assertive, directive, expressive, and commissive.

Assertive speech acts were used by both lecturers and students to express beliefs, convey factual information, describe situations, or make conclusions. For example, the lecturer confirmed information provided by students about the previous lecturer, thereby establishing the correctness of the knowledge. Students also performed assertive acts by confirming completion of tasks or providing explanations about their previous activities in the course. Explaining was another form of assertive act, where lecturers elaborated on tasks, course materials, or concepts in detail, ensuring that students understood the content. Concluding acts were observed when lecturers summarized students' progress or made conclusions about their understanding, ensuring clarity in the classroom interactions (Fryer & Leenknecht, 2023).

Directive speech acts were commonly used to guide, instruct, or request actions from the other party. Lecturers frequently asked questions to obtain information about students' activities or understanding of the material. They also provided instructions for assignments, such as watching presentation videos on YouTube or completing tasks by a specific deadline. Commands were expressed to ensure that students followed certain instructions, often emphasizing urgency or non-negotiable requirements. Students, on the other hand, occasionally performed directive acts, such as making suggestions about task submissions or requesting clarification. Refusals and complaints were also categorized under directive acts, showing instances where the speaker attempted to prevent certain actions or expressed disagreement with a proposal (Ferreira, 2021).

Expressive speech acts were observed when lecturers or students communicated their attitudes, feelings, or emotions. For instance, lecturers apologized when explaining that all course topics had to be completed in a single meeting. Students expressed respect for the lecturers at the beginning of their responses, demonstrating politeness and acknowledgment of authority. These expressive acts helped maintain the social dynamics of the online classroom, fostering positive interaction and encouraging cooperation among participants (Zuo, 2022).

Commissive speech acts were related to commitments to future actions. For example, lecturers stated what would occur during the lesson, such as explaining the course plan, the material to be covered, or the tasks students were expected to complete. These statements committed the lecturer to a future course of action while also informing students about their expected participation in upcoming activities. Commissive acts helped structure the learning process and set clear expectations for both lecturers and students (Ydesen & Dorn, 2022).

The analysis of sixteen transcript extracts revealed the diversity and complexity of speech acts in online classroom interactions. As shown in Table 1, directive and assertive acts dominated the discourse, while expressive and commissive acts appeared less frequently. Table 1 presents the types of speech acts performed by lecturers and students, along with the classification of each kind of act.

Table 1. Types and Classification of Speech Acts in Online Classroom Interactions

Types of Speech Act	Classification of Each Kind of Speech Act
Assertive	Confirming
	Explaining
	Concluding
Directive	Asking
	Requesting
	Instructing
	Command
	Refusal
	Suggesting
	Ordering
	Complaining
Expressive	Apologizing
	Respecting
Commissive	Commissive

Table 1 shows that assertive acts were mainly used to confirm information, explain concepts, or conclude ideas, ensuring students understood the material. Directive acts were the most dominant in lecturer speech, including asking

questions, giving instructions, issuing commands, suggesting, refusing, ordering, and handling complaints, reflecting their role in guiding student actions. Expressive acts appeared when lecturers apologized or students showed respect, maintaining positive classroom interaction. Commissive acts were observed when lecturers committed to future actions or outlined tasks, providing structure and setting expectations for the lesson. Overall, the table demonstrates that directive and assertive acts were central to achieving learning objectives, while expressive and commissive acts supported communication effectiveness (Riwayatningsih, 2025).

The table highlights that the lecturer's speech acts were predominantly directive, which included giving commands, instructions, and suggestions. Assertive acts were also common, primarily in the form of explaining course content or confirming information. Expressive acts appeared when lecturers expressed feelings or attitudes to maintain positive classroom interaction. Students primarily used directive acts when asking questions or making suggestions, and assertive acts when confirming or reporting activities. The dominance of directive and assertive functions demonstrates the interactive nature of online learning, where communication is goal-oriented and relies on clear instruction and feedback (Zhang et al., 2025).

These findings align with previous research indicating that directive and assertive speech acts are routinely used in educational contexts to achieve learning objectives. Directive acts serve to guide students' behavior and encourage active participation, while assertive acts provide necessary information and clarification to facilitate understanding (Blegur et al., 2023). Expressive and commissive acts, though less frequent, play supportive roles in managing classroom interaction and establishing expectations. Understanding the distribution and function of these speech acts can help educators enhance communication strategies, ensuring more effective teaching and learning in online classrooms (Almelhes, 2024).

Overall, the study demonstrates that speech acts are integral to online classroom discourse, shaping how lecturers and students convey information, request actions, express attitudes, and commit to future tasks. The findings underscore the importance of considering speech acts in teaching and learning, particularly in online settings where verbal communication serves as the primary medium. By analyzing these speech acts, educators can improve classroom interaction, promote clarity in instructions, and foster a supportive learning environment that encourages student engagement and understanding (Darong, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that directive illocutionary acts are the most frequently produced by both lecturers and students in online classroom interactions, highlighting the central role of guidance, instruction, and active

participation in the learning process. Assertive acts, which serve to convey information, confirm understanding, and explain concepts, were the second most dominant, reflecting the importance of clarity and accuracy in knowledge transfer. Expressive acts, though less frequent, reveal the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of communication, including respect, apology, and appreciation, which support a positive classroom climate. Commissive acts were the least used, indicating that commitments to future actions play a smaller but still meaningful role in structuring lessons. This study contributes to the academic understanding of speech act theory by demonstrating how illocutionary acts function in digital learning environments, providing practical insights for educators to enhance interaction and engagement. However, the research is limited to a single online course and a specific cultural context, suggesting that future studies could explore diverse disciplines, institutions, or cross-cultural settings to validate and expand these findings.

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