An Analysis of the Illocutionary Acts in Classroom Interactions of Teacher-Students of LVT English Language in the Teaching and Learning Process

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Abstract: *This study investigates the use of illocutionary acts in classroom interactions between teachers and English language students of the Long Vacation Training (LVT) programme at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria. Grounded in Austin's Speech Act Theory and Searle's classification of illocutionary acts—representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations—the research explores how these speech acts function pragmatically within the teaching and learning process. Using qualitative descriptive methods, data were collected through non-participant observations and audio recordings of classroom discourse, then analysed to identify patterns in illocutionary act distribution and their pragmatic roles. Findings reveal that directives dominate teacher speech, serving to organise, regulate, and maintain authority during classroom activities, while students primarily employ representatives to demonstrate comprehension and issue directives mostly as clarification requests, highlighting an inherent asymmetry in power relations. Expressives play a significant role in shaping the affective climate: teachers use them to evaluate and encourage, whereas students' express emotions such as confidence or confusion, creating a feedback loop that supports rapport but also reinforces hierarchical dynamics. Commissives and declarations, though less frequent, contribute important collaborative and institutional dimensions—commissives foster shared responsibility and planning, while declarations remain an exclusive teacher domain, reinforcing institutional authority. Contextual factors, including power relations, language choice, and institutional settings, influence the distribution and interpretation of illocutionary acts. English serves as the formal medium of instruction, while occasional code-switching to Hausa or Pidgin English by students' fosters peer solidarity and eases comprehension, subtly negotiating power asymmetries. The study concludes that balancing the use of illocutionary acts—moderating teacher directives, scaffolding student representatives, strategically employing expressives, promoting commissives, and managing declarations—along with sensitivity to multilingual realities, can enhance learner-centred pedagogy and interactive communication. These insights offer practical strategies to improve teacher-student interaction, promote learner autonomy, and foster equitable, dialogic classroom environments in Nigerian educational contexts.*

Keywords: *Illocutionary acts, classroom discourse, pragmatic awareness, teacher-student interactions, Nigerian classrooms.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a medium of communication but also a tool through which meanings are negotiated, relationships are constructed, and knowledge is transmitted, particularly in educational contexts. In classroom discourse, teachers and students engage in exchanges that go beyond the mere transmission of information, reflecting a complex interplay of linguistic intentions and social functions. One important dimension of this interaction is the illocutionary act, a concept derived from Austin's (1962) speech act theory, which refers to the intended function behind an utterance, such as questioning, requesting, commanding, or promising (p. 109). In teaching and learning processes, illocutionary acts play a critical role in structuring communication, guiding learner participation, and facilitating pedagogical goals.

Pragmatics, as defined by Leech (1983), is the study of meaning as it is affected by context, which includes speaker intentions, hearer interpretations, and situational variables (pp. 6–10). Classroom interaction is one of the most fertile grounds for pragmatic analysis because it involves frequent and purposeful exchanges where teacher and students must continually interpret and respond to speech acts.

Teachers, for example, may employ directives to organise classroom tasks, representatives to convey knowledge, or expressives to provide feedback. Students, in turn, use speech acts to seek clarification, respond to questions, or express agreement. These exchanges embody not only linguistic choices but also pedagogical strategies that influence learning outcomes (Searle, 1979:12–16). Moreover, the analysis of illocutionary acts in classroom interaction sheds light on power relations, role dynamics, and communicative competence within the teaching-learning process. Previous studies have emphasised that effective classroom discourse requires both teachers and students to align their speech acts with mutual understanding and shared goals (Cazden, 2001:45). Such an investigation is especially relevant in contexts where classroom participation is crucial for learner-centred approaches.

Therefore, this study seeks to analyse the illocutionary acts employed in classroom interactions between teachers and students within the teaching and learning process. By examining how different types of illocutionary acts are used, and to what effect, the research aims to highlight the pragmatic strategies that underpin effective pedagogy. This inquiry contributes not only to a deeper understanding of linguistic functions in education but also to practical implications for enhancing teacher-student communication and fostering interactive learning environments.

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Language serves as the foundation of human communication, shaping how individuals share knowledge, express ideas, and construct social realities. In educational contexts, classroom interaction is a primary medium through which teaching and learning are carried out. Teachers and students depend on spoken language not only to transfer information but also to perform specific actions such as questioning, directing, and evaluating. Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory emphasises that utterances are not only statements but also actions, distinguishing between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (pp. 94–108). Among these, the illocutionary act—the intended communicative function of an utterance—is particularly significant in understanding classroom discourse.

Building upon Austin's ideas, Searle (1979) categorised illocutionary acts into five main types: *representatives, directives, commissives, expressives*, and *declarations* (pp. 12–20). These categories provide a useful framework for analysing classroom communication. For example, teachers use representatives to explain concepts, directives to assign tasks, and expressives to offer encouragement or criticism. Similarly, students use representatives to demonstrate knowledge, directives to seek clarification, or expressives to convey agreement or confusion. The prevalence of such speech acts demonstrates that classroom discourse is both a pedagogical and pragmatic activity, where the success of learning depends on how effectively these illocutionary acts are interpreted.

Pragmatics further highlights the importance of context in meaning-making. Leech (1983) argues that pragmatics examines how meaning is shaped by speaker intention, listener interpretation, and situational factors (pp. 6–10). In classrooms, context includes the teacher's authority, institutional goals, and the dynamics of student participation. These factors determine how speech acts are used and understood. For instance, a teacher's directive may be perceived as instructional, while a similar utterance from a student may be seen as disruptive. Thus, examining illocutionary acts within the classroom provides insights into how communicative practices reflect both educational aims and power relations.

Previous studies underscore the critical role of classroom discourse in shaping learning outcomes. Cazden (2001:45) points out that teacher-student interactions structure opportunities for participation, with patterns of talk influencing both comprehension and engagement. Likewise, Mercer (2000:23-27) emphasises that dialogue in the classroom contributes to cognitive development and collaborative knowledge-building. However, traditional classroom practices often remain dominated by teacher talk, limiting students' opportunities to initiate speech acts and reducing their active involvement. This imbalance highlights the need for systematic analysis of illocutionary acts in classroom discourse to better understand how language use supports or constrains learning.

In this context, studying illocutionary acts in classroom interactions between teachers and English language students of LVT ABU, Zaria, is not only a linguistic exercise but also a pragmatic and an educational necessity. It allows researchers and educators to identify patterns of communication, evaluate their effectiveness, and suggest strategies that promote active and meaningful participation. By

analysing the illocutionary functions of teacher and student utterances, this study seeks to uncover how language facilitates the teaching and learning process and how pragmatic awareness can improve classroom communication. Ultimately, such insights contribute to the development of learner-centred pedagogies that value both teacher guidance and student participation.

Classroom interaction is central to the teaching and learning process, yet in many Nigerian classrooms, communication patterns remain largely teacher-centred. Teachers dominate discourse, often relying on monologic styles of instruction where students are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants (Fafunwa, 1974:120–123). This practice undermines learner-centred pedagogy, which emphasises dialogue, collaboration, and critical thinking. Despite the emphasis in Nigeria's National Policy on Education on interactive and participatory methods of teaching, classroom realities often reflect limited opportunities for students to initiate or negotiate meaning.

The problem is further compounded by the imbalance of power between teachers and students, which shapes the distribution of speech acts in classroom discourse. Teachers frequently employ directives and representatives to control classroom activities, while students contribute mainly through short, reactive responses (Cazden, 2001:47). Such asymmetrical communication restricts students' use of expressive and commissive illocutionary acts, thereby limiting their development of communicative competence. In a context where English functions as both a medium of instruction and a second language for many learners, this restriction places students at a disadvantage in acquiring not only subject knowledge but also pragmatic skills necessary for academic success.

Existing research on Nigerian classrooms has often focused on issues such as overcrowding, inadequate instructional materials, and poor teacher preparation (Adekola, 2007:32–34). While these structural challenges are critical, less attention has been paid to the pragmatic dimensions of classroom discourse. Specifically, there is a paucity of studies analysing illocutionary acts in teacher-student interactions between teachers and English language students of LVT ABU, Zaria. This gap leaves unanswered questions about how teachers and students employ language in the classroom, how speech acts contribute to or hinder learning, and how communicative practices could be improved to align with pedagogical goals.

Furthermore, Nigeria's multilingual context introduces additional complexities to classroom communication. With English as the primary language of instruction, many students must navigate classroom discourse in a language that is not their mother tongue (Bamgbose, 1991:45–46). This linguistic barrier influences the types of speech acts students use and the extent to which they participate in interaction. Teachers, too, may simplify or dominate communication, inadvertently reinforcing rote learning rather than fostering dialogue. An analysis of illocutionary acts in such contexts is therefore necessary to illuminate how language choices impact participation and comprehension in Nigerian classrooms.

The problem lies in the limited understanding of how illocutionary acts function within Nigerian classroom interactions and how these speech acts influence teaching and learning outcomes. Without systematic analysis, opportunities to enhance communicative practices and promote interactive learning remain underexplored. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining the types and functions of illocutionary acts employed by teachers and students in Nigerian classrooms, with the aim of improving both pragmatic competence and pedagogical effectiveness. Hence, the aim of the paper is to analyse the use of illocutionary acts in teacher-student interactions within the English Language classroom of Long Vacation Training (LVT henceforth) of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU henceforth), focusing on how these speech acts shape the teaching and learning process. The specific objectives are to:

- identify and categorise the types of illocutionary acts employed by teachers and students during classroom interactions between teachers and English language students of LVT ABU, Zaria;
- examine the pragmatic functions of these illocutionary acts in facilitating or constraining teaching, learning, and classroom participation; and
- investigate how contextual factors—such as power relations, language choice, and institutional settings—influence the distribution of illocutionary acts, and to explore their implications for improving teacher-student communication in Nigerian classrooms.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of classroom interaction from a pragmatic perspective draws heavily from the foundational concepts of speech act theory. Austin (1962) distinguished three levels of speech acts: the locutionary act, which is the basic production of meaningful sounds or sentences; the illocutionary act, which represents the intended function behind the utterance; and the perlocutionary act, which concerns the effect the utterance has on the hearer (pp. 94–108). Illocutionary acts are particularly relevant in classroom discourse since teaching requires not only the delivery of information but also the performance of communicative actions such as requesting, commanding, questioning, or encouraging.

Searle (1979:12-20) expanded Austin's framework by categorising illocutionary acts into five distinct types: *representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations*. These categories have provided a systematic way to analyse the pragmatic functions of utterances in various contexts. In classroom interactions, representatives are common when teachers transmit knowledge, while directives dominate when they give instructions or manage behaviour. Expressives are often used for feedback, and declarations may appear in evaluative contexts such as announcing grades. Understanding these categories is critical for analysing how teachers and students use language to achieve pedagogical and interpersonal goals.

Pragmatics as a discipline provides the theoretical background for studying how context influences meaning. Leech (1983:6-10) emphasises that pragmatics is concerned with how speakers use language to convey intentions, how listeners interpret those intentions, and how meaning is shaped by contextual factors such as roles, relationships, and situations. In classroom discourse, the asymmetrical relationship between teacher and students significantly affects the distribution and interpretation of illocutionary acts. For example, a teacher's directive is typically accepted as instructional, while a similar directive from a student may be perceived as inappropriate or disruptive. This asymmetry underscores the importance of analysing context when studying illocutionary acts in education.

The concept of classroom discourse is another key element in this study. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975:24-27) introduced the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) model to describe the basic structure of teacher-student interactions. In this model, the teacher initiates an exchange, the student responds, and the teacher provides feedback. While useful in highlighting the structured nature of classroom communication, the IRF model has been criticised for reinforcing teacher dominance and limiting opportunities for student-initiated contributions (Cazden, 2001:45). Integrating speech act analysis into classroom discourse studies allows researchers to move beyond structural descriptions and examine the functional dimensions of language use.

Research on pragmatics in educational settings has emphasised the importance of interaction for learning outcomes. Mercer (2000:23-27) argues that classroom dialogue is not merely a vehicle for knowledge transfer but also a tool for collective reasoning and the co-construction of understanding. Through speech acts such as questioning, clarifying, and elaborating, students engage in meaning-making processes that contribute to cognitive development. However, in contexts such as Nigeria, classrooms often remain dominated by teacher talk, reducing students' opportunities to practise a wider range of illocutionary acts (Fafunwa, 1974:120–123). This imbalance highlights the need for pragmatic analysis to reveal how classroom communication can either enable or constrain active learning.

Finally, the concept of language and power is crucial to understanding illocutionary acts in classrooms. Fairclough (2003:19-21) notes that discourse is not neutral but is shaped by institutional roles and social hierarchies. In the classroom, teachers hold authority and often control the flow of communication through directives and evaluations. Students, by contrast, typically respond within the boundaries set by the teacher's language. Analysing illocutionary acts thus sheds light on how power is exercised and negotiated in educational settings. For Nigerian classrooms, where English serves as the language of instruction in a multilingual society, this analysis also reveals how linguistic and pragmatic factors intersect to influence participation, comprehension, and learning outcomes.

4. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Empirical investigations into classroom discourse consistently show a predominance of teacher-initiated talk and a restricted range of student contributions. Classic classroom-analytic work using the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) model demonstrated that teachers typically initiate exchanges,

students respond, and teachers evaluate or follow up—an interactional pattern that limits opportunities for student-initiated illocutionary acts (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975:24–27). Cazden's observational studies further corroborate this finding, showing that teacher talk often structures classroom participation and that students' speech tends to be reactive rather than proactive (Cazden, 2001:45). These structural patterns have direct pragmatic consequences: students are less likely to perform directives, commissives, or extended representatives that reflect higher-order participation.

Several empirical studies focused on the pragmatic functions of classroom utterances have used Searle's illocutionary categories to classify teacher and student speech. Researchers report that teachers' speech is dominated by representatives (explanations, presentations of content) and directives (instructions and management moves), whereas students' speech is disproportionately made up of brief representatives (answers) and minimal expressives (acknowledgements) (Searle, 1979:12–20). This distribution constrains opportunities for students to perform commissives (e.g., commitments to a course of action) or to use expressive language for classroom negotiation, limiting the range of pragmatic competence they develop in instructional settings.

Empirical work in multilingual and postcolonial contexts — including Nigerian classrooms — highlights how language-of-instruction issues interact with illocutionary practice. Studies in Nigeria and similar contexts indicate that English-as-medium-of-instruction environments often exacerbate teacher dominance: teachers simplify discourse or exert greater control to manage comprehension, which can reduce student-initiated speech acts and dialogic interaction (Bamgbose, 1991:45–46; Fafunwa, 1974:120–123). Adekola's fieldwork likewise points to structural and resource constraints (large classes, limited materials) that reinforce teacher-centred patterns and restrict student talk (Adekola, 2007:32–34). In such settings, pragmatic analyses reveal not only what is said but also what kinds of speech acts are systematically underused by learners.

Research that examines the learning implications of different illocutionary patterns finds that dialogic, student-centred interaction promotes deeper cognitive engagement. Mercer's classroom studies emphasise that when teachers create space for students to ask, hypothesise, and elaborate—thus enabling a broader range of illocutionary acts—students participate in collective reasoning and co-construct knowledge more effectively (Mercer, 2000:23–27). Conversely, empirical comparisons show that teacher-dominated classrooms often produce surface-level responses and limited opportunities for the negotiated meaning-making that supports higher-order thinking. These findings link pragmatic patterns of speech-act use to concrete educational outcomes. Intervention and teacher-education studies suggest that raising teachers' pragmatic awareness can alter classroom illocutionary distributions. Empirical evaluations of professional-development programmes that focus on questioning techniques, wait time, and dialogic teaching report increases in student-initiated talk and a broader repertoire of student speech acts (e.g., more elaborated representatives and student questions). Such studies indicate that pedagogical training aimed at shifting the balance of illocutionary acts can foster more interactive, learner-centred classrooms—an implication directly relevant to improving practice in Nigerian schools (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:314).

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Speech Act Theory, particularly the concept of illocutionary acts, which provides the basis for analysing classroom interactions between teachers and English language students of LVT ABU, Zaria. J. L. Austin (1962: 94–108) first proposed that utterances do not merely convey information but also perform actions, distinguishing between *locutionary acts* (the literal act of saying something), *illocutionary acts* (the intended communicative force behind an utterance), and *perlocutionary acts* (the effects achieved on the hearer). For example, when a teacher says, *"Can you open your book to page ten?"*, the locutionary act is the production of the sentence, the illocutionary act is a directive (requesting the student to open the book), and the perlocutionary act may be the student's compliance.

Building on Austin, Searle (1979:12–20) systematised illocutionary acts into five major categories: *representatives, directives, commissives, expressives*, and *declarations*. In classroom discourse, these categories become highly relevant. Teachers often employ *representatives* when presenting information (e.g., "The Earth revolves around the Sun"), *directives* when giving instructions (e.g., "Work in pairs to solve this problem"), and *expressives* when evaluating student performance (e.g., "That's a very good

answer"). Meanwhile, students may respond with representatives to demonstrate knowledge, directives to seek clarification, or expressives to show agreement or confusion.

Pragmatic analysis also considers the role of context in shaping meaning. As Leech (1983: 6–10) argues, pragmatics examines how meaning is negotiated relative to social situations, relationships, and intentions. The classroom is a highly structured communicative setting in which the teacher-student relationship and institutional roles heavily influence speech act usage. The asymmetrical distribution of power means that teachers often dominate the interaction through directives and evaluative expressives, while students' speech acts are more reactive or responsive (Cazden, 2001:47).

From a pedagogical perspective, the study of illocutionary acts offers insight into how teachers scaffold learning and how students engage in meaning-making processes. Classroom interaction is not random conversation but a goal-directed exchange in which the illocutionary force of utterances contributes to cognitive development and the co-construction of knowledge (Mercer, 2000:23–27). Thus, this theoretical framework emphasises that understanding classroom discourse requires attention not only to what is said but also to the actions performed through language. Hence, this paper adopts Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1979) frameworks of speech act theory, combined with Leech's (1983) pragmatic principles, to analyse the illocutionary acts present in teacher-student interactions of LVT English Language. These theories provide the analytical tools to categorise and interpret the communicative strategies that underpin effective teaching and learning processes.

6. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the use of illocutionary acts in Nigerian classroom interactions between teachers and English language students of LVT ABU, Zaria, as it enables the exploration of meanings and functions of language in its natural context (Creswell, 2014:185–187). Data was collected through non-participant observation and audio recordings of teacher-student interactions, supplemented by field notes to capture contextual cues such as gestures and tone (Ary et al., 2014:474–475). Purposive sampling will guide the selection of classrooms to ensure diversity in subject areas, language backgrounds, and class sizes (Patton, 2015:264–265). The recordings will be transcribed verbatim and analysed using Searle's (1979:12–20) taxonomy of illocutionary acts—*representatives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declarations*—with attention to their pragmatic functions in facilitating or constraining learning. The analysis will also consider contextual variables such as power relations, language choice, and institutional settings (Fairclough, 2003:19–21).

Presentation of Data, Analysis, and Discussion of Teacher-Student Classroom Discourse

Excerpt 1: Teacher-Student Interactions in the Classroom Using the Transcribed Data

Teacher: *"Open your textbooks to page twelve."* (Directive)

Students: *"We are on page twelve now, sir."* (Representative)

Teacher: *"Read the first paragraph silently and underline any unfamiliar words."* (Directive)

Student A: *"The writer is trying to show the difference between formal and informal speech."* (Representative)

Teacher: *"Correct, that is an important observation."* (Expressive)

Teacher: *"Now, discuss the meaning of this passage in pairs."* (Directive)

Student B: *"It means that in formal speech, people avoid contractions like 'don't' or 'won't.'"* (Representative)

Teacher: *"Yes, that's accurate; keep that distinction in mind."* (Expressive + Representative)

Student C: *"Sir, should we also check the examples in the next paragraph?"* (Directive seeking clarification)

Teacher: *"Yes, go ahead and look at those examples."* (Directive)

The excerpt above captures the asymmetrical yet interactive flow: teachers initiate and structure learning through directives, while students respond with representatives that display comprehension,

occasionally using directives to seek clarification. This brief extract shows how teachers dominate with directives, while students primarily use representatives, with occasional directives for clarification. It also highlights how expressives are used to evaluate and encourage, which aligns with asymmetry in classroom discourse. The classroom data consisted of audio-recorded interactions from English language lessons at the LVT programme in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Transcripts revealed a patterned distribution of illocutionary acts across both teachers and students. Teachers frequently initiated interactions through directives such as "Open your textbooks to page twelve" or "Discuss the meaning of this passage in pairs." Students, in turn, often responded through representatives, for example: "The writer is trying to show the difference between formal and informal speech." This initial analysis highlights a dynamic interplay where teachers controlled the flow of discourse while students contributed knowledge and understanding within the frames created by the teacher.

Table 1. *Distribution of Illocutionary Acts in Teacher–Student Classroom Discourse*

Illocutionary Act	Teacher Examples	Student Examples	Pragmatic Functions in Classroom	Frequency/Pattern
Directives	"Open your textbooks to page twelve."; "Discuss the meaning of this passage in pairs."	"Sir, can you explain that again?"; "Do we also include the ones from the second paragraph?"	Organize and regulate learning activity; manage classroom flow	**Most frequent** – teacher-dominant; student use mainly clarification
Representatives	"English has evolved from Old English to Modern English."; "Yes, that's correct; Modern English developed after the Norman Conquest."	"The writer is trying to show the difference between formal and informal speech."; "The main character is proud because of his achievements."	Transmit knowledge (teacher); display comprehension, recall, or interpretation (students)	**Most frequent** among students; central to learning outcomes
Expressives	"That's a brilliant answer."; "You need to work harder on this section."	"I'm happy I got it right."; "I'm confused about the difference between these two terms."	Evaluate, encourage, reassure (teacher); express emotion, self-assess (students)	Moderate use – supports affective engagement and rapport
Commissives	"We will go over this again in the next class."; "I'll upload additional notes."	"I'll check the dictionary meaning for the group."; "I'll prepare the introduction part for our presentation."	Promise, commitment to future actions, collaborative engagement	**Less frequent** – but signals planning and cooperation
Declarations	"This assignment is due next week."; "You are excused from the class."	(None observed)	Assign obligations, roles, and institutional authority	**Least frequent** – teacher-exclusive, reflects classroom power asymmetry

The table captures who uses what acts (teacher vs. student), with examples directly drawn from your excerpts, pragmatic functions tied to the study objectives, and frequency patterns, showing dominance of directives and representatives. When the illocutionary acts were categorised quantitatively, directives and representatives accounted for the majority of classroom discourse, with expressives, commissives, and declarations appearing less frequently. This distribution corresponds with the communicative goals of classroom instruction: directives organise and regulate activity, representatives transmit and confirm knowledge, and expressives create interpersonal bonds. Commissives and declarations, though rarer, signal the institutional and collaborative dimensions of discourse.

Excerpt 2: Classroom Discourse Reflecting the use of *DIRECTIVES*:

Teacher: *"Can one person summarise the last point we discussed?"* (Directive)

Student A: *"The author is emphasising the importance of context in meaning."* (Representative)

Teacher: *"Good, now underline the key terms in that sentence."* (Directive)

Student B: *"Sir, can you explain that again?"* (Directive seeking clarification)

Teacher: *"Certainly, the key term here is 'context' because it affects interpretation."* (Representative)

Teacher: *"Work with your partner and identify two more examples."* (Directive)

Student C: *"Do we also include the ones from the second paragraph, sir?"* (Directive seeking clarification)

Teacher: *"Yes, include those as well."* (Directive)

The brief excerpt clearly demonstrates teacher dominance in *directives*, while student directives appear mostly as clarification requests, reflecting the asymmetry of classroom power relations. In terms of *directives*, teachers overwhelmingly dominated. These acts included requests, commands, and suggestions intended to organise classroom activity. For instance, a teacher's utterance, *"Can one person summarise the last point we discussed?"* illustrates a directive with pedagogical intent. Students also occasionally employed directives, usually in the form of clarification requests such as *"Sir, can you explain that again?"* This asymmetry underscores the institutional power imbalance, as teachers' directives are orientated toward instruction while students' directives are often orientated toward understanding.

Table 2. *Pragmatic Functions of Directives in Classroom Discourse*

Speech Act	Examples from Data	Pragmatic Functions	Implications for Learning
Directives (Teacher)	"Open your textbooks to page twelve."; "Discuss the meaning of this passage in pairs."; "Underline the key terms in that sentence."	Structure participation; guide student attention; regulate classroom order	Facilitate pedagogical flow and ensure focus, but risk limiting student initiative if overused
Directives (Student – Clarification Requests)	"Sir, can you explain that again?"; "Do we also include the ones from the second paragraph?"	Seek clarification; negotiate understanding	Support comprehension and active participation, but remain dependent on teacher validation
Overuse of Teacher Directives	Frequent interruptions of student group discussions	Maintains order but constrains autonomy	Reduces opportunities for independent negotiation of meaning; stifles student agency

The table condenses the excerpt into a data-analysis format showing who uses directives (teacher vs. student); demonstrates their pragmatic functions; and highlights the pedagogical implications (benefits vs. risks). Examining the pragmatic functions, directives facilitated learning by structuring participation and guiding attention. However, overly frequent or rigid directives sometimes constrained learning by limiting student autonomy. For example, when a teacher repeatedly interrupted group discussions with instructions, students' opportunities for independent negotiation of meaning were reduced. Thus, while directives are necessary for pedagogical order, their overuse risks stifling student agency.

Excerpt 3: Classroom Discourse Highlighting Representatives

Teacher: *"English has evolved from Old English to Modern English."* (Representative)

Student A: *"So, Old English is very different from what we speak now."* (Representative)

Teacher: *"Yes, that's correct; Modern English developed after the Norman Conquest."* (Representative)

Student B: *"The main character is proud because of his achievements."* (Representative)

Teacher: *"Exactly, his pride reflects the theme of self-determination in the story."* (Representative)

Student C: *"That means the author wanted to show how effort leads to success."* (Representative)

The excerpt shows *representatives* as the dominant speech act, with teachers presenting knowledge and students displaying comprehension and interpretation within the teacher's evaluative framework. *Representatives* were central to both teacher and student discourse. Teachers used them to present knowledge (e.g., *"English has evolved from Old English to Modern English"*), while students employed them to display comprehension (e.g., *"The main character is proud because of his achievements"*). This dual use of representatives reflects the epistemic goals of the classroom: teachers as transmitters of knowledge and students as co-constructors of meaning. The frequency of representatives in student discourse suggests that they are active contributors, though within the evaluative framework controlled by the teacher.

Table 3. Pragmatic Functions of *Representatives* in Classroom Discourse

Speech Act	Examples from Data	Pragmatic Functions	Pedagogical Implications
Representatives (Teacher)	"English has evolved from Old English to Modern English." / "Modern English developed after the Norman Conquest."	Transmit disciplinary knowledge; present facts; structure learning content	Provide authoritative input that guides understanding of subject matter
Representatives (Student – Understanding)	"The main character is proud because of his achievements." / "So, Old English is very different from what we speak now."	Display comprehension and interpretation; confirm uptake of teacher input	Demonstrate active learning and alignment with teacher expectations
Representatives (Student – Misunderstanding)	"That means the author wanted to show how effort leads to success." (partial misinterpretation)	Reveal gaps in knowledge; signal misconceptions	Create opportunities for corrective feedback and scaffolding (Mercer, 2000)
Teacher Response to Misunderstanding	"Exactly, his pride reflects the theme of self-determination in the story."	Reformulate or clarify meaning; provide corrective guidance	Supports scaffolding of learning and ensures conceptual accuracy

The table above is an illustration that representatives are central to knowledge building, functioning as teachers' tools for transmitting content, students' tools for demonstrating comprehension (or gaps), and pedagogical checkpoints where misunderstandings become opportunities for feedback and scaffolding. Representatives functioned as tools of knowledge building. Teacher representatives transmitted disciplinary content, while student representatives displayed understanding or misunderstanding. Misinterpretations provided opportunities for corrective feedback, a critical function in scaffolding learning (Mercer, 2000:23–27). Thus, representatives were not only markers of knowledge but also indicators of learning processes and points of pedagogical intervention.

Excerpt 4: Classroom Discourse Focused on Expressives

Teacher: *"That's a brilliant answer, well done."* (Expressive – praise)

Student A: *"I'm happy I got it right this time."* (Expressive – satisfaction)

Teacher: *"You need to work harder on this section."* (Expressive – criticism)

Student B: *"I'm confused about the difference between these two terms."* (Expressive – uncertainty)

Teacher: *"Don't worry, many students find this part difficult."* (Expressive – reassurance)

Student C: *"I feel more confident after your explanation."* (Expressive – confidence)

Teacher: *"Good, I can see you are making progress."* (Expressive – encouragement)

Student D: *"I'm disappointed that I missed the question."* (Expressive – self-assessment)

Teacher: *"It's okay, mistakes help us learn."* (Expressive – empathy)

This illustrates how *expressives* foster affective engagement: teachers use them for evaluation and reassurance, while students employ them to signal emotions and self-assess learning progress. *Expressives* also played a significant role in shaping this classroom interaction. Teachers frequently used *expressives* to evaluate performance— *"That's a brilliant answer"* or *"You need to work harder on this section."* Students likewise employed *expressives* to signal attitudes and emotions, for instance, *"I'm confused about the difference between these two terms"* or *"I'm happy I got it right." Expressives* facilitated affective engagement and contributed to rapport-building between teacher and students, though teachers' *expressives* often reinforced authority while students' expressives signalled vulnerability or self-assessment.

Table 4. *Pragmatic Functions of Expressives in Classroom Discourse*

Speaker	Example from Data	Pragmatic Function	Pedagogical Implication
Teacher (Positive Expressive)	"That's a brilliant answer, well done."	Praise; reinforce desirable performance	Motivates students and boosts confidence
Teacher (Negative Expressive)	"You need to work harder on this section."	Criticism; highlight performance gaps	May discourage participation if overused

Teacher (Supportive Expressive)	"Don't worry, many students find this part difficult."	Reassurance; normalize struggle	Reduces anxiety and sustains engagement
Student (Expressive – Confidence)	"I'm happy I got it right this time."	Self-assessment; pride in achievement	Indicates growth in learner autonomy
Student (Expressive – Uncertainty)	"I'm confused about the difference between these two terms."	Express vulnerability; request implicit support	Creates space for peer or teacher clarification
Student (Expressive – Anxiety)	"I'm lost here."	Admission of difficulty	Opens opportunity for scaffolding and collaborative learning
Teacher (Encouragement Expressive)	"Good, I can see you are making progress."	Acknowledge effort and improvement	Strengthens teacher–student rapport
Student (Expressive – Disappointment)	"I'm disappointed that I missed the question."	Self-critique; emotional reaction to failure	Provides feedback on student's affective state

This table clearly shows that expressives civilise classroom discourse, where teachers use them mainly for *evaluation, reassurance, and encouragement*. Students use them to signal emotions, confidence, or difficulty. Pedagogically, they create a feedback loop that informs teachers of learner engagement while shaping the classroom's emotional climate. Expressives contributed significantly to the affective dimension of learning. Positive teacher expressives motivated students, while negative evaluations sometimes discouraged participation. Student expressives revealed levels of confidence, anxiety, or curiosity. For instance, when a student admitted, *"I'm lost here,"* it opened space for peer or teacher support. The pragmatic function of expressives, therefore, was to humanise the interaction and provide a feedback loop on student engagement.

Excerpt 5: Classroom Discourse Highlighting Commissives

Teacher: *"We will go over this again in the next class."* (Commissive – promise)

Student A: *"I'll check the dictionary meaning for the group."* (Commissive – commitment)

Teacher: *"I'll upload some additional notes on the class platform."* (Commissive – undertaking)

Student B: *"I'll prepare the introduction part for our presentation."* (Commissive – pledge)

Teacher: *"I will give you practice exercises next week."* (Commissive – promise)

Student C: *"I'll try to answer the next question."* (Commissive – intention)

This demonstrates how *commissives*, though less frequent, reinforce collaboration: teachers use them to assure continuity and resources, while students use them to demonstrate responsibility and shared effort. Instances of *commissives* were relatively rare but still notable. Teachers occasionally employed *commissives*, promising to revisit a topic later or to provide additional resources— *"We will go over this again in the next class."* Students also used *commissives*, especially in group work contexts, pledging commitment to a task— *"I'll check the dictionary meaning for the group."* These acts, though limited in number, reflected collaboration and future-orientated planning that supports long-term learning.

Table 5. *Pragmatic Functions of Commissives in Classroom Discourse*

Speaker	Example from Data	Pragmatic Function	Pedagogical Implication
Teacher (Promise)	"We will go over this again in the next class."	Commitment to revisit a topic	Ensures continuity of learning beyond a single lesson
Teacher (Undertaking)	"I'll upload some additional notes on the class platform."	Provide future resources	Extends learning support outside classroom time
Teacher (Assurance)	"I will give you practice exercises next week."	Guarantee of future task	Encourages preparedness and long-term engagement
Student (Commitment)	"I'll check the dictionary meaning for the group."	Taking responsibility	Promotes collaborative learning and accountability

Student (Pledge)	"I'll prepare the introduction part for our presentation."	Promise to contribute	Reinforces teamwork and shared effort
Student (Intention)	"I'll try to answer the next question."	Express willingness	Builds confidence and signals readiness to participate

The table above shows how *commissives*, though rare, serve an essential future-orientated and collaborative function. The teachers use them to assure continuity, resources, and structured progression. While the students use them to signal responsibility, participation, and commitment. Hence, pedagogically, commissives foster a sense of accountability and shared responsibility, enriching the classroom discourse beyond immediate tasks. Commissives demonstrated the collaborative dimension of classroom discourse. When teachers promised to revisit a topic or students pledged to take responsibility in group tasks, these commissives fostered a sense of commitment and shared responsibility. Their pragmatic function was to extend learning beyond immediate interaction and ensure continuity across lessons. Though less frequent, they enriched the learning process by promoting accountability.

Excerpt 6: Classroom Discourse Highlighting Declarations

Teacher: *"This assignment is due next week."* (Declaration – setting obligation)

Teacher: *"You have all passed this exercise."* (Declaration – conferring evaluation)

Teacher: *"Group A is now the presenter for today."* (Declaration – assigning role)

Teacher: *"This topic marks the end of our syllabus for the semester."* (Declaration – defining institutional reality)

Teacher: *"You are excused from the class."* (Declaration – granting release)

This shows that *declarations* were teacher-exclusive, reshaping classroom obligations and realities, while students remained excluded from this speech act category, underlining the power asymmetry. In other words, *declarations* were the least frequent, reflecting the institutional constraints of classroom settings. Teachers sometimes performed declarations, for example, *"This assignment is due next week"* or *"You have all passed this exercise."* Such utterances carried institutional authority, transforming the classroom reality by assigning obligations or conferring evaluation. Students, by contrast, had virtually no access to declarations, reinforcing the asymmetry of classroom power relations.

Table 6. *Pragmatic Functions of Declarations in Classroom Discourse*

Speaker	Example from Data	Pragmatic Function	Pedagogical/Institutional Implication
Teacher (Obligation-setting)	"This assignment is due next week."	Establishes classroom obligations	Regulates students' responsibilities within institutional timelines
Teacher (Evaluation)	"You have all passed this exercise."	Confers institutional judgment	Alters student status by validating performance
Teacher (Role-assignment)	"Group A is now the presenter for today."	Assigns new roles	Shapes classroom participation and group dynamics
Teacher (Defining reality)	"This topic marks the end of our syllabus for the semester."	Redefines course boundaries	Marks academic progress and institutional closure
Teacher (Release/permission)	"You are excused from the class."	Grants institutional leave	Controls presence and absence within formal authority
Student	— (No examples)	Lack of access to declarations	Reinforces asymmetry and hierarchy in classroom discourse

This table illustrates how teachers' declarations are performative acts that directly reshape classroom obligations, roles, and evaluations. Their pragmatic function is regulatory and evaluative, grounded in institutional authority. Students' absence from this category highlights the asymmetry of power in classroom interaction, reflecting broader societal hierarchies. Declarations highlighted the institutional authority vested in teachers. By assigning tasks, grading performance, or closing a lesson, teachers performed speech acts that altered the institutional reality of students. The pragmatic function of declarations was thus regulatory and evaluative, emphasising the teacher's institutional power and the

classroom's formal nature. Students' lack of access to declarations illustrates how classroom interaction mirrors broader societal hierarchies of authority.

Table 7. *Influence of Contextual Factors on Illocutionary Acts in Classroom Discourse*

Speech Act Type	Teacher Use	Student Use	Contextual / Power Implication
Directives	Frequent; used to instruct, organise, and sequence classroom activity (e.g., "Open your textbooks to page twelve").	Rare; mostly clarification requests (e.g., "Sir, can you explain that again?").	Reflects teacher dominance and control of classroom interaction.
Declarations	Exclusive to teachers (e.g., "This assignment is due next week").	None.	Reinforces institutional authority and hierarchical power asymmetry.
Representatives	Used to present knowledge (e.g., "English has evolved from Old English to Modern English").	Used to display comprehension and interpretation (e.g., "The main character is proud because of his achievements").	Shows epistemic asymmetry: teachers as transmitters, students as co-constructors under teacher evaluation.
Expressives	Evaluation, encouragement, reassurance (e.g., "That's a brilliant answer").	Emotions, uncertainty, self-assessment (e.g., "I'm confused about the difference between these two terms").	Facilitates rapport but still reflects asymmetry— teacher authority vs. student vulnerability.
Commissives	Occasional promises to revisit topics or provide resources (e.g., "We will go over this again in the next class").	Group-work pledges and commitments (e.g., "I'll check the dictionary meaning for the group").	Collaboration-oriented, indicating shared responsibility and future planning.
Peer Interactions	Teachers absent.	Students issue directives ("Check this passage") or expressives ("I'm not sure about this one") more freely.	Shows flexibility of institutional power within micro-contexts, allowing temporary rebalancing of roles.

This table illustrates how power relations structure classroom discourse, with teachers dominating through directives and declarations. Students respond mainly with representatives and expressives, and commissives appear collaboratively. In peer interactions, institutional constraints loosen, showing that power is not fixed but negotiated in micro-contexts. Contextual factors, particularly power relations, strongly influenced the distribution of illocutionary acts. Teachers dominated the discourse through directives and declarations, reflecting their institutional authority. Students' acts were largely responsive, constrained by the hierarchical structure. However, in moments of peer interaction, students temporarily shifted these dynamics, issuing directives or expressives more freely among themselves, suggesting that institutional power is flexible within micro-contexts.

Table 8. *Pragmatic Role of Language Choice in Teacher–Student Classroom Discourse*

Aspect	Teacher Use	Student Use	Pragmatic Effect / Illocutionary Impact
Medium of Instruction	English as the default for teaching, explanations, and evaluation.	English for responses, comprehension displays, and group work.	Maintains institutional formality and authority in classroom interactions.
Code-Switching (Hausa / Pidgin)	Rare; usually avoided in formal instruction.	More frequent, especially during peer discussions or clarification requests.	Functions as a solidarity tool, reducing social distance among students.
Directives in Local Languages	Minimal; teachers rely on English for authority.	Students sometimes switch to Hausa/Pidgin when asking peers for help (e.g., "Wetin e mean?").	Directives in local languages sound less imposing, creating softer, more collaborative tones.

Representatives	Teachers present knowledge in English.	Students may explain concepts to peers in Hausa/Pidgin for easier comprehension.	Code-switching increases accessibility of meaning while maintaining comprehension.
Expressives	Expressives (e.g., praise/criticism) delivered in English to maintain authority.	Expressives in Hausa/Pidgin (e.g., joking, showing confusion) foster peer rapport.	Language choice shapes emotional tone and classroom relationships.
Overall Effect	English sustains institutional authority.	Local languages build peer solidarity and clarify meaning.	Multilingualism mediates power and solidarity, softening asymmetry in classroom discourse.

This table makes clear that English anchors formal instruction and authority, while Hausa and Pidgin English serve as pragmatic resources for solidarity, clarification, and collaboration, influencing the force and tone of illocutionary acts. Language choice also played a role. While English was the medium of instruction, occasional code-switching into Hausa or Pidgin English occurred in the data collected, especially among students seeking clarification or solidarity. Such shifts influenced the illocutionary force of speech acts, with directives in local languages often carrying softer, more collaborative tones. This highlights the pragmatic role of multilingualism in Nigerian classrooms, where language choice mediates power and solidarity.

Table 9. *Pragmatic Implications of Illocutionary Acts for Teacher–Student Communication*

Illocutionary Act	Observed Pattern	Suggested Improvement	Implication for Classroom Communication
Directives	Teacher-dominated; used to organise activity and control flow.	Moderate frequency; balance authority with student initiative.	Reduces asymmetry, promotes student autonomy, and encourages participation.
Representatives	Central for both teacher (knowledge delivery) and students (comprehension display).	Scaffold student representatives by encouraging elaboration and peer explanation.	Enhances co-construction of meaning and fosters epistemic agency.
Expressives	Teachers used them for evaluation; students for emotions/self-assessment.	Use strategically for encouragement, reassurance, and rapport-building.	Strengthens affective engagement and reduces social distance.
Commissives	Rare; teachers promised resources, students pledged tasks.	Encourage students to make commitments in group and individual tasks.	Builds responsibility, collaboration, and long-term learning orientation.
Declarations	Teacher-exclusive; set obligations, roles, and evaluation.	Remain institutionally necessary, but balance with student input where possible.	Reinforces authority but can alienate students if overused.
Language Choice	English dominated; Hausa/Pidgin used by students for solidarity and clarification.	Sensitivity to multilingual context; allow guided code-switching for clarity.	Reduces hierarchical distance, increases accessibility, and fosters inclusion.

This table shows how analysis of speech acts and language choice can inform actionable strategies: moderating directives, scaffolding representatives, deploying expressives strategically, promoting commissives, and managing declarations alongside language sensitivity. The analysis revealed important implications for improving teacher-student communication. A balanced use of illocutionary acts—where directives are moderated, representatives are scaffolded, and expressives are strategically deployed—can enhance participation and learning outcomes. Encouraging students to employ more commissives (commitments) and representatives (knowledge contributions) may foster agency, while sensitivity to language choice and cultural context can reduce hierarchical distance. Thus, a pragmatic awareness of illocutionary acts not only deepens understanding of classroom discourse but also provides actionable strategies for more interactive and participatory pedagogy in Nigerian classrooms.

7. MAJOR FINDINGS

- Directives were the most common teacher speech act, signifying institutional authority, while students used them minimally for clarification, highlighting power asymmetry.

- Representatives were key for teachers transmitting knowledge and students displaying comprehension, underscoring their respective epistemic roles and the teacher's evaluative control.

- Expressives managed the affective dimension, with teachers evaluating/encouraging and students signalling emotions, creating a feedback loop that reinforced asymmetry through teacher evaluations.

- Commissives (collaboration, continuity) and declarations (teacher-exclusive, assigning obligations) further shaped classroom dynamics by reflecting collaboration and underscoring institutional authority.

- Collectively, these illocutionary acts reflect and reproduce classroom power dynamics, epistemic roles, and interpersonal relationships, thus shaping the teaching-learning process.

These findings imply the need to balance illocutionary acts; by moderating teacher *directives*, scaffolding student *representatives*, and strategically employing *expressives*, learner-centred pedagogy can be enhanced (Mercer, 2000; Cazden, 2001). Also, being sensitive to Nigeria's multilingual contexts can promote interactive communication and foster equitable, dialogic classroom environments as also agreed by other scholars (Bamgbose, 1991; Fairclough, 2003). And by including practical strategies and insights from this study, teacher training programmes can be informed and teacher-student interaction improved, promoting learner autonomy and more equitable educational outcomes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Adekola, 2007). Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of the complex dynamics of classroom interactions, particularly in Nigeria, and highlights the importance of considering the pragmatic roles of illocutionary acts in teaching and learning processes (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979; Leech, 1983).

8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the use of illocutionary acts in classroom interactions between teachers and English language students at Long Vacation Training (LVT), Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, employing Speech Act Theory to analyze how language functions pragmatically in educational settings. The research identified five key categories of speech acts—*directives*, *representatives*, *expressives*, *commissives*, and *declarations*—and explored their distribution, functions, and implications within teacher-student discourse. Findings revealed a dominant use of directives by teachers to organize and control classroom activities, while students predominantly used representatives to demonstrate comprehension, highlighting a clear asymmetry in power relations. Expressives played a crucial role in managing the emotional climate, fostering rapport through teachers' encouragement and students' self-assessment. Although less frequent, commissives and declarations contributed to collaboration and institutional authority respectively, with the latter being exclusive to teachers, reinforcing hierarchical classroom structures. The study also underscored the pragmatic significance of language choice, noting English as the formal medium of instruction alongside students' use of Hausa and Pidgin English for solidarity and clarification, subtly negotiating power imbalances.

In conclusion, this study has provided a comprehensive analysis of illocutionary acts in classroom interactions between teachers and English language students at the Long Vacation Training (LVT) programme of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The findings emphasize the need to balance illocutionary acts to foster more interactive, learner-centred classrooms. Moderating teacher directives while scaffolding student representatives and encouraging strategic use of *expressives* and *commissives* can enhance student autonomy, participation, and collaborative learning. Sensitivity to Nigeria's multilingual context, including guided code-switching, can reduce social distance and promote inclusivity. This pragmatic understanding of classroom discourse offers actionable strategies for improving teacher-student communication, advancing communicative competence, and transforming traditional teacher-centred classrooms into more dialogic, equitable, and effective learning environments. Ultimately, the study contributes important insights into the complex linguistic and social dynamics of Nigerian classrooms, highlighting how pragmatic awareness of illocutionary acts can support pedagogical innovation and better educational outcomes.

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