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Speech Acts in the Speak Out Textbook Series: A Pragmatic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatic competence is vital for effective communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, yet many textbooks fail to adequately foster this skill. This study examines the frequency and distribution of speech acts in the Speak Out English textbook series (second edition) to assess its pragmatic competence. Using Searle's (1976) speech act framework, in a quantitative design, dialogues from the Starter to Advanced levels were analyzed. Results show that Assertives (41.7%) and Directives (33.7%) dominate, followed by Commissives (13.2%) and Expressives (10.2%), with Declaratives (1.1%) significantly underrepresented. This imbalance may limit learners' pragmatic competence, potentially causing communication breakdowns. The findings highlight the need for balanced speech act representation in EFL textbooks and offer implications for curriculum design, teaching practices, and material development.

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1. Introduction

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, achieving communicative competence extends beyond mastering grammar and vocabulary to include pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately in social and cultural contexts (Hymes, 1972). Pragmatic competence enables learners to navigate real-world interactions effectively, avoiding misunderstandings that arise from inappropriate language use (Eslami, 2010). Textbooks, as primary instructional tools in EFL classrooms, play a critical role in shaping learners' communicative abilities (Richards, 2001). However, research suggests that many EFL textbooks inadequately address pragmatic knowledge, particularly through the representation of speech acts—functional

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units of communication such as requests, apologies, or declarations (Namaziandost et al., 2019; Vellenga, 2004).

Speech act theory, pioneered by Austin (1962) and expanded by Searle (1976), provides a framework for analyzing how language performs actions in context. Searle's (1976) classification includes five speech act types: Assertives (committing to truth), Directives (prompting action), Commissives (committing to future action), Expressives (expressing feelings), and Declaratives (altering reality). These categories are essential for communicative competence, yet their distribution in EFL textbooks often lacks balance, potentially hindering learners' pragmatic development (Alemi & Irandoost, 2012; Tran & Yeh, 2020). In EFL settings like Iran, where exposure to native-like communication is limited, textbooks are a primary source of pragmatic input, making their quality a critical concern (Allami & Naeimi, 2011).

This study investigates the Speak Out English textbook series (2nd Ed.), a widely used resource in EFL programs, to evaluate its efficiency in terms of pragmatics, based on Searle's (1976) framework. In turn, it will contribute to the selection of practical textbooks in suitable contexts. The books are published in six volumes.

By analyzing the frequency and distribution of speech acts across its Starter to Advanced levels, the study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What types of speech acts are represented in the Speak Out textbook series, and what are their frequencies?

Research Question 2: How does the distribution of speech acts vary across different proficiency levels?

The study aims to contribute to the literature on textbook analysis and pragmatic competence, offering insights for educators, curriculum designers, and material developers to enhance EFL instruction.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Pragmatics and Communicative Competence

Pragmatics is the user language or speaker's meaning, and the way people use language to communicate. In Yule's (1996) view, it is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the user. Pragmatics, therefore, deals with people's expected meanings, assumptions, aims, and intentions. Pragmatics examines language use in context, focusing on how speakers convey meaning beyond literal interpretations (Crystal, 1997). It encompasses functions such as requesting, apologizing, and suggesting, which are integral to communicative competence—the ability to use linguistic, interpersonal, and sociocultural knowledge effectively (Nunan, 1989). Hymes (1972) introduced communicative competence as a shift from structural language mastery to contextually appropriate language use, emphasizing pragmatic knowledge as a core component of language learning (Widdowson, 1989). In EFL contexts, where learners have limited exposure to the target culture, pragmatic competence is often underdeveloped, leading to communication breakdowns (Rose & Kasper, 2001). Pinyo (2009) found that Thai university students with higher proficiency performed better on pragmatic assessment tasks than lower-level students.

2.2 Speech Act Theory

Speech acts are functional units of communication through which speakers perform actions such as informing, requesting, or promising (Austin, 1962). Searle's (1976) framework categorizes speech acts into five types:

Assertives: Commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition (e.g., stating, suggesting).

Directives: Prompt the hearer to act (e.g., requesting, ordering).

Commissives: Commit the speaker to future action (e.g., promising, offering).

Expressives: Convey the speaker's psychological state (e.g., thanking, apologizing).

Declaratives: Effect immediate changes in reality (e.g., declaring, firing).

Speech acts require both linguistic proficiency and pragmatic awareness, and their misuse can lead to misunderstandings, particularly in cross-cultural communication (Vaezi, 2011). In EFL teaching, exposure to diverse speech acts is essential for learners to navigate varied communicative contexts effectively (Hassani et al., 2011).

2.3 Textbook Analysis in ELT

Textbooks are central to EFL instruction, providing structured content and serving as a primary source of linguistic and pragmatic input (Richards, 2001). Textbook analysis evaluates the quality, organization, and appropriateness of instructional materials, identifying strengths and gaps in content delivery (O'Keeffe, 2013). Studies on EFL textbooks reveal that pragmatic content, including speech acts, is often underrepresented or unevenly distributed (Campillo, 2006; Vellenga, 2004). For instance, Alemi and Irandoost (2012) found that the English Result series emphasized compliments and complaints but lacked variety in speech act strategies. Similarly, Jalilian and Roohani (2016) noted fluctuations in the frequency of compliments and complaints in the Touchstone series, suggesting inconsistent pragmatic coverage.

Textbooks, as Hashemi and Mahdavirad (2022) observe, offer instructions to use, complementary materials, teaching processes, chronological order of presentation, expected learning outcomes, and some extra activities to master the subject, and are incorporated into any syllabus based on the focus of the course, administrative requirements, and teacher expertise.

Textbooks and their quality are a consideration in attaining the desired student achievement, as Robitaille and Travers (1992) hold, course book content is directly related to students' learning. Although the curriculum profoundly influences the selection and treatment of subject matter in language classes, the course book is also another crucial issue in realizing this content.

In the Iranian EFL context, research highlights similar issues. Namaziandost et al. (2019) found that Iranian junior high school textbooks overrepresented Assertives while neglecting Declaratives, limiting learners' pragmatic development. Bagheri Nevisi and Moghadasi (2020) analyzed Iranian high school textbooks, noting uneven distribution of speech acts and inadequate meta-pragmatic information. These findings underscore the need for systematic analysis of widely used textbooks like Speak Out to ensure they support comprehensive pragmatic competence.

2.4 Research Gap

While previous studies have examined speech acts in various EFL textbooks, few have focused on the Speak Out series, despite its global use in EFL programs. Moreover, existing research often targets specific speech acts (e.g., compliments, refusals) rather than the full range of Searle's (1976) categories. This study addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of all five speech act types across multiple proficiency levels, offering insights into the series' pragmatic effectiveness and its implications for EFL teaching.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a text analysis design to investigate the pragmatic content of the Speak Out English textbook series (second edition). Text analysis, as defined by Krippendorff (2004), involves systematically examining textual materials to describe their content and context. This approach was suitable for analyzing the frequency and distribution of speech acts in the series' dialogues, providing quantitative insights into its pragmatic effectiveness.

3.2 Corpus

The corpus comprised transcriptions of dialogues from the listening and speaking sections of the Speak Out series, covering six proficiency levels in six volumes: Starter (160 pages), Elementary (178 pages), Pre-Intermediate (176 pages), Intermediate (175 pages), Upper-Intermediate (176 pages), and Advanced (175 pages). These sections were chosen because they simulate real-life communication, making them ideal for analyzing speech acts. The series, published by Pearson Education, is widely used in EFL classrooms globally, including in Iran, making it a relevant subject for this study.

3.3 Data Collection

Speech acts were identified and categorized by the researcher based on Searle's (1976) framework. Each utterance in the dialogues was manually coded as an Assertive, Directive, Commissive, Expressive, or Declarative. To ensure reliability, utilizing expert judgement, the researcher coded the data twice, with a one-week interval between rounds, to verify consistency in identification and categorization. Any discrepancies were resolved through re-examination of the context and utterance function.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis utilized a quantitative approach. Quantitatively, the frequency and percentage of each speech act type were calculated for each proficiency level and overall. Descriptive statistics were used to identify trends in speech act distribution. The analysis focused on how the distribution of speech acts aligns with learners' communicative needs and the potential impact of any imbalances.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

As the study involved publicly available textbook materials, no ethical approvals were required. However, the researcher ensured accurate representation of the Speak Out series content and adhered to academic integrity standards in data analysis and reporting.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Distribution of Speech Acts

The analysis identified 943 speech acts across the Speak Out series, with significant variation in their distribution (Table 1). Assertives were the most frequent, accounting for 41.7% (n = 394), followed by Directives at 33.7% (n = 318). Commissives and Expressives represented 13.2% (n = 124) and 10.2% (n = 96), respectively, while Declaratives were the least common at 1.1% (n = 11).

Table 1
Frequency and Percentage of Speech Act Categories in the Speak Out Series

Speech Act	*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Assertives	394	41.7
Directives	318	33.7
Commissives	124	13.2
Expressives	96	10.2
Declaratives	11	1.1
Total	943	100

Table 2 shows the distribution of speech acts at the Starter level. Directives (41.8%) are the dominant category, followed by Expressives (27.2%) and Assertives (21.8%). Commissives (7.2%) and Declaratives (1.8%) appear only minimally, reflecting the limited functional range typical of beginner-level materials.

Table 2
Frequency and Percentage of Speech Act Categories at Starter Level

Speech Act	*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Assertives	12	21.8
Directives	23	41.8
Commissives	4	7.2
Expressives	15	27.2
Declaratives	1	1.8

Table 3 presents the results for the Elementary level. Directives again form the largest group (37.5%), with Expressives (26.9%) and Assertives (21.1%) following. Commissives (11.5%) and Declaratives (2.8%) remain less frequent, indicating continued emphasis on interaction-management functions at this level.

Table 3
Frequency and Percentage of Speech Act Categories at Elementary Level

Speech Act	*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Assertives	22	21.1
Directives	39	37.5
Commissives	12	11.5
Expressives	28	26.9
Declaratives	3	2.8

Table 4 summarizes the findings for the Pre-Intermediate level. Assertives (41.1%) and Directives (38.2%) dominate the distribution, showing a shift toward more

informational communication. Commissives (11.7%) and Expressives (8.8%) occur less frequently, and no Declaratives are recorded.

Table 4
Frequency and Percentage of Speech Act Categories at Pre-Intermediate Level

Speech Act	*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Assertives	42	41.1
Directives	39	38.2
Commissives	12	11.7
Expressives	9	8.8
Declaratives	0	0

Table 5 displays the distribution at the Intermediate level. Assertives remain the most frequent category (42.3%), followed by Directives (29.3%) and Expressives (17.3%). Commissives (6.5%) and Declaratives (4.3%) appear in comparatively low numbers, suggesting moderate expansion of interpersonal functions.

Table 5
Frequency and Percentage of Speech Act Categories at Intermediate Level

Speech Act	*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Assertives	39	42.3
Directives	27	29.3
Commissives	6	6.5
Expressives	16	17.3
Declaratives	4	4.3

Table 6 shows the results for the Upper-Intermediate level. Assertives constitute nearly half of all cases (48%), while Directives account for 29.5%. Commissives (11.4%) and Expressives (10.2%) appear at moderate levels, and Declaratives (0.7%) remain rare.

Table 6
Frequency and Percentage of Speech Act Categories at Upper-Intermediate Level

Speech Act	*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Assertives	122	48.0
Directives	75	29.5
Commissives	29	11.4
Expressives	26	10.2
Declaratives	2	0.7

Table 7 presents the Advanced-level distribution. Assertives (46.7%) and Directives (34.2%) remain dominant, but Commissives rise noticeably to 18.1%, reflecting increased pragmatic complexity. Expressives (0.6%) and Declaratives (0.34%) occur only minimally.

Table 7
Frequency and Percentage of Speech Act Categories at Advanced Level

Speech Act	*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Assertives	157	46.7
Directives	115	34.2
Commissives	61	18.1
Expressives	2	0.6
Declaratives	1	0.34

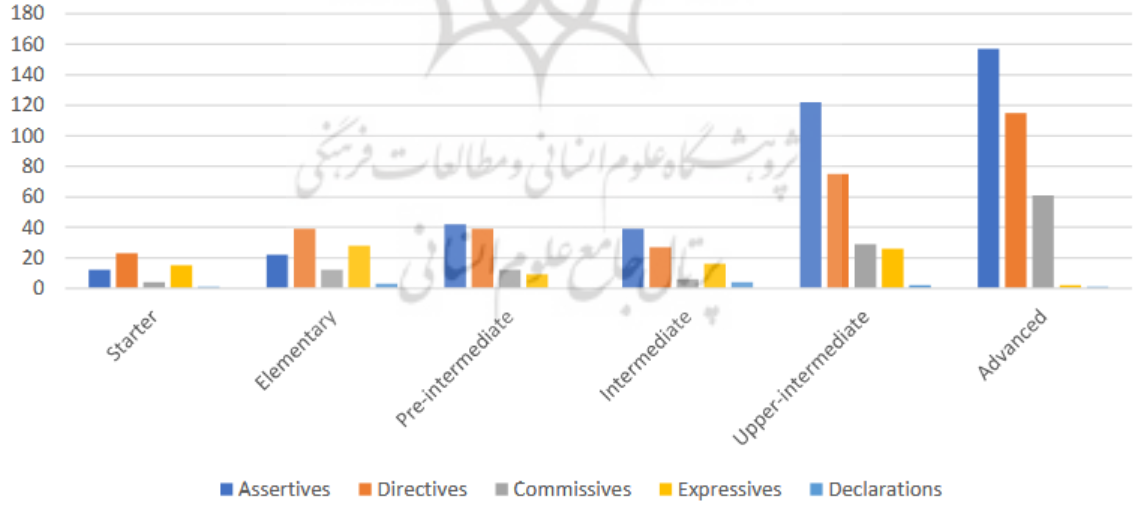
4.2 Distribution Across Proficiency Levels

The distribution of speech acts varied across proficiency levels, reflecting differences in linguistic and pragmatic complexity (Tables 2-7). At the Starter level, Directives dominated (41.8%, n = 23), followed by Expressives (27.2%, n = 15) and Assertives (21.8%, n = 12). Declaratives were minimal (1.8%, n = 1). A similar pattern appeared at the Elementary level, with Directives and Declaratives.

At the pre-intermediate level, Assertives became the most frequent (41.1%, n = 42), followed closely by Directives (38.2%, n = 39), with no Declaratives (0%). The Intermediate level showed a continued dominance of Assertives (42.3%, n = 39), with Directives at 29.3% (n = 27) and Declaratives at 4.3% (n = 4). At the Upper-Intermediate level, Assertives peaked, while Declaratives remained scarce. The Advanced level mirrored this trend, with Assertives and Declaratives.

The total number of speech acts increased progressively from 55 at the Starter level to 336 at the Advanced level, indicating pragmatic complexity which is defined as the instances of frequency and typology of the inferential process of describing the meaning of an utterance (Kilani-Schoch, Marianne & Sánchez-Miret, Fernando & Dressler, Wolfgang, 2011) increases as proficiency rises (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Number of Speech Act Items Across Speak Out Series Levels



While Assertives were the most frequent overall, their dominance was less pronounced at lower levels (Starter and Elementary), where Directives prevailed. This shift suggests that lower-level materials prioritize action-oriented language (e.g., requests, instructions), while higher-level materials emphasize propositional statements (e.g., opinions, facts). Declaratives remained consistently underrepresented across all levels, with no clear progression in their inclusion as proficiency increased.

5. Discussion

In a similar study, Moradi et al. (2013), the speech act items in the textbooks were analyzed in a similar way as this study. Iranian high school textbooks along Interchange series were compared and the conversation section of these books were analyzed. The findings are also in line with this research as it was concluded that these textbooks unequally presented the speech act items and hence, they may not be able to foster pragmatic competence in the learners. However, the language functions studied in that research are excluded from the variables in the present study. Also, the materials used in that research were totally different from what was investigated in the present research.

In a similar fashion, Bagheri Nevisi & Moghadasi (2020) investigated to decode the way of distribution of the speech acts throughout all the levels of the recently published Iranian high school 'Prospect' and 'Vision' series. The findings of this research are in line with the ones of the present study in that the speech act item of Representatives enjoys the highest frequency and the textbooks are less pragmatically competent, yet they differ in the trends of distribution of these items throughout different levels. It must be mentioned that, unlike the present study, this research focuses on two other variables as well, namely Politeness markers and Language functions.

The Speak Out series can also be better interpreted in light of the textbook series' design philosophy. According to Pearson Education (Longman, 2020), the Speak Out series was developed through a comprehensive needs analysis process that included global classroom research, user feedback, and pedagogical consultation. Importantly, the syllabus was aligned with both the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the Global Scale of English (GSE), ensuring a level-specific and goal-oriented curriculum. These systematic efforts were particularly emphasized in the second edition, which incorporated updated content and revised tasks based on learner data. Given this background, the observed variation in speech act types at different proficiency levels likely reflects intentional pedagogical choices made to match learners' pragmatic development stages.

Furthermore, since pragmatic competence has become a central goal in communicative language teaching, especially in curricula aligned with CEFR and GSE, analyzing speech acts in such textbooks is crucial. Textbooks serve as primary input for learners in many instructional contexts, and how speech acts are distributed and presented significantly affect learners' ability to perform appropriate language functions in real-life situations. Therefore, a detailed pragmatic analysis such as the one undertaken in this study helps evaluate how well the textbook series supports the development of learners' pragmatic awareness and communicative effectiveness. This kind of analysis also offers insights for teachers, material developers, and curriculum planners seeking to improve the authenticity and functional quality of classroom discourse.

6. Implications and Recommendations

Teachers using the Speak Out series should supplement its content with activities targeting underrepresented speech acts, particularly Declaratives. Role-plays simulating formal scenarios (e.g., job terminations, official declarations) can enhance learners'

familiarity with these speech acts. Additionally, teachers can design tasks that emphasize Expressives, such as writing thank-you letters or practicing apologies, to address their limited presence at higher levels. Explicit instruction on pragmatic norms, including cultural differences in speech act performance, can further support learners' communicative competence (Rose & Kasper, 2001).

Curriculum designers should integrate pragmatic competence as a core component of EFL syllabi, particularly in contexts like Iran, where exposure to native-like communication is limited. Syllabi should include objectives related to all five speech act types, with clear progression across proficiency levels. For instance, Declaratives could be introduced gradually, starting with simple examples (e.g., "I name this ship") and progressing to complex scenarios (e.g., legal pronouncements).

Textbook developers should ensure balanced representation of speech acts, with particular attention to Declaratives and Expressives. Including meta-pragmatic information—explanations of when and how to use specific speech acts—can enhance learners' understanding of contextual appropriateness (Vellenga, 2004). Dialogues should be designed to reflect diverse communicative contexts, incorporating both everyday and formal scenarios. Additionally, developers can use authentic materials, such as real-life conversations or media excerpts, to provide richer pragmatic input (Gilmore, 2004).

The uneven distribution of speech acts in the Speak Out series may hinder learners' development of comprehensive pragmatic competence. Declaratives, though less frequent in daily communication, are essential for understanding institutional and formal language use (Cutting, 2002). Their underrepresentation could leave learners unprepared for professional or legal contexts, where such speech acts are common. Moreover, the limited presence of Expressives at higher levels may restrict learners' ability to express emotions or build rapport, which are crucial for social interactions (Yule, 1996). To address these gaps, textbook designers must ensure balanced inclusion of all speech act types, accompanied by meta-pragmatic explanations to clarify their contextual use.

Future studies could analyze other sections of the Speak Out series, such as reading passages or exercises, to provide a comprehensive evaluation of its pragmatic content. Comparative analyses with other EFL textbook series (e.g., English File, Interchange) could identify best practices in pragmatic instruction. Additionally, experimental studies examining the impact of speech act exposure on learners' pragmatic performance would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of textbook content.

7. Limitations

The study's focus on the Speak Out series limits its generalizability to other EFL textbooks. Additionally, the analysis was confined to dialogues in the listening and speaking sections, excluding other components like reading passages or exercises. The manual coding process, while rigorous, may introduce minor subjectivity, despite double-coding to enhance reliability. Future research could incorporate automated text analysis tools or examine learner outcomes to assess the impact of speech act exposure on pragmatic competence.

8. Conclusion

This study reveals that the Speak Out textbook series effectively incorporates Assertives and Directives, supporting learners' ability to engage in informational and action-oriented communication. However, the significant underrepresentation of Declaratives and the uneven distribution of Expressives and Commissives highlight gaps in its pragmatic coverage. These shortcomings may limit learners' ability to achieve comprehensive communicative competence, particularly in formal or emotional contexts. By addressing these gaps through balanced speech act representation and contextualized instruction, textbook developers and educators can better equip EFL learners for real-world communication. The findings underscore the importance of pragmatic competence in EFL teaching and call for continued research to optimize instructional materials.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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