APPLICATION OF SPEECH ACT THEORY TO ORAL ENGLISH TRAINNING IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

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This paper includes a review several pieces of literature which focus on the application of speech act theory in language teaching, especially teaching oral English in the ESL class. As we know, learning a new language must include a high proportion of practice, of using the language. So what strategies teachers can use is a question of great concern. The paper mainly discusses the theory of speech acts founded by J. L. Austin. After defining speaking and speech act theory, the case for enhancing teaching methods for developing speech act ability and the development of research on why and how to apply speech act theory in language teaching is provided.
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INTRODUCTION

Language learning is for communication. Spoken English is one of the most important skills of English learning which also becomes an effective evaluation tool to test students’ level of English comprehension. Increasingly, researchers and teachers were aware that oral English is not just a dogma of English sentence patterns but more about applied linguistics. Contemporary professionals recognize oral English teaching in TESOL class are facing a great deal of problems in the progress of development. Several oral English teaching methods and research experiments are thought to be associated with pragmatics. The following literature reviews attempt to illustrate the speech act theory and demonstrate the research of this theory in oral English teaching.

With the development of the applied linguistics, more and more teachers focus on the relationship between pragmatics and language teaching. Speech acts theory, which is the first major theory in pragmatics, was initially proposed in the 1950s and widely discussed in the 1960s and 1970s. There is an enormous amount of literature on it from both the philosophical and linguistic points of view. According to Austin’s theory of speech acts (2002), utterances have three kinds of meaning. Cohen (1996) has summed up two important developments in speech act research that are worthy of note. In this paper, definitions of the three kinds of speech acts will be illustrated. Meanwhile, the research abroad and at home about the studies of speech act theory and the application to oral English teaching is also demonstrated and reviewed.

This focus of literature for this paper is the introduction of speech act theory, studies on application of speech act theory to oral English and use of speech act theory in oral English teaching.
Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is, “What is the relationship between speech acts theory and college oral English teaching in the ESL classroom?”

Definition of Terms

Oral English. Speaking is “an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information” (Florez, 1999, p. 1). It is “often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving” (ibid., p. 1).

Speech act. In general, "speech act" refers to the act of successfully communicating an intended idea to the listener. Speech acts also include greetings, criticism, invitations, congratulations etc. (Austin, 2002)

Speech act theory. According to Austin’s theory of speech acts (2002), utterances have three kinds of meaning. The first kind is the elocutionary or propositional, namely, the literal meaning of the utterance. The second kind of meaning is illocutionary, namely, the social function that the utterance or written text has. The third notion of meaning is perlocutionary which produces effect that is intended by the utterance in the given context.

ESL. Abbreviation for the term English as a Second Language

Delimitations of Research

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville over ninety (90) days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “oral English teaching”, “speech acts theory”, and “ESL”.

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Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the studies of speech acts theory was conducted. A second review of literature on the studies of application of speech acts theory to oral English employed by ESL learners in college will also be conducted. The findings are summarized and recommendations made.
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Language is for doing; it is used for performing various actions. One critical component of successful language usage is that recognizing the actions which others perform with their utterances (Grice, 1957; Searle, 2001; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Hence, recognizing the specific speech act (Searle, 2001)) that a speaker performs with an utterance is a fundamental feature of pragmatic competence.

Speaking consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning. Utterances are simply things people say. Speaking is “an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information” (Florez, 1999, p. 1). It is “often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving” (ibid., p. 1), but it is not completely unpredictable. For native speakers (L1), the component of recognizing the actions is relatively effortless and perhaps automatic. However, what about second language (L2) learners? One of the central difficulties inherent in the study of speaking is that it overlaps with a considerable number of other areas and activities. According to Hughes (2005), teaching speech is not easily separated from other objectives, which includes a further complicating factor in that when the spoken language is used for the other classroom activities. There are other aims which the teacher might have: for instance, helping the students to gain awareness of or to practice some aspect of linguistic knowledge, to develop production skills, or to raise awareness of pragmatic points. By recognizing speech act theory, it takes the first step to looking deeply at the language teaching.

Speech Act Theory
Speech acts theory, which is the first major theory in pragmatics, was initially proposed in the 1950s and widely discussed in the 1960s and 1970s. There is an enormous amount of literature on it from both the philosophical and linguistic point of view. According to Austin’s theory of speech acts (2002), utterances have three kinds of meaning. The first kind is the elocutionary or propositional, namely, the literal meaning of the utterance. In his words, it is “the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain ‘meaning’ in the favorite philosophical sense of that word, i.e. with a certain sense and with a certain reference” (Austin, 2002, p. 94). That is, in this sense, when a pupil says to a teacher or sends a note in class, “It’s hot here,” the lectionary meaning would concern the warm temperature of the classroom.

The second kind of meaning is illocutionary, namely, the social function that the utterance or written text has. Austin argues that

In performing an illocutionary act we shall also be performing such an act as: asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or an intention, pronouncing sentence, making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism, making an identification or giving a description, and the numerous like (Austin, 2002, pp. 98-9).

For example, the illocutionary meaning or function of “It’s hot here” may be a request to turn up the air conditioner or turn down the heat. In other words, when we speak, we not only produce some units of language with certain meaning, but also make clear our purpose in producing them, the way we intend them to be understood, or they also have certain forces, as Austin prefers to say.

Austin adds the third notion of “perlocutionary forces” telling someone to do something can have consequential effects of a locution upon the hearer. That is, it produces the result or effect that is
intended by the utterance in that given context. By telling somebody something, the speaker may change the opinion of the hearer on something, mislead him or her, surprise him or her, induce him or her to do something, or what not. Whether these effects are intended or not, they can be considered as a part of the act that the speaker has performed. Thus, if the utterance leads to the action of turning down the air conditioner in the classroom, the perlocutionary force of that utterance would be greater than if the requirement were ignored.

In this general theory then, every utterance is a speech act, consisting of three sub-acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. According to Austin (2002), utterances are no longer performative or constative, which is contrary to Leech’s classification theory of the three acts (1983). The original performatives are just a special type in which the illocutionary force is made in detail by the performative verb. Thus, “I promise to return it tomorrow” is a promise, and “I warn you that the bull will charge” is a warning. In this sense, “state” is also a performative verb in “I state this is only a personal opinion”. Among the three acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary, the second is the most important. In Austin’s address (2002), the theory of speech acts can in fact be said to be the theory of illocutionary acts. In other words, it is the illocutionary act that most closely catches the nature of the speaker’s intention or goal in producing a particular conversation result.

Despite problems in interpreting the true intentions of the speaker, efforts have been made to assign functions to speech acts according to a series of categories delineated by philosophers such as Austin (2002) and Searle (2001). According to speech act theory, a sentence uttered in context is not solely a range of abstract symbols, but simultaneously involves the performance of an act or acts (Searle, 1969/2001). Thus, speech act theory is concerned both with what is said in speaking, and what
is done or accomplished from speaking. Speech acts have been classified according to five categories: assertives (assertions, claims, reports, etc), directives (suggestions, requests, commands, etc), expressives (apologies, complaints, thanks, etc), comissives (promises, threats, etc), and declaratives (decrees, declarations, etc). Some important speech acts in English include thanking, requesting information, apologizing, refusing, warning, complimenting, directing, complaining, and so on.

Searle claims that the successful classification of illocutionary acts shows that “there are a rather limited number of basic things we do with language: we tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes and we bring about changes through our utterances” (Searle, 2001, p. 29). If we consider that Austin takes the speech act as a study on the meaning of utterance solely, Searle takes the speech as a kind of theory to explain the language communication. Searle pointed out that using language, which just like other social activities is a kind of intentional actor strained by rules.

Levinson (2001) points out that Searle’s classification is a disappointment in that it lacks a principled basis, and it is not even built in any systematic way on felicity conditions. Although the process of defining and identifying speech acts has been going on since the 1960s with an uneven process, according to Cohen (1996), he believes that the last 14 years have marked a milestone from an intuitively based approach of speech act description to an empirical one.

**Studies abroad**

In the research article by Cohen (1996), empirically based research, which involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches, has focused on the perception and production of speech acts by learners of a second or foreign language at varying stages of language proficiency and in different
social interactions. This work has included efforts to establish both cross-language and language-specific standards of speech act behavior, standards without which it would be impossible to understand and evaluate inter-language behavior.

Cohen (1996) has summed up two important developments in speech act research that are worthy of note. First, one of the most comprehensive empirical studies of speech act behavior has been the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Research Project, known as CCSARP (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), which compared speech act behavior of native speakers of a number of different languages with the behavior of learners of those languages. Second, several excellent surveys of the research literature have appeared which help to define and shape the field of investigation with respect to speech act research. For example, in a research article by Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper (1989), the authors examine why it is important to study speech acts—their cultural specificity and contrastive pragmatics. Bardovi-Harling (1992), who believes that many teachers are unaware of what comprises competence in English, describes a way to develop ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers’ awareness so that they can better teach the rules of language appropriateness to their students.

In Bailey’s book (2007), the author also states that an important concept that should be kept in mind is that people use language in recognizable ways to get things done, which is similar to the main idea of Austin’s theory. As the author states, Bailey (2007) believes that there are many “speech acts” in any language, and it is important that students learn the appropriate ways to accomplish their goals when they are speaking. In his further writing of a book named Practical English Language Teaching: Speaking, he provides an overall introduction to key aspects of language teaching methodology in an accessible way. In his book, many pragmatics theories were used as major foundation to his writing.
and practical teaching, including speech act theory. In the chapter of introduction of approaches to speaking, the author explained language teaching was seen as helping learners develop linguistic competence—that is, by studying the bits and pieces of a language, students could eventually put sounds, words and grammar patterns of English all together and communicate (2007). The author also highlights that all speaking activities can be characterized as more or less interactive, regardless of the course focus or level.

Recently, many researchers around the world have paid more attention to speech act theory in English teaching. In an article written by Sornig & Haumann (2000), the author explicitly illustrates speech act theory and relative definitions with a variety of perspectives. The article concluded with consequences for teaching, which suggests that it is significant to acknowledge what speech acts aim at is the effect upon the recipients and the attempt to control their reaction (Sorning & Haumann, 2000).

More recently, Taguchi (2005) investigated L1-L2 differences in processing indirect utterances that varied in their degree of conventionality though an experiment designed for examining the conversational component between L1 speakers with L2 learners. Conventional indirect forms were formulaic expressions whose indirect meanings were relatively clear, for example, “Would you X?” as a request for the hearer to do X. L1 participants, processing speed and accuracy were roughly equal for the more that conventional and the less conventional forms. In contrast, for L2 participants the more conventional forms were processed, it was quicker and more accurate than the less conventional forms. These results illustrate that there exist different types of indirect meaning and the L1-L2 processing differences can vary over these different forms. The purpose of Taguchi’s (2005) study was to research
pragmatic comprehension in L2 by examining possible L1-L2 differences in speech act comprehension.

In 2007, Holtgraves published an essay named Second Language Learners and Speech Act Comprehension in *Language Learning*, which researched whether pragmatic competence occurs for participants learning English as a second language through an experiment based on the speech acts theory. Overall, the author designed experiments for finding evidence that the comprehension of implicit speech acts by native speakers entails activation of illocutionary force. In terms of results, the research conducted by Holtgraves (2007) suggests additional questions for future L2 research. First and foremost, is it possible for nonnative speakers to ever achieve true automaticity in speech act recognition? The question concerning the possibility of automaticity in speech act recognition is the key focus of research, which plays the leading role in the process of language research. A second question concerns the time course of the acquisition of pragmatic automaticity and its relation to automaticity in other components of language processing. For example, does syntactic and semantic competence become automatic before pragmatic competence is automatic? Third, there are many different types of indirect meaning. The question is whether L2 learners are more likely to develop automaticity for some types of indirect meaning than for other types.

Among the researches abroad, they revealed the relationship between speaking teaching and speech acts theory a lot. Since teaching is also a kind of research, through teaching teachers are more aware of the significant for proper strategies in oral English teaching. Speaking is no different from any other kind of class activity, which needs planning and it needs proper execution. So knowing some certain linguistic theories and researches is necessary for language teachers.
Studies at home

In China, learning English as a second language is a very common matter for Chinese students. From primary schooling, English is already set up as a compulsory subject. But for some Chinese students, oral English is the biggest problem even though they can get high scores in English examination. For the various reasons for English learning and teaching, researchers in China have focused on pragmatics application in English learning from as early as the 1980s. Among them, He Ziran (1997) points out people do not always say what they mean. In most cases, what they express cannot be understood literally. Their intended meaning can only be inferred in context. As a result, teaching speaking is not just a kind of representation but more likely is a micro-environment of real life. For example, some teachers invited one foreigner to the class so that the students could communicate with native speaker to get the first-hand language sources.

Recently, Zeng Wengxiong (2003) has discussed the relationship of the characteristics of Speech Act Theory with TEFL by briefly introducing the Speech Act Theory through examples. The writer believes that he also could not ignore Searle’s (2001) contribution to the theory of speech acts, which concentrated on the view that the small units of linguistic communication are speech act rather than words or sentences. Thus, the communication in fact consists of speech acts, and each speech act embodies the intention of the utterance. In that paper, the author (2003) points out that the teachers have to teach students how to express the speaker’s intention politely. They also teach how to use imperative, declarative and interrogative to express their questioning, ordering, stating, thanking, inviting, warning and so on according to the rules of speech acts. This is done so that students can understand and perform the appropriate intention of the utterance. In terms of language practices,
according to the statement of author (2003), the teacher should design some more conversations or situations connected with the factors of speech acts: hearer, speaker, topic, and ways of communication, time and place. During practices, the teacher can also ask students to design some activities and perform the activities; what’s more, students will get a deeper impression effectively through such practice. Therefore, they are able to use language appropriately and understand its intention exactly in different situations.

More recently, Wang Yinxiu (2007) who works as an English teacher in Mianyang Normal University has published an essay related to the Speech Acts from the view of pragmatic analysis. The author, Wang Yinxiu (2007) focuses on a type of speech act called a complaint which is not to be ignored in daily communication. In order to reason how to perform a complaint more smoothly in daily life, the paper (2007) investigates complaints by discussing the nature of a complaint, classification and some pragmatic strategies. The author (2007) states that it is difficult to estimate the worth of further study of complaint by more language researchers, so that more and more people can be aware of this type of speech act and perform it more successfully to broaden the application and study of speech acts as well as the study of speech acts.

Lately, Li Jiadong and Chen Zhongqing (2008) researched Austin’s Speech Act Theory to when applied communicative approach of language teaching. The paper begins with an analysis of Austin’s Speech Act theory and its influence on other disciplines and goes on to present an overview of its application by western applied linguists in the field of language teaching. This was done with a purpose of clarifying learners’ and teachers’ understanding of its limited use for language teaching purpose and teaching techniques. In terms of significances, the readers are convinced that speech act
theory and the authors’ thoughts that language contains “speech act” within itself could free language teaching from the obstacles of only focusing on language pattern and structure. Moreover, language teachers teaching pay more attention on “meaning” and “function”. As a result, the authors (2008) believe that methods and materials of language teaching are becoming more and more communicative due to a greater concern on research of language application and language function.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Speech acts, of course, never occur in a vacuum situation; there always exists a context. Additionally, it might be that the background context plays a relatively greater role in L2 speech act comprehension (Taguchi, 2002). On one hand, for L1 speakers’ speech act recognition is automatic for
they have acquired pragmatic knowledge regarding the linguistic means by which speech acts are performed. On the other hand, L2 learners do not have this capability and, therefore, must pay closer attention to the context in order to interpret the speaker’s meaning—a process that requires attentive resources and, hence, prevents automatic comprehension.

There are many problems in oral English teaching. An important concept to keep in mind is that people use language in recognizable ways to get things done. As an aspect of communication, oral English plays an important role in English learning. There are many, many “speech acts” in any language, and it is important that students learn the appropriate ways to accomplish their goals when they are speaking. Teachers of English course not only have to pay more attention to a variety of factors of language learning but teaching and also should make full use of linguistics knowledge for improvement. To sum up, the understanding and application of speech act theory can largely be beneficial to spoken English teaching. Therefore, with the further development of language teaching, students would make progress in speech component without boring language sentence teaching and memory.

Through discussion of the speech acts theory, the teacher should pay more attention to the theory in teaching language and practice to allow students to use the appropriate language in different context and understand both the utterance’s literal force and illocutionary force. It is imperative that the language teachers should develop proper teaching materials and combine this theory with other pragmatic theories to further develop the students’ competence in language teaching.
References


