

Analyzing Speech Acts in Peer Interaction Among EFL High School Students

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Abstract

This study explores the use of speech acts among high school students during peer discussions in an English as a Foreign Language classroom. It aims to identify the types of illocutionary acts students produce and understand how they employ language to negotiate meaning and express ideas in peer interaction. The research was conducted at MAN 1 Jember with four students from the Bina Insan Cendekia program, using a qualitative descriptive design. The previous research was conducted at elementary school or junior high school, and in this study researcher conducted in senior high school to fulfill the gap in this field. Data were collected through audio recordings, observations, and transcripts of peer discussions on the topic of mental health. The analysis, based on Searle's speech act theory, revealed that assertive acts were most frequently used, followed by expressive, directive, and commissive acts, while declarative acts were absent. Students used assertive acts to share experiences and state opinions, expressive acts to convey emotions and reactions, and directive acts to maintain the flow of conversation. Commissive acts were rare and typically appeared in supportive or empathetic responses. The results highlight the significance of topic relevance and peer familiarity in encouraging authentic language use. This study contributes to understanding pragmatic competence in EFL settings and supports the use of peer discussion as a valuable strategy for enhancing speaking skills and meaningful communication in the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak effectively is central to mastering a foreign language, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where learners often struggle to articulate ideas fluently and confidently. In Indonesian classrooms, particularly at the high school level, many students face difficulties in expressing themselves orally due to limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, or anxiety over making mistakes. To address this, peer discussion has emerged as a pedagogical strategy that promotes collaborative learning, increases learner engagement, and facilitates language development. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) argue, communicative activities, including peer discussions, are instrumental in enabling learners to use language meaningfully in real-life contexts. Speaking, in this sense, involves not merely the articulation of sounds, but the performance of communicative acts embedded with intention and meaning. In these interactions, language serves both as a medium for expressing ideas and as a tool for social action, aligning with the core principles of speech act theory.

Speech act theory, introduced by Austin and further developed by Searle, underscores that utterances do more than convey information—they also perform actions such as asserting, questioning, promising, or apologizing. Based on Bouchard et al. (2023) The speech, that composed when speaker produced utterances, essentially contained a series of symbols contained meaning, the meaning was expressed to start from incorporating sectional sound sequences they were, then hooked together into words, the words were then planned and constructed into sentences, the sentences finally spoken to deliver the meaning existing in our mind. These acts are fundamental in classroom discourse where communication is both a cognitive and social process. In the context of peer discussion, speech acts manifest as students attempt to negotiate meaning, persuade, agree, or disagree, thus revealing their pragmatic competence. Illocutionary acts, in particular, are central to understanding what speakers intend when they produce utterances. These are distinct from locutionary acts (the literal expression) and perlocutionary acts (the effect on the listener), as illocutionary acts focus on the speaker's intention, which is crucial in evaluating the depth of student communication in academic settings.

Despite the acknowledged importance of speech act theory in communicative contexts, most studies have focused on teacher-student interactions or scripted communication, leaving peer-to-peer discourse underexplored. In real-world classroom settings, especially in Indonesian senior high schools, peer discussions occur regularly as part of group or pair activities. However, the kinds of speech acts that emerge in such interactions, and how

students use them to construct meaning, remain poorly documented. This gap becomes even more apparent when considering that communication breakdowns often result from a mismatch between what is said and what is meant, a common issue among EFL learners. Therefore, there is a pressing need to investigate the forms and functions of speech acts that students employ in peer discussion settings, especially as a means to improve their communicative effectiveness.

General solutions to this issue have largely centred on increasing speaking opportunities and integrating communicative language teaching (CLT) strategies that emphasize meaningful interaction. These methods encourage students to use language for real purposes, including expressing opinions, solving problems, or sharing experiences. While such strategies are effective in promoting verbal output, they do not necessarily guarantee that students will use language pragmatically or appropriately, especially when peer interaction lacks structure or focus. Furthermore, In CLT oriented classes, speaking activities are often directed by the teacher so that students can still discuss according to the topic being discussed, although this can limit students' autonomy regarding the discussion they will discuss, but this is for the sake of the appropriateness of the topic being discussed. Thus, peer discussions allow learners to have greater control over the discourse, thus offering a richer context for studying speech act performance.

In terms of more targeted approaches, recent studies have highlighted the value of analyzing speech acts within specific contexts to understand learners' pragmatic skills. For example, Hidayat, Fadhilah, and Septian (2022) investigated the types of speech acts used in English classrooms and found that both teachers and students utilized a range of representative and expressive acts, often shaped by classroom roles and expectations. Similarly, Asiah, Asdar, and Lutfin (2024) analyzed expressive speech acts in online group discussions via WhatsApp and found that even in digital environments, learners employed a wide variety of expressive forms—apologizing, thanking, praising—demonstrating the importance of context in speech act performance. While these studies offer valuable insights into speech act usage in educational settings, they do not address how students interact with one another in face-to-face peer discussions, nor do they explore how these acts function in spontaneous, student-led exchanges.

The theoretical perspectives of Vygotsky and Halliday support the relevance of peer discussion in language learning by emphasizing the social nature of meaning construction. Vygotsky highlights the importance of interaction in learning, suggesting that students develop language through collaborative engagement with peers. Similarly, Halliday views language as a resource for making meaning in social contexts, which aligns with the interactive processes involved in peer discussion. Together, these perspectives reinforce the value of

examining how learners use language in peer interactions to support language development.

Existing literature has explored speech acts in a variety of contexts, including teacher-led instruction (Merdana et al., 2013), public speeches (Reflinaldi et al., 2024), online group chats (Asiah et al., 2024), and film scripts (Rahayu et al., 2019). However, few studies have examined naturally occurring peer discussions in high school English classrooms. The available research often highlights the role of speech acts in structured or formal communication, neglecting the dynamic, often unpredictable nature of peer interaction. For instance, Merdana et al. (2013) found that elementary teachers produced more directive acts than students, and students mainly responded with assertive acts. Yet, this teacher-centred communication differs significantly from peer-to-peer discussion, where both participants take on equal roles and alternately function as speaker and listener. Consequently, there is a clear research gap concerning the analysis of speech acts produced specifically during high school peer discussions in English classes, especially within the Indonesian educational context.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining the types of speech acts used by high school students during peer discussions in an EFL classroom setting. Conducted at MAN 1 Jember, particularly within the XI grade Bina Insan Cendekia (BIC) program—a highly interactive and academically rigorous program—this study explores how students use speech acts to negotiate meaning, express ideas, and respond to each other during discussions on relevant topics like mental health. By focusing on naturally occurring student dialogue, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of how speech acts are employed in peer interactions, shedding light on students' pragmatic competence in real communicative contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its detailed analysis of illocutionary acts within student-initiated discourse, using Searle's (1979) classification as a framework. Furthermore, it situates the analysis within a relevant theoretical landscape that includes speech act theory, sociocultural learning theory, and systemic functional linguistics.

Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to both the theoretical and practical understanding of speech act use in EFL learning. It provides empirical data on how Indonesian high school students perform speech acts in peer discussions, identifies which types are most frequently used, and explores the communicative strategies they adopt. The findings are expected to benefit English teachers in designing more effective communicative tasks and contribute to the growing body of research on classroom discourse. By uncovering the subtleties of student interaction, this study also highlights the importance of peer discussion as

a valuable tool in developing speaking proficiency and pragmatic awareness in language learners.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the types and functions of speech acts produced by high school students during peer discussions in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The qualitative design was selected based on the research objective, which seeks to understand and interpret students' utterances in their natural context rather than measure variables statistically. As Creswell (2014) notes, qualitative research allows for a comprehensive understanding of human behavior and social phenomena through detailed textual analysis and context-specific insights. In this study, the emphasis was on identifying illocutionary acts, which represent the speaker's intent and serve as the core of speech act theory, rather than focusing on locutionary or perlocutionary dimensions.

The research was conducted at MAN 1 Jember, a prominent Islamic senior high school located in Jember, East Java, Indonesia. The selection of this site was intentional and based on its academic environment, particularly the Bina Insan Cendekia (BIC) program, which emphasizes intellectual and linguistic development. The BIC 1 class, which consists of male students, was chosen due to its strong English language orientation and the students' familiarity with communicative activities. The school environment, combined with the structured English curriculum and student dormitory life, created a conducive setting for capturing authentic peer discussions in English.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method suitable for qualitative inquiries that aim to obtain in-depth insights from information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided voluntary consent prior to data collection. Participants' identities were kept confidential by using pseudonyms, and all data were used solely for research purposes. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant institution. The validity of the study was established through the use of a well-established theoretical framework for analyzing speech acts. The data were examined in relation to the research questions to ensure alignment between the analytical focus and the study objectives. In addition, excerpts from the data were provided to support the interpretations and enhance transparency.

Four students from the XI BIC 1 class were chosen based on recommendations from the English teacher, who identified them as communicative and competent in English. To ensure reliability, a coding scheme based on established speech act classifications was developed. Two independent coders analyzed the data, and inter-rater reliability was calculated. Any discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached. The sampling criteria focused on students' willingness to participate, their ability to engage in peer discussion, and their exposure to English speaking activities in class. The selected students were divided into two peer pairs, each participating in a discussion session moderated minimally by the researcher to ensure the natural flow of interaction.

Data collection relied on multiple techniques to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of findings. Data were collected through audio recordings and classroom observations of peer discussions. The audio-recorded interactions were subsequently transcribed verbatim and served as the primary data for analysis. In addition, observation notes were used to provide contextual information supporting the interpretation of the interactional data. These included observation, audio documentation of peer discussions, and document review of transcribed utterances. Prior to the discussion sessions, participants were provided with a written transcript of the video stimulus used to initiate the peer discussions. This transcript functioned solely as a discussion prompt and was not included as part of the research data. The discussion took place in the school library and multimedia room, both of which were arranged to create a relaxed, familiar, and non-intrusive environment. A discussion prompt in the form of an English-language video on mental health was presented to each peer group to stimulate conversation. The video, titled "Are You Okay" from the YouTube channel Fight Child Abuse, was selected for its relevance and emotional resonance, which were expected to elicit meaningful and varied speech acts from participants.

Each peer discussion lasted approximately 16 to 20 minutes and was recorded using a smartphone. The researcher provided the participants with the transcript of the video to support comprehension, thereby reducing the cognitive load during discussion. Students were encouraged to express their thoughts freely, and minor code-switching between English and Indonesian was permitted due to their status as EFL learners. Non-verbal cues and back-channel responses were also observed and recorded to supplement the understanding of pragmatic intent.

Transcription of the audio recordings was carried out using the CapCut application, followed by validation through member checking. Participants were invited to review the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of their utterances. Revisions suggested by the students were incorporated into the final version of the

transcript, which was then analyzed using Searle's (1979) taxonomy of illocutionary acts. The data were organized and coded into five categories: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. Each utterance was labeled based on its function and intention, and further classified by specific strategies such as stating, asking, confirming, denying, or clarifying.

To enhance analytical rigor, each utterance was contextualized using observational notes and repeated listening of audio recordings. This ensured that the classification of speech acts reflected not only the linguistic form but also the communicative function intended by the speaker. For example, the utterance "Yes, I'm Hilmi" was classified as a confirming act under the assertive category due to its role in affirming identity in response to a direct query. The analysis further distinguished between dominant and infrequent speech act types, highlighting assertive acts as the most commonly used, followed by expressive, directive, and commissive, while declarative acts were absent from the data set.

The data analysis process followed Creswell's (2014) qualitative data analysis framework, beginning with the organization and preparation of data, followed by reading and memoing, coding, description of categories, and finally, interpretation. A combination of open and axial coding was used to extract themes and subcategories related to speech act performance. This iterative process enabled the researcher to explore patterns of communication and identify recurring strategies across different peer discussions.

To establish the validity of the findings, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing three types of data: observational notes, recorded audio, and transcribed documents. Technique triangulation helped ensure that the speech act classifications were consistently supported across data sources. Furthermore, expert validation was conducted by an academic validator who reviewed the findings and analysis for consistency, coherence, and alignment with speech act theory.

This study is informed by Halliday's functional view of language, particularly the idea that language use is shaped by social context. Rather than applying the framework as a formal analytical model, Halliday's perspective is used to support the interpretation of how meaning is constructed through peer interaction. This study adopts Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics as an analytical framework. The peer discussion transcripts were examined to identify how language was used to realize meaning in interaction, with particular attention to patterns of meaning construction in the data. Analytical categories derived from the framework guided the coding and interpretation process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the types of speech acts produced by students during peer discussions in a high school English class, particularly focusing on illocutionary acts as conceptualized by Searle (1979). The peer discussions were conducted by four male students from the XI BIC 1 program at MAN 1 Jember. These students were divided into two pairs and engaged in structured yet natural conversations on the topic of mental health. The recorded utterances were then transcribed, coded, and categorized to identify patterns in the use of speech acts. The results revealed four primary types of speech acts: assertive, expressive, directive, and commissive. Notably, declarative acts were not found in the students' discourse.

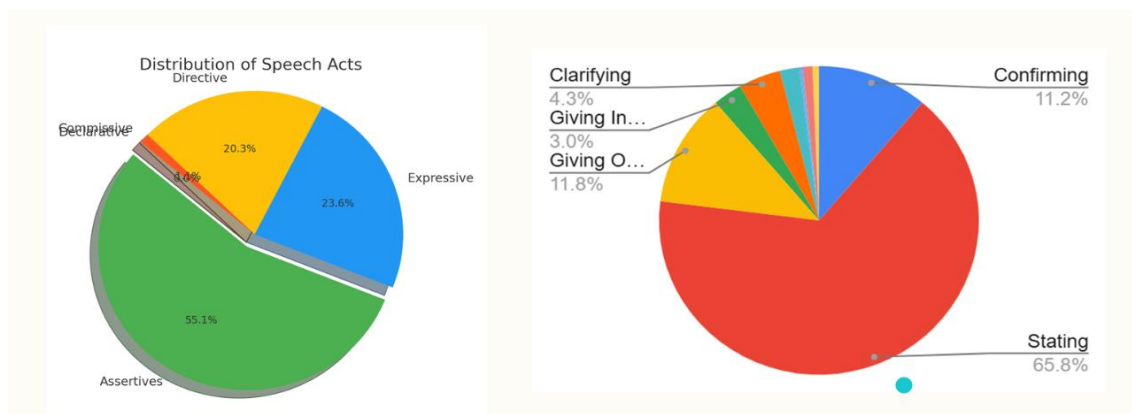


Figure 1. The Distribution of the Speech Act

The findings show that assertive speech acts were the most frequently produced by the participants, accounting for 304 out of the total utterances. This category includes a range of communicative intentions, such as stating facts, confirming information, expressing opinions, clarifying, and denying. The dominance of assertive acts indicates that students primarily used language to convey personal experiences, share knowledge, and assert beliefs during peer discussions. For example, utterances like “I ever have a friend that he often get bullied from his friend” reflect the students’ reliance on personal narratives to support their ideas. This trend aligns with the nature of the discussion topic—mental health—which inherently invites self-disclosure and reflection on real-life situations. Furthermore, the use of confirming strategies, such as responding with “yes” or “oh yes” to verify understanding, was common and functioned to maintain coherence and mutual comprehension during the interaction.

The results indicated assertive speech acts occurred more frequently than other categories during peer discussions. This pattern suggests that participants primarily used language to express opinions, share personal viewpoints, and respond to peers’ ideas. The predominance of these speech acts reflects the interactive nature of peer discussion, where learners are encouraged to articulate

understanding and negotiate meaning collaboratively rather than merely exchange factual information.

In contrast, directive, commissive and expressive speech acts appeared less frequently. This may be attributed to the relatively equal status of participants in peer interaction, which reduces the need for commands or commitments. Overall, the distribution of speech acts demonstrates how peer discussion functions as a meaning-oriented activity that promotes active participation and mutual engagement.

In addition to assertive acts, expressive speech acts were also prominently featured, with 130 utterances identified. These acts allowed students to communicate their psychological states, emotions, and evaluative judgments. Examples include expressions of surprise, empathy, or personal reactions to bullying experiences. Expressive acts often surfaced when students were recounting emotional events, such as feeling upset after being bullied or expressing relief at being able to talk openly about sensitive experiences. The prevalence of expressive utterances highlights the affective dimension of peer discussions, which served not only as a platform for language practice but also for emotional support and interpersonal bonding. The frequency of these acts reflects the students' engagement with the discussion topic and their willingness to articulate emotional responses in English, despite it being a foreign language.

Similarly, Merdana et al (2013) Assertive as the most frequently appeared in speech act among teacher and student at SDN 10 Pringgasela East Lombok. Besides, similar with Sella & Sembiring (2018) his object research was 'sleeping beauty movie transcript' was found assertive speech act was frequently appeared. However, the result of this research was differed from the result of Hidayat & Septiawan (2022) they found directive was the most frequently appeared in Junior High School English Classroom. This also differ from Asdar & Lutfin (2024) their research was about online discussion by using WhatsApp platform as channel, in his research expressive was frequently appeared. The prevalence of assertive speech acts indicates that students were actively involved in expressing their understanding and building knowledge through verbal interaction. Future research could look into how different discussions affect the use of diverse speech actions, especially in different educational environments. Researcher has limitation in conducting this research consist of the object study that contribute to this research only 4 students, the topic that discussed was about mental health, the participant was English foreign language student, and the location was at MAN 1 Jember. So that, to extend finding, for the next study can attempt to explore speech act in discussion among student exchange or student English as a native speaker.

Directive speech acts were the third most common, with 112 instances recorded across both peer groups. These acts involved attempts by the speaker to get the listener to do something, such as asking questions, offering advice, or prompting responses. For instance, students frequently used interrogative forms

to elicit opinions from their partners, as seen in utterances like “Do you even being annoyed by them?” These directives played a crucial role in sustaining the flow of conversation and encouraging active participation. The presence of directives suggests that students assumed equal conversational roles, prompting one another to share experiences and elaborate on their thoughts. This interactional symmetry supports the idea that peer discussions offer a more balanced discourse environment compared to teacher-led dialogues, where power dynamics often restrict student agency.

Commissive speech acts were relatively rare, with only six instances observed. These acts commit the speaker to a future action, such as promising or volunteering to do something. The limited occurrence of commissives may be attributed to the context of the discussion, which did not require participants to make commitments or pledges. Instead, the students focused more on sharing personal narratives and discussing abstract ideas. Nevertheless, the few commissive utterances that did appear revealed moments of solidarity and empathy, such as statements of support or encouragement. Although less frequent, commissive acts demonstrate that students were capable of projecting themselves into future scenarios and expressing intentions when prompted by the context.

Interestingly, no declarative speech acts were found in the entire dataset. Declaratives, as defined by Searle (1979), are acts that bring about a change in the external situation through speech alone, such as pronouncing someone married or declaring a meeting open. Their absence is consistent with the informal, non-institutional nature of peer discussion, where students lacked the authority or contextual need to perform such functions. This finding reinforces the importance of situational context in shaping the distribution of speech act types. As peer discussions among students are inherently collaborative and non-hierarchical, they naturally favor acts that express opinion, inquiry, and emotion over institutional declarations.

The results also reveal variations in speech act strategies between the two peer groups. Peer 1 produced a higher number of utterances (332) compared to Peer 2 (220), suggesting differences in participation levels and communication styles. Peer 1 relied heavily on the stating strategy within assertive acts, as well as on confirming and clarifying tactics to maintain the interaction. Peer 2, while also assertive, showed a broader range of strategies, including initiating, answering, and correcting. These variations may be influenced by individual personality traits, language proficiency, or the dynamics between interlocutors. For instance, students with shared experiences or closer relationships, as observed in Peer 1, may feel more comfortable dominating the conversation.

Contextual factors also played a significant role in shaping the nature of student interactions. The discussion topic—mental health—appeared to elicit deeper engagement and more authentic speech acts, as it resonated with students’ personal experiences. The familiarity of the peer participants, coupled with the relaxed setting of the school library, contributed to a supportive environment where students felt safe to express themselves. The freedom to alternate between

speaker and hearer roles allowed for reciprocal exchange and the spontaneous emergence of speech acts. These findings support Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, where peer interaction provides scaffolding that enables learners to perform beyond their individual capabilities. Moreover, the peer discussion format aligns with Halliday's (1985) ideational metafunction, in which language is used to represent experience and convey meaning about the world.

In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings suggest that peer discussion is a valuable tool for enhancing students' speaking skills and pragmatic competence. The predominance of assertive and expressive acts indicates that students are capable of using language not only to convey information but also to reflect on emotional and interpersonal aspects of communication. Teachers can leverage this by designing discussion tasks around topics that are personally meaningful and contextually relevant. Furthermore, providing students with opportunities for peer interaction can foster greater autonomy and confidence in language use. Incorporating pragmatic instruction, including the teaching of speech act types and their functions, may also help students use language more effectively and appropriately in various communicative situations.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence that high school students in an EFL context utilize a diverse range of speech acts during peer discussions. The findings underscore the prominence of assertive and expressive acts, with directive and commissive acts playing supportive roles. The absence of declaratives is contextually appropriate, reflecting the informal and student-centered nature of the interaction. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of student discourse and highlight the importance of peer discussion as a pedagogical strategy for promoting communicative competence. Future research could explore how speech act usage varies across different topics, genders, or proficiency levels, offering further insights into the development of pragmatic skills in foreign language learning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the types and functions of speech acts produced by Indonesian high school students during peer discussions in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Using Searle's classification, the findings revealed that assertive speech acts were the most dominant, followed by expressive, directive, and a few commissive acts, while declarative acts were absent. These results suggest that students primarily used language to convey personal experiences, express emotions, seek clarification, and maintain engagement with peers. The emotional relevance of the discussion topic, the peer-based format, and the supportive classroom environment significantly contributed to the authenticity and richness of student interactions.

The study contributes to the growing body of research on classroom discourse and pragmatics by focusing specifically on peer discussion, an area that remains underexplored in EFL contexts. It highlights the role of speech acts in fostering meaningful communication and suggests that peer interaction can enhance students' pragmatic competence and speaking fluency. These findings have pedagogical implications for designing communicative tasks that align with learners' experiences and language development goals. Further research could investigate how variables such as gender, topic familiarity, or proficiency levels influence speech act production. Ultimately, this study affirms the educational value of peer discussions in promoting effective and purposeful language use in foreign language classrooms.

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