A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF SPEECH ACTS IN THE OPENING AND CLOSING OF ONLINE TEACHING SESSIONS

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Abstract

In the academic sphere, devising innovative teaching and learning (T&L) approaches that align with evolving educational norms is always an ongoing endeavour. Although online teaching is not a novel concept in academia, the COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably accelerated its widespread adoption and now many higher education institutions are fully integrating it into their curricula. Research on virtual student-instructor communication in online teaching is relevant to gaining deeper insights into how students and instructors adapt to this mode of T&L practice. This preliminary study explores the speech acts used by an instructor when opening and closing three online teaching sessions conducted via Google Meet platform. The findings indicate that directive speech acts are the most frequently utilised, while expressive speech acts appear the least.

Keyword: *Speech Acts, Opening and Closing, Online Teaching, Teacher-Student Interaction*

INTRODUCTION

Online teaching has been incorporated in educational institutions for decades. However, following the outbreak of COVID-19, this mode of teaching and learning has become closely linked to the new norms in education (Cicha et al., 2021). In fact, online teaching now is the enabler of the teaching and learning process. To define the new norms in education, four key aspects must be considered:

i.   Shift or learning space
ii.   Shift of delivery method
iii. Shift of responsibility
iv. Shift in evaluation

(Mohd Kamalludeen, 2020)

The above four aspects serve as the core elements in online teaching and in the context of this study, particular emphasis will be placed on the shift of responsibility. Shift of responsibility in the teaching and learning process requires active participation from the whole members. As interaction has transitioned from physical to virtual, it does not mean that communication with our learning community has been eliminated, rather, it has simply been transformed from physical into a virtual format.

With online teaching becoming an integral part of curricula, it is crucial to examine how instructors communicate with students virtually. One significant element that appears to be lacking in this mode of teaching is the performative aspect, which includes students' feedback and also their emotional reactions. While this aspect is easily addressed in face-to-face interactions, it is more challenging to capture in a virtual interaction (Cicha et al., 2021). Therefore, this study will analyse the speech acts used in the interactions in the opening and closing segments of online teaching sessions, aiming to understand the importance of speech acts used in online teaching.

In speech act theory, speech acts are defined as speaker's performance in saying something and according to Austin (1962), there are three dimensions of the use of a language:

Dimension	Explanation
Locutionary acts	Produce a sentence with a particular sense and reference
Illocutionary acts	A sentence with a conventional force such as informing and ordering
Perlocutionary acts	The effect of saying something like convincing

Based on the above three dimensions, Searle (1969) then categorizes speech acts into five categories which are:

Category	Example
Assertives	Commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition: Assert, state, predict, conclude, deduce, guess, hypothesize, suggest *No one makes a better cake than me.*
Directives	Attempt to make the addressee perform an action: Order, command, request, ask, beg, plead, pray, entreat, invite, permit, advise *Could you close the window?*
Commissives	Commit the speaker to some future course of action: Promise, pledge, vow, swear, guarantee, plan *I'm going to Paris tomorrow.*
Expressives	Express how the speaker feels about a state of affairs: Thank, apologize, congratulate, condole, deplore, welcome *I am sorry that I lied to you.*
Declaratives	Change the state of the world to bring it into conformity with the propositional content: Pronouncing two people man and wife, christening a ship, terminating someone's employment, adjourning a meeting, appointing someone chairman *I hereby pronounce you man and wife.*

Hence, using these five categories, this preliminary study aims to identify the types of speech acts exchanged between an instructor and students during the opening and closing segments of online teaching sessions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this preliminary study, a qualitative method was employed to analyse the online classroom discourse collected from three Google Meet sessions of online teaching for English language classes. The sessions were conducted by a Malay female lecturer with twelve years of teaching experience and involved a total of 83 students. Both the lecturer and students speak English as their second language, with the Malay language or other languages as their first language.

As this study serves as a preliminary study of a larger ongoing research, only 10% of the data collected was analysed. The focus was specifically on openings (instances that initiated the online teaching sessions) and closings (instances that indicated the ending of the online teaching sessions) (Kuang et al., 2013). Therefore, only interactions occurring within these two phases were examined based on the taxonomy of speech acts (Searle, 1979). Given the small repertoire of data, the analysis was performed using common functions in Microsoft Excel as it was deemed feasible and sufficient to attain the research objectives. The analysis was carried out based on the following steps:

Collected the data → Transcribed the audio recording of openings and closings of ODL sessions → Transferred the text from Word to Excel → Prepared the Excel document for coding → Coded in Excel → Prepared the coded openings and closings for sorting → Sorted the data → Transferred quotes from Excel to Word → Sorted the text into a logical structure based on the coding → Analysed the data.

(Ose, 2016)

Inter-rater reliability test involving two raters was also conducted to ensure consistency in the data coding process (Cenni & Goethals, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the findings of this study, we could observe that the most frequent speech act used in the opening and closing of these three online teaching sessions is directive, with the total frequency of 8 (1 in the opening and 7 in the closing). This is followed by declarative type of speech act with the frequency of 7 where it was more frequently used in the closing (4) and 3 in the opening.

Meanwhile for commissive and expressive speech acts, they appeared only in the opening of online teaching sessions and not in the closing. For commissive type of speech act, with the total frequency of 5, they were all identified in the opening. As for expressive, it was used the least in these three online teaching sessions with the frequency of 3. This pattern suggests that expressive speech acts may play a role in building rapport among the group members at the start of a session. As conversation typically begins with efforts to establish a positive connection, the use of expressive speech acts in the opening phase aligns with this social norm. This observation is further supported by Carretero et al., (2015), who highlight the role of expressive speech act in fostering a good rapport in relationships.

The table below provides better understanding for the frequency of speech acts in the opening and closing of these three online teaching sessions:

Category	Type(s) of speech act found	Frequency		Total
		Opening	Closing	
Assertives	Assert, state	4	1	5
Directives	Command	1	7	8
Commissives	Announce, repeat, undertake	5	-	5
Expressives	Greeting	3	-	3
Declaratives	Declare, commence, postpone, adjourn	3	4	7
Total		16	12	■

Table 1: Frequency of Speech Acts in the Opening and Closing

Based on the above frequencies, directive type of speech act is identified as the most dominant in these three online teaching sessions. In using directives, the intention is to make the addressee perform an action. This is clearly seen in this sample excerpt:

Utterance	Directive
If you can get touch of them please do it as soon as possible before I begin with the slides.	Command

The excerpt portrays that the instructor wanted the addressee which are the students who were present during the session to perform an action that is to reach out to their friends who were still absent hence, directive occurred. This is viewed as common in class interaction since directive is potentially done by a teacher as compared to students (Fitriani & Prihadi, 2019).

The frequency table too indicates to us that declarative comes next after directive speech act. Here are some sample utterances classified under declarations:

Utterance	Declaratives
If there's no question then I'm going to end our session today.	Adjourn
Okay..with that since you don't have any question..I'm going to stop the recording.	
Okay..if you don't have any question..I'm going to stop the recording.	
So, if you don't have any question..I will stop the recording.	

All these utterances signify those declarations are used to declare the end of the online class sessions and according to Yule (1996), declarative changes the world of the hearer via utterances uttered by a speaker, the speaker must be someone with a special institutional role to do so (Basra & Thoyyibah, 2017). In this case, only the instructor will have the authority to declare that.

Next is assertive, identified as having the same frequency like commissives, it is just that assertives occurred in both the opening and closing unlike commissive which is only in the opening. The role of a speaker is seen as providing the truth of a proposition (Searle, 1969) especially in these online teaching sessions. Below are two examples of assertive utterances taken from the online classes:

Utterance	Assertives
So, tentatively if we refer to the Course Information..this week you should be presenting your informative speech	State
Right after this I'm going to share you the link in our Whatsapp group.	Assert

These two utterances provide statements of truth or information to others. According to Labinaz and Sbisa (2014) assertion is the most fundamental way to communicate information. Thus, a connection can be made here because when learning is conducted online, an instructor plays a very significant role in providing information to all members, as a result, speech act of assertive is employed.

Meanwhile, for commissive (commit the speaker to some future course of action), with the frequency of 5, occurred only in the opening:

Utterance	Commissives
So, first thing first is I will announce the names of the people who are still not here.	Announce
as usual..urm..for the first..before I start..I'm going to announce the names of the people who are still not here.	

These excerpts depict that the speaker was announcing names of the absentees to the other classmates. The announcement was also made in the opening in order to seek help from the students who were present to remind the absentees about the online classes. This is such an important act as having a lot of absentees in an online session will result in the arrangement of a replacement slot.

Finally, for expressive speech act, it is reported to take place during the opening only and with the lowest frequency (3) for these three online teaching sessions. An example of the utterance for expressive is as follows:

Utterance	Expressive
Okay. Bismillahhirahmanirrahim. Assalamualaikum warahmatullah hiwabarakatuh and also not to forget Selamat Hari Raya, maaf zahir batin to all of you.	Greeting

According to Qadir and Riloff (2011), clues like welcoming, appreciating, thanking and congratulating are categorized under expressives. This is in tandem with this utterance where it was uttered in the opening to welcome and convey a good wish to the students. This conveyance of good wish too is commonly practiced in a Muslim community.

All in all, based on these three online teaching sessions, there are five types of speech acts employed in the instructor-student virtual communication namely assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. The most dominantly used by the instructor is directive whereas the least dominant is expressive.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insights on the variety of speech acts that characterize virtual communication between an instructor and students during the opening and closing segments of online teaching sessions. It is found that the most frequently used is directive speech act and the least used is expressive. It is hoped that these findings will help to enhance and encourage more active communication sessions between instructors and students even in virtual learning environments.

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