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Performing speech acts among Moroccan EFL advanced learners

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, research studies on communicative competence have increasingly been conducted in the past few decades. The mastery of foreign languages especially English language has been one of the primary concerns of researchers in the field of language learning and teaching (e.g Canale & Swain, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Blum-Kulka & Kasper, 1993; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005). These researchers alongside others tried to deal with issues of ELT that have a strong link with the social context. The production of speech acts by non-native speakers is one of these issues. However, few studies on this topic have been conducted in the Moroccan context. The study of how Moroccan EFL learners perform speech acts in English language is overlooked and still at its embryonic stage especially at the university level. Hence, this paper goes profoundly through this issue by investigating fifteen speech acts among the most frequently used ones in the daily life conversations, namely the speech acts of apologizing, inviting, congratulating, adding information, complimenting, introducing, greeting, expressing gratitude, refusing, helping, making suggestions, requesting, offering, criticizing, and complaining. Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) were used as the major data collection instruments; they are one of the most powerful methods used in speech act research (Kasper & Dahl 1991). Twelve American native speakers were involved in the study for the sake of using their answers as a reference through which the Moroccan learners' responses were assessed. The present study shed a great amount of light on Moroccan EFL learners' strengths and weaknesses in choosing the appropriate strategies to perform the aforementioned functions. The findings of this study proved that Moroccan EFL learners suffer widely from using the appropriate expressions when they perform these functions. Thus, the present findings pave the ground to reconsider some critical points regarding the gap existing in the learners' communicative competence.

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1. Introduction

Historically, learning and teaching foreign languages have been beneath constant change throughout the phases of developing learning and/or acquiring foreign languages. Starting from the audio-lingual method in 1930s, language was manipulated in terms of mastering the grammatical aspects and emphasized on accuracy more than any other element. Chomsky (1965) developed his theory about language acquisition and analyzed it as a system neutrally without taking into account any extrinsic forces. However, Hymes (1972) reacted upon Chomsky's theory by taking into consideration the social dimension of language. He, then, coined for the first time the concept of *Communicative Competence* which goes beyond the restricted rules of the syntactical and phonological rules of language. He emphasized the pivotal role of the social context in achieving a successful communication. Later on, Canale and Swain (1980) furthered the aforementioned concept by setting three main components. In addition to the grammatical competence which was linked somehow with Chomsky's linguistic competence, and which considers the rules of grammar, phonology, and knowledge of lexical items, they added the sociolinguistic competence, which stresses the social roles of a group of people in a given context, and the strategic competence, which deals with the communication strategies to avoid patterns of communication breakdowns. Canale (1983) added the fourth component called *discourse competence*. The latter is concerned with the intersentential relations and the way they are connected in a discourse to shape a holistic meaning out of a series of sentences.

This development contributed significantly in paving the ground for many researchers to work on numerous issues related to language use. One of the salient fruits of this metamorphosis was Bachman's concept of Pragmatic Competence (1990). Pragmatic competence is equated widely with Canale and Swain's sociolinguistic competence. According to Bachman's model of *Communicative Language Ability*, language competence is divided into two main components: organizational competence and pragmatic competence. The latter was defined by Bachman in terms of sociolinguistic competence which has been mentioned before, and the illocutionary competence which deals with the effects and the forces of utterances on the interlocutor and the way they are interpreted by him/her. Pragmatic competence opened a wide space for researchers to investigate surrounding issues such as socio-cultural knowledge, context knowledge, and speech act knowledge. The latter remains one of the central issues which have gained a great amount of attention in the study of language use. In this respect, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989b; 1) point out that speech acts are "one of the most compelling notions in the study of language use" (cited in Al-Momani, H., 2009, p. 6).

2. Speech act theory

The origins of speech act theory dated back to 1962 by Austin in his famous book *How to Do Things with Words*. According to Austin, utterances indicate actions. In other words, saying an utterance means performing an action. For example, when we declare a marriage (in the appropriate circumstances), it reveals that we are not reporting on a marriage, we are indulging in it (Austin, 1962, p. 6). By the same token, Searle developed speech act theory through several series of books and defined speech acts as "the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" (Searle, 1969, p. 16). Searle referred to the rationale behind the study of speech acts and declared that:

"The reason for concentrating on the study of speech acts is simply this: all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts. The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, word, or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (p.16).

According to Austin (1962), there are three main categories governing the performance of speech acts. First, locutionary act, it refers to the lateral meaning of an utterance. Second, illocutionary act, it has a specific force on the interlocutor. This force is typically conventional (shared by members of a social group) between the speaker and the hearer. Third, perlocutionary act, it is concern with the consequences of the speaker's utterance on the hearer so as to achieve a specific goal by the speaker. For instance, convincing, changing the hearer's mind and so forth.

Based on the abovementioned taxonomies of speech act performance, Searle (1969) went deeply into the analysis of the second category (illocutionary act) and set four main conditions governing the performance of any given speech act called Felicity conditions.

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