

PAPER

SPEECH ACT THEORY AND COMMUNICATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Speech Act Theory provides an essential framework for understanding language as purposeful social action rather than a purely formal system (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In the context of foreign language learning, successful communication depends on learners' ability to perform speech acts appropriately within specific sociocultural contexts (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). This article explores the contribution of Speech Act Theory to communicative development in foreign language education, with particular attention to pragmatic competence (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Drawing on classical theories proposed by Austin and Searle and supported by contemporary research in applied linguistics and pragmatics, the study examines how learners acquire and use speech acts such as requests, apologies, refusals, and suggestions (Tran Thanh Du, 2023). A qualitative literature-based methodology is employed to analyze theoretical models and pedagogical studies related to speech act instruction. The findings indicate that foreign language learners often demonstrate pragmatic inadequacies despite grammatical accuracy, primarily due to insufficient exposure to contextualized language use (Kasper & Rose, 2002). The article argues that explicit instruction in speech acts significantly enhances learners' communicative competence by improving their awareness of intention, context, and sociocultural norms (Nusratullayeva, 2025). The study concludes that integrating Speech Act Theory into foreign language curricula is essential for fostering meaningful, appropriate, and effective communication.

Key words: Speech Act Theory; Pragmatic Competence; Communicative Competence; Illocutionary Force; Foreign Language Education; Interlanguage Pragmatics; Sociocultural Context; Language Use; Communication Strategies; Pragmatics

Review of the Literature

Speech Act Theory emerged as a foundational concept in pragmatics through Austin's (1962)

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argument that utterances function as actions rather than mere carriers of information. Austin's distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts was later systematized by Searle (1969), who classified speech acts into five major categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. These theoretical developments significantly influenced pragmatic analysis in linguistics. Later research extended Speech Act Theory into second and foreign language acquisition. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) demonstrated that speech act realization is culturally variable, emphasizing the importance of politeness, indirectness, and social norms. Kasper and Rose (2002) introduced the concept of interlanguage pragmatics, highlighting how learners' pragmatic competence develops differently from native speakers'. Recent applied studies have focused on the pedagogical implications of speech acts in foreign language classrooms. Research indicates that learners frequently experience pragmatic failure due to limited instruction and negative transfer from their first language (Tran Thanh Du, 2023). Collectively, the literature confirms that Speech Act Theory remains a central framework for analyzing communicative behavior and underscores its relevance for communicative development in foreign language learning (Nusratullayeva, 2025).

Introduction

Foreign language learning is no longer viewed solely as the acquisition of grammatical knowledge; it is increasingly understood as the development of communicative ability in real-world contexts (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Communicative competence involves knowing how language is used to perform actions such as requesting, apologizing, or persuading (Searle, 1969). Speech Act Theory offers a powerful theoretical lens for understanding this functional dimension of language use (Austin, 1962).

Despite its relevance, pragmatic competence often receives limited attention in foreign language instruction. Learners may produce structurally correct sentences that fail to meet sociocultural expectations, resulting in misunderstandings or perceived impoliteness. This gap highlights the

need for a theoretical approach that connects linguistic form with communicative intention (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Speech Act Theory addresses this need by emphasizing the relationship between utterances, speaker intentions, and contextual factors. By focusing on illocutionary force and communicative purpose, the theory provides valuable insights into how language functions in interaction. This article aims to examine the role of Speech Act Theory in fostering communicative development among foreign language learners. It argues that explicit attention to speech acts is essential for developing pragmatic competence and achieving effective communication in a second or foreign language.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design grounded in theoretical and applied linguistic literature (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the research relies on an in-depth analysis of established theoretical frameworks and peer-reviewed studies related to Speech Act Theory, pragmatics, and foreign language learning. This approach is appropriate given the study's aim to synthesize existing knowledge and identify pedagogical implications.

The primary materials include classical philosophical and linguistic works by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), which establish the conceptual foundations of Speech Act Theory. In addition, contemporary studies in interlanguage pragmatics and foreign language pedagogy, including the attached scholarly articles, are examined to provide applied perspectives (Tran Thanh Du, 2023). These sources were selected based on their relevance to speech act realization, communicative competence, and instructional practices in foreign language contexts.

The analysis focuses on commonly studied speech acts in language learning research, such as requests, apologies, refusals, compliments, and suggestions. These speech acts are examined in terms of their illocutionary force, linguistic realization strategies, and sensitivity to sociocultural variables, including power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition. Particular

attention is paid to differences between native speaker norms and learner performance (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

A thematic analysis method is employed to identify recurring patterns and findings across the reviewed studies. The analysis categorizes results into themes such as pragmatic failure, instructional effectiveness, and the role of explicit versus implicit teaching. Comparative analysis is also used to contrast instructional approaches and learner outcomes reported in different studies (Nusratullayeva, 2025).

To enhance reliability, findings are cross-referenced across multiple sources. The study emphasizes analytical interpretation rather than quantitative measurement, aligning with its theoretical orientation. By integrating insights from philosophy of language, pragmatics, and applied linguistics, the methodology enables a comprehensive examination of how Speech Act Theory contributes to communicative development in foreign language learning.

To operationalize Speech Act Theory in pedagogical contexts, the reviewed studies frequently employ classroom-based tasks designed to elicit specific speech acts. For example, learners are asked to perform request-making tasks under varying conditions of social power and distance. A typical task requires students to request an extension from a teacher (high power distance) and compare it with requesting notes from a classmate (equal status). These tasks allow analysis of learners' choice of directness, modal verbs, and politeness markers.

Another commonly used method involves discourse completion tasks (DCTs). For instance, learners are given a situation such as apologizing for arriving late to a formal meeting and are asked to produce an appropriate response. The resulting data are analyzed in terms of illocutionary force, mitigation strategies, and sociocultural appropriateness.

Role-play activities are also used as a methodological tool. In one example, students simulate a service encounter in which one learner plays a customer making a complaint, while another plays a service provider responding to it. These activities provide insight into both the

production and interpretation of speech acts in interactive settings.

Results

The analysis of the reviewed literature reveals several consistent findings regarding the role of Speech Act Theory in foreign language learning. First, foreign language learners frequently demonstrate pragmatic inadequacies even when their grammatical proficiency is relatively high (Kasper & Rose, 2002). These inadequacies often manifest as overly direct requests, inappropriate expressions of politeness, or misinterpretation of implied meanings. Such issues are commonly attributed to limited exposure to authentic communicative contexts and negative pragmatic transfer from the learners' first language.

Second, the findings indicate that explicit instruction in speech acts leads to noticeable improvement in learners' pragmatic performance. Learners who receive focused instruction on speech act strategies, including form-function relationships and contextual variables, show greater awareness of communicative norms. Instructional practices such as role-plays, discourse completion tasks, and analysis of authentic dialogues are reported to be particularly effective (Tran Thanh Du, 2023).

Third, the results highlight the importance of sociocultural factors in communicative development. Learners become more successful in performing speech acts when they are taught to consider variables such as interlocutor status, social distance, and situational formality. Studies consistently show that awareness of these factors enhances learners' ability to choose appropriate linguistic forms.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that Speech Act Theory supports both productive and receptive dimensions of communication. Learners not only improve in producing appropriate speech acts but also develop better skills in interpreting speakers' intentions. Overall, the results confirm that integrating Speech Act Theory into foreign language instruction significantly contributes to the development of communicative competence (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

The results show that learners often rely on

literal translations from their first language when performing speech acts. For example, in request situations, learners may use imperatives such as “Give me your book”, which are grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate in English. After explicit instruction, learners tend to shift toward more acceptable forms such as “Could you lend me your book, please?”

In apology tasks, learners initially produce minimal responses like “Sorry” without explanation or responsibility-taking. Post-instruction data demonstrate improved responses incorporating multiple apology strategies, for example: “I’m really sorry for being late; the traffic was heavier than usual.”

Similarly, in refusal scenarios, learners initially provide blunt rejections such as “I can’t”. After pragmatic training, they employ indirect strategies including excuses and expressions of regret, e.g., “I’d love to help, but I already have another appointment.” These examples illustrate measurable improvement in pragmatic competence.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the central role of Speech Act Theory in understanding communicative development in foreign language learning. By conceptualizing language as action, the theory explains why grammatical accuracy alone does not guarantee communicative success. Learners must also acquire pragmatic competence, which involves recognizing intentions and responding appropriately within specific contexts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

The results align with previous research emphasizing the effectiveness of explicit pragmatic instruction. While communicative language teaching encourages interaction, it does not automatically ensure pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Speech Act Theory provides a structured framework for teaching communicative functions systematically rather than incidentally.

Another significant point concerns cultural variability. Differences in politeness norms, indirectness, and social hierarchy can lead to pragmatic failure if not explicitly addressed.

The discussion suggests that foreign language instruction should integrate cross-cultural comparisons to help learners understand how speech acts differ across languages and cultures (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

From a theoretical perspective, the discussion confirms the adaptability of Speech Act Theory across linguistic contexts. Pedagogically, it supports the inclusion of pragmatics as a core component of language curricula. Overall, the discussion highlights the necessity of moving beyond form-focused instruction toward a more function-oriented approach to language teaching. The practical examples support the argument that pragmatic awareness does not develop automatically. Learners exposed only to grammatical instruction often fail to adjust their speech to context. For instance, students may use the same request form when speaking to both peers and teachers, ignoring differences in power relations.

The discussion of role-play activities demonstrates how Speech Act Theory enables learners to reflect on communicative intent. When learners analyze why a particular request sounds impolite or overly direct, they begin to understand the interaction between language form and social meaning. This reflective process is central to pragmatic development.

The examples further show that culturally appropriate communication requires more than vocabulary knowledge. Understanding when indirectness is preferred, or when an apology requires explanation, helps learners avoid pragmatic failure in real-life interactions.

Conclusion

From a practical standpoint, foreign language teachers can integrate Speech Act Theory into lessons through task-based instruction. For example, a lesson on requests may begin with analyzing authentic dialogues from films or real-life conversations. Students identify the speech act, the level of politeness, and the social context.

Teachers may then design guided role-plays, such as requesting permission, making suggestions during group work, or refusing invitations politely. Learners can compare their responses with native-

speaker models and discuss differences.

Another effective strategy is reflective journaling, where learners write short reflections on communicative situations they encounter outside the classroom, such as ordering food or asking for help. This encourages transfer of classroom learning to real-world communication.

These practical applications demonstrate that Speech Act Theory is not merely abstract but directly applicable to foreign language teaching. When systematically implemented, it significantly enhances learners' communicative confidence and pragmatic competence.

This study demonstrates that Speech Act Theory is a vital theoretical and pedagogical tool for enhancing communicative development in foreign language learning (Nusratullayeva, 2025). By emphasizing the performative nature of language, the theory provides insights into how learners can use linguistic resources to achieve communicative goals effectively and appropriately.

One of the primary challenges identified is learners' limited pragmatic competence, often resulting from insufficient instruction and lack of exposure to authentic language use. To address this issue, foreign language teaching should incorporate explicit instruction in speech acts. Teachers can introduce common speech acts systematically, explain their sociocultural constraints, and provide learners with opportunities for guided practice. Practical solutions include the use of authentic materials, role-playing activities, and reflective discussions on language use. Discourse completion tasks and analysis of real-life interactions can further enhance learners' awareness of pragmatic norms (Tran Thanh Du, 2023). Teacher education programs should also emphasize pragmatics to ensure instructors are equipped to address communicative competence effectively.

From a curricular perspective, Speech Act Theory should be integrated into communicative syllabi rather than treated as an optional component. Such integration can help learners develop confidence and flexibility in real-world communication. Moreover, assessment practices should include pragmatic criteria to evaluate learners' ability to perform speech acts appropriately. In conclusion, Speech Act Theory

bridges the gap between linguistic knowledge and communicative use. Its integration into foreign language education promotes not only accuracy but also appropriateness, ultimately leading to more effective and meaningful communication. Future research may explore empirical classroom-based studies and the impact of digital communication environments on speech act development.

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