

SPEECH ACTS AND POWER RELATIONS IN THE UNDERGRADUATE EFL LEARNER'S ORAL PRESENTATION

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Abstract

Oral presentations require the effective communication of ideas while managing interpersonal dynamics and institutional expectations. This study explored the types of speech acts employed by an EFL learner during an English oral presentation and examined the dynamics of power relations found in the discourse. The research employed a qualitative design using the Interaction Analysis Method (IAM). The data were obtained from a documentary recording of a speech performance, available on the YouTube link for the National English Speech Contest hosted by the English Education of Universitas Timor. The participant focused on the first-place winner as the subject of analysis. The speech was transcribed and analyzed using Austin's and Searle's frameworks of speech acts. The findings reveal that the speech includes five types of speech acts: assertive (47%), directive (24%), expressive (13%), commissive (11%), and declarative (5%). The dominant use of assertive and directive speech acts shows that the speaker's primary goal was to inform and persuade the audience. Furthermore, the data identified several power markers, such as epistemic power, deontic power, affective power, moral commitment power, and performative power. These power markers demonstrate how the speaker constructs authority, influences the audience, and negotiates relational dynamics through strategic language choice. The study enhances comprehension of pragmatic competence in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context and has pedagogical implications for teaching public speaking and presentation skills.

Keywords: *oral presentations, power relations, speech acts*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for conveying information but also a means for acting and negotiating social relationships. In the academic context, such as student oral presentations, communication involves not only the disclosure of ideas but also the management of interpersonal dynamics and institutional expectations. This study focuses on analyzing specific speech act tokens in each turn during the presentation. By clarifying the unit of analysis, this study enhances methodological coherence and sets clear expectations for readers. The concept of speech acts, introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969), emphasizes how utterances function as actions, such as requesting, asserting, questioning, or apologizing, rather than merely

stating facts. Through this speech act, the speaker constructs meaning, establishes authority, and interacts with their audience in a socially and situationally appropriate manner. It is important to consider both participants in communication. Darong (2024) emphasizes the importance of pragmatic competence in effective communication, enabling the speaker to convey the intended message to the listener or interlocutors.

In EFL learner's oral presentations, language use demonstrates linguistic proficiency and sociocultural awareness specific to the EFL context. EFL learners must communicate strategically to achieve specific goals, such as persuading, informing, or responding to feedback. This interaction often occurs in a classroom environment characterized by an unequal power dynamic between the lecturer, evaluator, and peers. By focusing on EFL presentations, studying how power is presented, challenged, or negotiated through students' speech acts can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of EFL classroom communication. Previous research has shown that institutional discourse, such as academic presentations, reflects hierarchies and norms. In the context of EFL, these norms shape the participants' behavior, making it extremely complex to balance language accuracy, pragmatic skills, and cultural sensitivity. For EFL learners, cross-cultural communication challenges arise, such as differences in how disagreement is perceived. For example, direct disagreement might be acceptable in English-speaking cultures but considered rude elsewhere. Understanding these differences highlights the unique difficulties EFL learners face. Increased cultural awareness and communication skills can foster more equitable classroom interactions.

Speech acts, grounded in Searle's (1969) theory, perform actions such as ordering, promising, apologizing, and declaring; they are categorized into five types: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. In recent studies by Mukhroji et al. (2019), the use of various speech acts among English learners at Kampung Inggris in Indonesia is examined, focusing on commands, promises, and expressions of gratitude. Their research reveals that directives, such as requests and advice, constitute the most prevalent speech acts at 35.3%, followed by expressive (greetings, thanks) at approximately 25.9%, while declaratives, assertive, and commissive represent smaller proportions. They identify several factors that impact the effectiveness of speech act use, including students' difficulties in modelling speech acts, selecting

appropriate types, and developing sufficient exposure to pragmatic skills. The challenges faced by students include inadequate proficiency in performing diverse speech acts, limited strategies for selecting acts, insufficient exposure to authentic social and classroom interactions, and reduced awareness of pragmatic competence. Sari et al. (2025) examine the utilization of various speech acts by an English teacher at Smart Mataram Private Course. The findings indicate that the predominant form of teacher discourse consists of giving instructions (directives), followed by statements reflecting facts or beliefs (representatives), expressions of emotion (expressive), and promises or commitments (commissive), with a lesser emphasis on declarations. The research concludes that enhancing teachers' awareness and application of these speech acts can significantly improve classroom communication and learning outcomes.

Previous research mainly focused on classroom interaction contexts involving the teacher and students, whereas this research focuses on students' oral presentations. This study answers the research questions of what types and functions of speech acts were found in students' oral presentations. Thus, the study examines the types and functions of speech acts used by EFL students during oral presentations. It also explores how power relations emerge and are negotiated in their oral discourse. This finding can provide the pragmatic aspects of classroom communication. The study also informs teaching strategies to improve students' speaking skills and critical awareness of the power of discourse. It also helps students use speech acts to challenge or negotiate power relations. Such an approach can enhance students' language skills and foster critical thinking in their engagement with classroom discourse.

METHOD

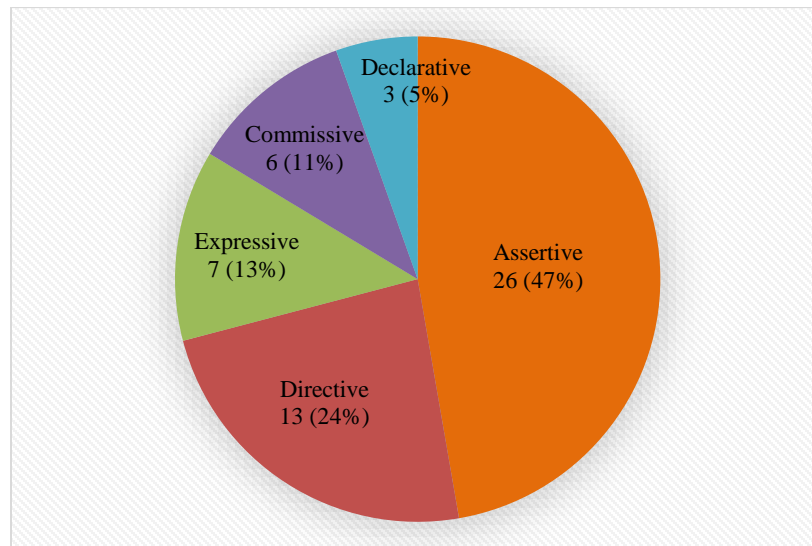
This study employed a qualitative research design (Cresswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018) with an emphasis on the Interactional Analysis Method (IAM) (Keyton, 2018). IAM examines how speech acts and power relations play out in the spoken discourse of EFL learners. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of language use in its natural context, rather than through numerical measurements. Pragmatic analysis provides tools for examining how language performs actions and achieves specific communicative objectives (Levinson, 1983; Searle, 1969). The instrument was documentary data obtained from recordings of a student's speech performance,

accessed via YouTube videos of the 2025 National English Speech Competition. This competition was organized by the English Language Education Study Program, Timor University. The selected video focused on the first-place winner, who was purposively selected as a participant. The winner's performance was assumed to represent a model of effective communicative and rhetorical competence. The speech served as the primary text for analysis. To ensure thorough analysis, the researcher reviewed the recordings and transcripts multiple times to verify their accuracy. The videos were carefully downloaded and transcribed verbatim to capture the data into written text. Furthermore, in line with the conventions of interactional analysis, this approach ensured that the nuances of the spoken interaction were accurately preserved for interpretive accuracy. The transcriptions were analyzed using Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory. This framework categorizes utterances into five types: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. The analysis was then expanded to reveal power markers in the discourse. These markers include epistemic, deontic, affective, moral, and performative commitments.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents and discusses research findings focusing on the types of speech acts and power relations identified in students' oral presentations. The analysis was conducted on transcribed speeches from the winners of the National English Speech Contest, organized by the English Education Program of Universitas Timor. Each utterance was analyzed using the theoretical frameworks of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Through this analysis, this research reveals that learners' spoken discourse is not only a medium of communication but also a site for negotiating power, performing identity, and institutional positioning within the EFL context, as evidenced by the various strategies employed by the speakers to assert their viewpoints and influence their audience.

Figure 1: Frequency of Speech Acts in Oral Presentation



The analysis revealed that assertive speech acts were the most frequently used, occurring 26 times or accounting for 47% of the total utterances. This indicates that the speaker primarily uses language to convey information, express beliefs, and present arguments as truths. These features reflect the informative and persuasive nature of a speech performance. Directive speech acts appeared 13 times, or 24% of the total utterances, making it the second most common category. This category involves efforts to influence the audience's behavior or thinking. The speaker uses suggestions, requests, encouragement, or challenges to engage the audience. The process indicates an aim to engage the audience interactively and motivate them to take a specific stance or action. Expressive actions occurred 7 times (13%). This statement indicates the speaker's emotional involvement and attitude toward the topic. These expressions, such as showing pride, gratitude, or empathy, help create a sense of sincerity and connection with the audience. Commissive acts occurred 6 times (11%). These reflect the speaker's commitment to certain values or actions, such as promises. Such actions demonstrate an intention to take responsibility, which can enhance moral credibility. Declarative acts are the least common, occurring in 3 instances (5%). Although rare, these speech acts are significant. They serve to assert authority or define moral attitudes. These actions function as performative statements that position the speaker as a moral or social leader. In summary, the dominant use of assertive and directive speech acts shows

the speaker's primary goal is to inform and persuade the audience. Expressive, commissive, and declarative speech acts add interpersonal and moral dimensions to the performance. Ashfira and Hardjanto (2021) discovered that the assertive act of stating is the most prevalent, constituting 44% of Trump's speech patterns. This statistical observation indicates that Trump's principal rhetorical strategy consists of making assertions, thereby convincingly leading his audience to believe that his policies are the most beneficial for the nation. The dominance of asserting himself in his speeches underscores a deliberate communicative approach aimed at reinforcing his political objectives and influencing public perception regarding his governance. Yanti et al. (2021) present an analysis of the types of speech acts as categorized by Searle's taxonomy, focusing specifically on their occurrence within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The study highlights that a significant majority, about 70% of the utterances made by English teachers, are classified as directives. This finding underscores the predominant role of directives in shaping instructional communication and interactions within the EFL learning environment. The research conducted by Armistany and Zamzani (2019) delves into the expressive functions that greetings and praises fulfill within social interactions, particularly in a classroom setting. Their findings indicate that these interactions reinforce relationships, exhibit respect and recognition, and maintain the established social norms characteristic of educational settings. Furthermore, Rahmawati (2021) emphasizes the prevalence of certain expressive speech acts, namely apologizing, thanking, and complimenting. These acts are vital to the nuances of communication dynamics. Moreover, Nazrah and Rosida (2024) categorize various forms of expressive speech acts, such as expressions of gratitude (thank you), apologies, protests, and compliments, further illustrating the diversity and significance of these communicative behaviors in social contexts.

Table 1: Power Markers and Function in Oral Presentation

Type	Power Markers	Function	Data
Assertive	Epistemic Power	The speaker establishes his intellectual authority and credibility through information, descriptions, and conclusions.	- [According to a report from the Pew Research Center of 2023, 81% of young adults feel more connected...]
			- [Clearly, social media has the power to strengthen relationships]
			- [A research study from global mental health experts warns that heavy social media use can triple the risk of depression...]

Directive	Deontic Power	The speaker invites audience participation and subtly positions herself as a moral guide by requesting, advising, encouraging, and challenging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [Ladies and gentlemen, first, let us be clear] - [If we truly want to rise as a generation, we must reclaim our time] - [Will you let the screen steal your life?] - [Let's be that courage, let's be that light]
Expressive	Affective Power	The speaker builds solidarity and emotional connection; elevates moral authority.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [With a grateful heart, I thank the Lord for His beautiful opportunity to stand before you today] - [May His love shine within our hearts and minds] - This moment becomes more than just a competition, but a chance to grow, to inspire, and to remind us of what truly matters]
Commissive	Moral Commitment Power	The speaker shows personal and generational resolve and creates motivational force by promising and commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [We must reclaim our time, our focus, and our peace of mind] - [We are not slaves of algorithms; we are the authors of our own stories] - [Social media will no longer control us; it will serve us]
Declarative	Performative Power	The speaker establishes authority and leadership role by declaring identity, status, and intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [My name is MT and I'm a student of English Study Program] - [Today, I wish to address an issue that deeply touches our daily lives] - [Social media should be a bridge, not a prison]

The findings demonstrate that the student's oral presentation employs various speech acts that reveal how power is enacted and negotiated through language. Based on Searle's (1969) framework, the speaker strategically used assertive, directive, expressive, commissive, and declarative acts to achieve her communicative goals. The predominance of assertive speech acts shows the speaker's use of epistemic power. It lets her present herself as a knowledgeable and credible source. By citing research from the Pew Research Center and global mental health experts, she adopts an authoritative stance. This makes her more credible as a speaker because she backs up her claims with facts instead of just her own opinion. This aligns with Fairclough's (1992) notion of power in discourse, in which knowledge and expertise contribute to the legitimation of authority. Kamlasi et al. (2025) found that assertive speech acts establish epistemic authority. The assertive acts position the speaker as both an intellectual and a moral voice in addressing social media and mental health. Heritage (2012) highlights that students use assertive speech acts to claim knowledge about the mental health impacts of social media, thereby demonstrating epistemic authority, which is the right to make knowledge claims in that domain. The directive speech acts, on the other hand, manifest deontic power. They reflect the speaker's intention to influence her audience's attitudes and actions. Instead of using coercive commands, she employs rhetorical questions and inclusive pronouns ("let us," "we," "our") to invite reflection and collective

responsibility. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) suggests that inclusive pronouns, such as "let us," "we," and "our," are positive politeness strategies that establish group membership. By encouraging the audience to choose self-awareness over digital dependence, the speaker exercises soft power. She guides moral reflection without explicit authority. Kamlasi et al. (2025) reported that the directive was used to offer recommendations and suggestions, which helped the audience reflect on their choices and consider the benefits of self-awareness over digital dependence.

Meanwhile, expressive speech acts reveal affective power. Here, emotion and spirituality become tools of influence. Expressions of gratitude and religious references (e.g., thanking God, invoking divine love) humanize the speaker and create an empathetic connection with the audience. This resonates with Fairclough's idea that affective and moral discourses contribute to the naturalization of authority. Emotional sincerity enhances the perceived authenticity of the speaker's message. The use of affective power allows the speaker to appeal not only to reason but also to the shared emotional and spiritual values of her listeners. The commissive speech acts embody moral commitment and power. The speaker aligns herself with her generation by expressing shared goals and responsibilities. Through statements such as "We must reclaim our time" and "We are not slaves of algorithms," she articulates a promise of collective action and empowerment. In this sense, the commissive acts are performative acts of solidarity. They transform passive listeners into active participants in change. Finally, declarative speech acts exhibit performative power. The speaker constructs their identity and legitimizes their social role. By stating, "My name is MT and I'm a student of the English Study Program," she situates herself within an academic context that grants her the right to speak on the topic. Searle's (1989) concept of self-identification in academic settings establishes a student's institutional position, granting them rights and responsibilities within the academic context. Declarations such as "*Social media should be a bridge, not a prison*" redefine existing social meanings. This demonstrates her ability to reframe discourse in a transformative way. These declarative acts represent moments where language itself reshapes social reality. They turn speech into social action. Searle's 2010 examination of declarative speech acts, defined by "performative power," corresponds with his research on institutional reality, emphasizing the formation of identity and social roles.

Overall, the interplay of epistemic, deontic, affective, moral, and performative power reflects the multidimensional nature of communicative authority in oral presentations. The student wields power not through domination but through persuasion, empathy, and a shared vision, aligning with Fairclough's (1992) idea of hegemonic power being realized through consent rather than coercion. The student's speech acts show how linguistic choices can transform a simple presentation into an empowering discourse that informs, inspires, and mobilizes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of students' oral presentations shows that speech acts not only function as linguistic expressions but also as instruments of power that shape meaning, identity, and social relationships within academic discourse. By strategically using assertive (47%), directive (24%), expressive (13%), commissive (11%), and declarative (5%) modes, the speaker establishes herself as an informed, empathetic, and morally grounded communicator. Each type of epistemic power, deontic power, affective power, moral power, and performative power contributes to a multidimensional portrayal of authority, combining intellect, persuasion, and emotional resonance. This finding indicates that in EFL oral presentations, power is not exerted through dominance or hierarchy, but rather through rhetorical proficiency, ethical stance, and collective engagement with the audience. The student's performance demonstrates how language can serve as a transformative tool, inspiring and empowering the audience in an academic context. The dominant use of assertive and directive speech acts shows the speaker's primary goal is to inform and persuade the audience. The study enhances comprehension of pragmatic competence in the EFL context and has pedagogical implications for teaching public speaking and presentation skills. This study recommends pragmatics training for EFL learners to improve language skills and enhance communication effectiveness in various contexts. The emphasis on pragmatic training focuses on the practical use of language in real-life situations, equipping learners with the tools to navigate English interactions more successfully.

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