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Patterns of Lecturer and Student Speech Acts in EFL Classroom Interaction: Qualitative Study Insights

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ABSTRACT

Classroom interaction has long been a significant concern in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly the persistent imbalance in participation, in which lecturers dominate classroom discourse while students make minimal contributions. Within the international discussion of interactional asymmetry and learner agency, speech act theory offers a valuable lens for examining how such interactional roles are constructed and maintained in the classroom environment. The findings indicate that classroom interactions are heavily dominated by representative and directive speech acts from lecturers, which serve to explain content and organize learning activities. In contrast, students produce only limited expressive responses, indicating limited opportunities to engage in various pragmatic roles. Commissive and declarative speech acts are absent, reflecting students' limited role in the meaning-making process. The prevalence of these patterns is shaped by pedagogical strategies, interlocutor roles, peer dynamics, and activity types, as well as student affective factors such as self-confidence and anxiety. By highlighting patterns of pragmatic dominance and their contextual determinants, this study extends research on international EFL classroom interaction beyond descriptive classification. It highlights how the distribution of speech acts reflects broader pedagogical and psychological dimensions, offering insights for fostering more interactionally balanced and student-centered EFL learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Classroom interaction plays a central role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it shapes students' linguistic development, communication strategies, and psychological engagement. Through interaction, learners are exposed not only to linguistic input but also to opportunities to negotiate meaning, develop pragmatic competence, and build confidence in using the target language. Effective classroom interaction facilitates vocabulary growth, fluency, and critical thinking, whereas limited or monotonous interaction may result in passive learning and low communicative participation. In many EFL contexts, including Indonesia, unequal participation between teachers and students remains a persistent issue, with classroom discourse often dominated by teachers while students contribute only minimally. This condition indicates that interaction is influenced not only by learners' linguistic proficiency but also by pedagogical practices, institutional culture, and sociocultural norms governing communication.

From a pragmatic perspective, speech act theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how classroom interaction is constructed through language. As proposed by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1979), language is not merely used to convey information but also to perform actions, such as requesting, explaining, questioning, promising, or expressing attitudes.

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In instructional settings, these actions are realized through different types of speech acts, including representative, directive, expressive, commissive, and declarative acts. The distribution of these acts reflects interactional roles and power relations between lecturers and students, as well as the extent to which learners are positioned as active participants or passive recipients of knowledge.

A number of studies have applied speech act theory to EFL classrooms in Indonesia. Sriwahyuni et al. (2024) found that teachers predominantly used locutionary and directive acts to manage learning activities, indicating a strong instructional orientation. Using conversational analysis, Darong (2024) similarly reported that teachers produced substantially more speech acts than students, confirming the dominance of teacher talk in classroom interaction. At the secondary school level, Hidayat et al. (2022) identified directive acts, particularly questions and commands, as the most frequent speech acts in English classrooms, while Yanti et al. (2021) showed that directive acts constituted approximately 70% of teachers' utterances. These findings consistently demonstrate that Indonesian EFL classrooms tend to be teacher-fronted, with interaction patterns characterized by explanation, instruction, and control of turn-taking.

Despite their contributions, existing studies reveal several limitations. First, most previous research has been conducted in public schools or secular universities, leaving Islamic higher education institutions, particularly those located in Eastern Indonesia, underrepresented in pragmatic and classroom discourse research. Second, many studies focus primarily on identifying and quantifying types of speech acts, without sufficiently exploring the contextual and affective factors that shape their use, such as teaching strategies, students' motivation, anxiety, confidence, and sensitivity to social hierarchy. Third, little attention has been paid to courses that explicitly require high levels of oral interaction and critical engagement, such as English Debate and Critical Speaking, where students are expected to perform complex illocutionary acts including arguing, challenging, and defending positions.

Preliminary observations at STAIN Majene reveal similar interactional conditions. Although a small number of students participate actively, the majority tend to remain passive, showing limited verbal contributions due to restricted vocabulary, low confidence, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. These psychological factors are further intertwined with sociocultural expectations of politeness and respect toward lecturers, which may discourage students from initiating questions, disagreements, or critical responses. As a result, classroom discourse often reflects an imbalance in which the lecturer assumes a dominant role as the primary source of knowledge and authority, while students position themselves as cautious and reactive participants.

In this context, examining speech act patterns in an English Debate and Critical Speaking course becomes particularly relevant. Such a course is designed to foster communicative competence, critical thinking, and argumentative skills, requiring students to actively perform a wide range of speech acts. However, the persistence of lecturer-dominated interaction and limited student participation suggests that pragmatic development may be constrained by pedagogical and sociocultural factors. Understanding how speech acts are distributed between lecturer and students, and what factors influence their use, is therefore essential for creating more interactive and student-centered learning environments.

Moreover, previous studies have rarely integrated speech act analysis with an exploration of contextual determinants. While Arbain et al. (2024) demonstrated that the identity and status of the interlocutor influence the formality and type of speech acts produced, and Andini et al. (2024) highlighted the role of questioning techniques in promoting interaction, there remains a need for comprehensive analysis that links speech act patterns with classroom atmosphere, peer dynamics, learning activities, and students' affective conditions. Arshad et al. (2024) further emphasized that meaningful interaction is shaped by both linguistic and psychological dimensions, suggesting that pragmatic behavior cannot be separated from learners' emotional readiness and sense of security in the classroom.

Addressing these gaps, the present study focuses on the English Debate and Critical Speaking course at STAIN Majene as an under-researched institutional and pedagogical context. By employing a qualitative case study design, the study aims to analyze the types of speech acts produced by the lecturer and students and to identify the internal and external factors that influence their use. These factors include teaching strategies, interlocutor roles, peer support, classroom atmosphere, learning topics, and students' motivation, confidence, and anxiety. Through this approach, the study seeks to move beyond mere classification of speech acts toward a deeper understanding of how pragmatic interaction is shaped by psychological, pedagogical, and sociocultural dimensions in Islamic higher education.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the patterns of speech acts used by the lecturer and students in EFL classroom interaction at STAIN Majene, and (2) to identify the contextual factors that influence the production of these speech acts. By situating the analysis within the framework of speech act theory and the specific context of an English Debate and Critical Speaking course, this study is expected to contribute to the growing body of research on EFL classroom discourse in Indonesia and to provide pedagogical insights for fostering more balanced, interactive, and communicatively rich learning environments.

METHODS
Design
This study used a qualitative approach to understand how speech acts emerge in classroom interactions in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This approach was chosen because, as Sugiyono (2021) explained, qualitative research focuses on the meanings individuals and groups attach to social phenomena. Therefore, this study aims to explore the speech acts used by a lecturer and students in EFL classroom communication. To support this objective, this research employed a case study design. This design allowed researcher to examine in detail the speech acts between a lecturer and students at STAIN Majene. Consistent with Sugiyono's (2021) perspective, case studies provide an opportunity to explore a limited system in depth, thus yielding a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study.

Participants
In this study, the researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select the English Debate and Critical Speaking course, with one lecturer and 11 fourth-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at STAIN Majene as participants. A lecturer was involved because the speech acts produced during the learning process play a crucial role in shaping interaction patterns. At the same time, the students were selected because this course requires them to create various types of speech acts, such as statements, questions, objections, and responses.

This participant selection was supported by initial observations and brief interviews with several students, which revealed significant variation in verbal participation. Some students appeared active in speaking English, while others remained hesitant or passive. This situation confirms that the use of and responses to speech acts are strongly influenced by the social context and communication patterns between a lecturer and students, making this class relevant for analysis.

Data Collection
Data were collected through non-participatory classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to examine the use of speech acts in EFL classroom interactions. Before data collection, all participants including lecturers and students were informed of the study's purpose and procedures, and informed consent was obtained to ensure ethical compliance.

Classroom observations were conducted during two learning sessions in the English Debate and Critical Speaking courses at an Islamic higher education institution in Sulawesi, Indonesia. During the observations, the researcher did not participate in class activities but focused on documenting

verbal interactions between lecturers and students. Classroom discourse was audio-visually recorded using a mobile device positioned to capture natural interactions, and field notes were taken to supplement the recordings. These observations focused on identifying speech acts produced during the learning interactions, including locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions based on Searle's (1979) speech act framework.

Following the observations, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the lecturer and eleven students to explore their perceptions of factors influencing speech act production and classroom interactions. The interviews provided contextual insights into pedagogical strategies, student affective factors, and interaction dynamics that cannot be fully captured through observation alone. All recordings, observation notes, and interview data were securely stored and handled confidentially to protect participant privacy and adhere to qualitative research ethics.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed the interactive model as proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves four interrelated stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. This model was selected because it allows for a systematic and cyclical interpretation of qualitative data, ensuring that emerging patterns of speech acts and their influencing factors were continuously refined and validated throughout the analysis process. Classroom observation transcripts and interview recordings were first transcribed verbatim and then imported into NVivo 12 Plus to facilitate systematic coding. Coding was conducted deductively based on Searle's (1979) classification of speech acts (representative, directive, expressive, commissive, and declarative), and inductively to identify contextual factors such as teaching strategies, interlocutor roles, peer influence, classroom atmosphere, and student affective variables.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was applied in two forms: source triangulation and time triangulation. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing data from different participants (lecturer and students) and different instruments (classroom observations and semi-structured interviews). This allowed the researcher to cross-check whether the speech act patterns observed in classroom interaction were consistent with participants' perceptions and reflections. Time triangulation was conducted by observing more than one instructional session, enabling the researcher to examine the stability of interaction patterns across different meetings and learning activities. In addition, peer debriefing with academic supervisors was used to review coding consistency and interpretative decisions, reducing subjective bias. Through these procedures, the analysis ensured that the identified speech act patterns and their influencing factors were not isolated occurrences but represented reliable and contextually grounded phenomena in the EFL classroom at STAIN Majene.

Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for qualitative research. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the type of data collected, and their rights, including the option to withdraw voluntarily without consequences. Verbal consent was obtained before audio recording. Participants' identities were anonymized using coded labels, and all data were securely stored and used only for academic purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Patterns of Lecturer and Student Speech Acts

The results of the study showed that only three types of speech acts emerged in EFL classroom interactions: representative, directive, and expressive speech acts. Commissive and declarative speech acts were not observed. The lecturer mostly used representative speech acts to explain debate procedures and learning content, while directive speech acts were used to organize class activities.

Expressive speech acts were primarily used to build rapport and maintain a supportive classroom atmosphere. Instead, students produce a limited range of speech acts, primarily expressive acts and occasional directive acts, which indicate controlled verbal participation. Instead, students produce a limited range of speech acts, primarily expressive acts and occasional directive acts, which indicate controlled verbal participation.

Table 1 summarises the dominant speech act patterns observed in classroom interactions, along with representative utterances and their pragmatic functions.

Table 1. *Dominant Speech Act Patterns in EFL Classroom Interaction*

No.	Patterns	Utterance	Brief Elaboration
1	Lecturer-dominated representative acts	"Actually, even in real debates, in competitions, you're not allowed to bring anything like smartphones, laptops, or digital devices that allow you to search instantly."	This utterance represents a representative speech act in which the lecturer asserts factual information about actual debate practice. Pragmatically, this expression serves to convey knowledge and legitimise classroom rules by referring to external norms in the real world. Its frequent use reflects the lecturer's authoritative role in shaping students' understanding and controlling the learning discourse, a common characteristic of teacher-led EFL classroom interactions.
2	Directive acts for classroom management and pedagogical control	"Let's continue our debate session from the last meeting."	This utterance functions as a directive speech act in which the lecturer directs the flow of classroom activities and signals the continuation of structured learning tasks. Pragmatically, this utterance serves to initiate and regulate interactions by implicitly establishing participation roles. Its prevalence reflects the lecturer's control over turn-taking and the sequence of activities, a characteristic of pedagogical discourse in EFL classrooms where the teacher essentially manages interactions.
3	Students' limited expressive responses	"Okay, Ma'am."	This utterance represents expressive speech acts that function primarily as acknowledgements rather than initiating interaction. Pragmatically, they reflect students' reactive participation, where responses are limited to compliance or agreement without further elaboration. The prevalence of such minimal expressive acts indicates limited interaction space for students and reinforces asymmetrical power relations in teacher-led EFL classroom discourse.

Overall, the data presented in Table 1 demonstrate a clear imbalance in classroom interactions, characterised by lecturer dominance and limited student participation. Representative and directive speech acts were predominantly produced by the lecturer, whose function was to convey knowledge and organise classroom activities. In contrast, student contributions were mainly limited to minimal expressive responses, reflecting reactive rather than proactive participation. This distribution suggests that classroom interactions were primarily lecturer-led, with limited opportunities for students to engage in more complex or self-initiated speech acts. These patterns highlight interactional asymmetries in EFL classrooms and provide a basis for examining the pedagogical, psychological, and contextual factors that influence speech act use, as discussed in the next section.

Contextual Factors Influencing Speech Act Use

The following table summarises the key factors influencing the use of speech acts in EFL classroom interactions, supported by representative interview excerpts and analytical elaborations.

Table 2. *Contextual Factors Influencing Speech Act Use*

No.	Factors	Utterance	Brief Elaboration
1	Lecturer's teaching strategies	"The first thing the lecturer usually does is greet us, then ask how we're feeling and what's interesting today. Hmm... that's often the opening before we get into the material. Lecturer also tend to take the initiative to speak first so we can participate actively."	This quote illustrates how the lecturer's teaching strategies shape classroom interactions from the outset. By initiating interactions with greetings and personal questions, the lecturer creates a supportive communication environment while maintaining control over discourse initiation. Pragmatically, these strategies position the lecturer as the primary interaction agent, influencing when and how students are expected to produce speech acts.
2	Interlocutor	"Yes, when we talk to lecturers, we usually use more polite or formal language and words. It's different when we talk to classmates or other students, uh... we usually use more informal or relaxed language."	This excerpt illustrates how the identity of the interlocutor shapes students' pragmatic choices in classroom interactions. When speaking to a lecturer, students adopt more formal and cautious speech acts, reflecting a sensitivity to power relations and institutional roles. In contrast, interactions with peers allow for more casual and spontaneous speech, demonstrating that the status of the interlocutor directly influences the form and function of the resulting speech act.
3	Influence of peers	"Yes, Ms. Sometimes my friends say, uh... 'Just try talking, it's okay, we'll help,' so I become more confident."	This quote demonstrates that peer support positively influences students' willingness to engage in speech acts. Encouragement from classmates reduces anxiety and increases self-confidence, enabling students to participate more actively in classroom interactions. From a pragmatic perspective, the presence of peers can expand students' interactional space by providing a supportive environment for verbal experimentation.
4	Shyness	"Moreover, uh... if the lecturer doesn't tell me beforehand, I'm just told to come forward. It feels like my head is blank, and I don't know what to say. So, I get nervous, and sometimes I say things wrong."	This quote illustrates how shyness limits students' ability to produce speech acts in classroom interactions. Nervousness and fear of sudden exposure interfere with cognitive processing, resulting in hesitation, mispronunciation, and minimal verbal output. Pragmatically, shyness limits students' interactional abilities and contributes to passive participation in teacher-led EFL classes.
5	Type of activity	"I'm more active during activities like group discussions or debates because I can share my opinions with my friends. Situations such as presentations also encourage me to speak up more."	This quote shows that the type of classroom activity directly influences students' willingness to produce speech acts. Interactive activities such as discussions, debates, and presentations create structured opportunities for sharing opinions, thus encouraging more active and sustained verbal participation. From a classroom interaction perspective, activity design plays a crucial role in shaping interaction patterns and enabling student-initiated speech acts.

The data in table 2 shows that although psychological factors such as shyness remain a significant barrier, supportive teaching strategies from lecturers and peer influence play a substantial role in reducing students' communicative anxiety. These five factors collectively define the pragmatic environment of the English Debate and Critical Speaking classroom.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a clear pattern of asymmetric interactions in the English Debate and Critical Speaking courses at STAIN Majene, where classroom discourse is dominated by the lecturer through representative and directive speech acts, while students' contributions are largely limited to expressive and occasional directive acts. This pattern is consistent with previous research in Indonesian EFL contexts, which has shown that teachers and lecturers tend to occupy the central communicative role by explaining, instructing, and controlling turn-taking (Darong, 2024; Hidayat et al., 2022; Yanti et al., 2021). From a speech act perspective, this dominance reflects the institutional authority of the lecturer and the pedagogical expectation that knowledge transmission and classroom management are primarily lecturer-driven, as conceptualized in Searle's (1979) classification of representative and directive acts.

The absence of commissive and declarative speech acts in both lecturer and student discourse is particularly noteworthy. Theoretically, commissives (e.g., promising, committing) and declaratives (e.g., formally announcing or institutionalizing actions) indicate a speaker's power to create obligations or change social reality (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979). It suggests that students are not positioned as agents who can negotiate commitments, take institutional roles, or perform speech acts with transformative force. Even in a course that is explicitly designed to foster critical thinking, they remain largely confined to reactive roles, producing minimal expressive responses rather than initiating arguments, challenges, or commitments. This finding resonates with Darong's (2024) conversational analysis, which demonstrated that EFL classrooms in Indonesia often function as asymmetrical interactional spaces where teachers perform most illocutionary acts with pedagogical force, while students' speech remains peripheral.

The dominance of representative acts by the lecturer also reflects a strong epistemic orientation toward knowledge transmission. In theory, debate classes should encourage dialogic interaction and extend student talk, and use diverse pragmatic functions such as arguing, disagreeing, and committing to positions. However, similar to the findings of Gümüşok and Balıkçı (2020) and Riad and Trimasse (2023), the present study indicates that even in higher education settings, instructional discourse often remains teacher-centered, with students relying heavily on the lecturer's explanations and procedural guidance. This suggests that the pedagogical culture in EFL classrooms, including in Islamic higher education institutions, still prioritizes control and clarity over risk-taking and dialogic exploration.

The use of limited speech acts by the students can also be interpreted through sociocultural and affective lenses. Interviews revealed particular patterns from the students such as shyness, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety about speaking in front of peers and the lecturer significantly constrained their participation. These internal factors align with the concept of affective filter in second language acquisition, where anxiety and low self-confidence reduce learners' willingness to communicate. Yulian and Mandarani (2023) similarly reported that limited pragmatic competence and fear of negative evaluation lead students to avoid initiating speech acts, preferring safe and socially acceptable expressive responses. In the present study, students' tendency to use polite and minimal expressive acts indicates a pragmatic strategy to maintain harmony and avoid face-threatening acts, especially when interacting with a lecturer who is perceived as an authority figure.

The role of the interlocutor emerged as a crucial contextual factor shaping speech act choice. Students reported being more formal, cautious, and linguistically controlled when speaking to the lecturer, but more relaxed and spontaneous with peers. This finding supports Arbain et al. (2024), who showed that power relations and institutional roles strongly influence the type and form of speech acts produced in EFL classrooms. In the context of Islamic higher education, norms of respect, politeness, and deference to teachers further intensify this pattern. Consequently, students' pragmatic behavior reflects not only linguistic limitations but also sociocultural expectations regarding appropriate interaction with authority figures.

Despite these constraints, peer support and classroom atmosphere were found to play a facilitative role in reducing communicative anxiety and encouraging participation. When students felt

supported by classmates, they were more willing to attempt speaking, ask questions, and express opinions. This finding is consistent with Andini et al. (2024) and Arshad et al. (2024), who emphasized that a positive and collaborative classroom environment can lower affective barriers and increase students' willingness to engage in interaction. From a speech act perspective, peer encouragement functions as a perlocutionary force that empowers students to move beyond minimal expressive acts toward more directive or assertive contributions, such as requesting clarification or challenging ideas.

Teaching strategies employed by the lecturer also significantly influenced the pragmatic climate of the classroom. The use of greetings, apologies, and motivational utterances created a supportive atmosphere and fostered rapport, corresponding to the use of expressive acts with positive perlocutionary effects. However, as Afzali and Kianpoor (2020) noted, a friendly atmosphere alone does not automatically lead to more balanced interaction if the overall discourse structure remains lecturer-controlled. In the present study, although students felt psychologically comfortable, the lecturer still managed most turns and activities through directive and representative acts, which limited opportunities for students to initiate extended speech or perform more complex pragmatic functions.

The type of classroom activity further shaped speech act distribution. Debate and discussion tasks encouraged more active participation than one-way explanations, supporting Rini et al.'s (2024) argument that task design and topic relevance influence the variety and frequency of speech acts. When topics were familiar and cognitively accessible, students were more confident in expressing opinions and engaging in interaction. Conversely, when topics were perceived as difficult or highly technical, students tended to retreat into passive listening, producing only minimal responses. This indicates that cognitive load and topic familiarity interact with affective factors to determine whether students can perform higher-level illocutionary acts, such as arguing, refuting, or committing to a stance.

Overall, the findings suggest that speech act patterns in the EFL classroom at STAIN Majene are shaped by a complex interplay of pedagogical authority, sociocultural norms, psychological factors, and instructional design. While the lecturer's dominance through representative and directive acts is consistent with global patterns of teacher-fronted discourse (Gümüşok & Balıkçı, 2020; Riad & Trimasse, 2023), the strong influence of politeness norms and respect toward authority in Islamic higher education adds an additional layer of pragmatic restraint. Students' preference for expressive and non-confrontational acts reflects an orientation toward maintaining social harmony rather than engaging in critical, potentially face-threatening.

Theoretically, these findings reaffirm Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1979) view that speech acts are not merely linguistic forms but social actions embedded in institutional and cultural contexts. The limited range of speech acts produced by students indicates restricted opportunities for developing pragmatic competence and interactional agency. In line with Ahmed and Saalh (2025), fostering more balanced interaction requires lecturers to consciously decentralize their pragmatic authority by designing tasks that encourage student-initiated talk, allow for disagreement and commitment, and legitimize a wider range of illocutionary forces. By doing so, students can gradually shift from passive recipients of knowledge to active negotiators of meaning, capable of performing diverse speech acts that reflect both linguistic competence and critical engagement in EFL learning.

CONCLUSION

This study examines speech-act patterns in English Debate and Critical Speaking courses at an Islamic higher-education institution in Eastern Indonesia. Findings indicate that lecturer consistently dominate classroom interactions through representative and directive speech acts, whereas students exhibit limited expressive participation, reflecting pragmatic caution shaped by sociocultural norms and lecturers' authority. Peer support and activity types are identified as essential factors that can mitigate these constraints and encourage more active student engagement.

Theoretically, these results contribute to the understanding of interactional asymmetry in EFL classrooms, illustrating how authority, social norms, and peer dynamics collectively shape pragmatic behavior. Practically, these findings highlight the need for lecturer to decentralize their pragmatic

authority by designing activities that encourage student autonomy, provide opportunities for speaking and risk-taking, and leverage peer support to enhance communication confidence.

While providing meaningful insights, this study is limited by its short observation period, which may not fully capture the full range of communication patterns that typically occur in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. More extensive and longer-term observations could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how speech acts develop across various learning topics and activities.

While this study provides in-depth insights from a small sample, future research could explore interaction patterns across different EFL contexts and with larger participant groups to validate and expand these findings. Overall, this study underscores the importance of creating more interactionally democratic classrooms that empower students to become active negotiators of meaning in global EFL learning.

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