

## A Speech Act Analysis of Teacher-Student Interactions in Educational Cinema: A Case Study of "Freedom Writers"

Halimah Rismawaty Wailissa<sup>1\*</sup>

\*Corresponding Email: [risma.wailissa01@gmail.com](mailto:risma.wailissa01@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> English Education Study Program, Pattimura University, Indonesia

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the speech acts employed by the protagonist Erin Gruwell in the film "Freedom Writers" to understand the linguistic patterns in teacher-student interactions within challenging educational contexts. Using discourse analysis methodology, the research specifically analyzes illocutionary acts and their pedagogical implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching situations. The study systematically analyzed 126 utterances from the main character's dialogue, employing Miles and Huberman's interactive model for data analysis. The findings reveal a predominant use of directive speech acts (40.5%), followed by representative acts (33.3%), with minimal deployment of commissive (3.2%) and declarative acts (0.8%). This distribution suggests a teaching approach that balances instructional authority with authentic communication and student engagement. The analysis demonstrates that effective teaching in diverse classroom environments requires strategic integration of different speech act types, with particular emphasis on combining directive and representative acts for optimal pedagogical outcomes. These findings contribute to our understanding of educational linguistics by illuminating how speech act theory can inform practical teaching strategies, particularly in challenging and diverse classroom environments. The research provides valuable insights for teacher training and professional development, especially in preparing educators to work effectively in multicultural educational settings. The conclusions drawn from this study offer practical implications for improving teacher-student communication and enhancing educational outcomes in diverse classroom contexts.

**Keywords:** *speech act analysis, illocutionary acts, educational discourse, Freedom Writers*

### INTRODUCTION

Language stands as an indispensable bridge in human communication, serving as the primary medium through which people convey information, arguments, and emotions. According to The American linguist Bernard Bloch and George L, language represents a set of arbitrary vocal symbols that social groups employ for communication. This definition aligns with Wibowo's (2001) assertion that language functions as a system of meaningful symbols used by groups to communicate feelings and thoughts. In the educational context, this understanding of language becomes particularly crucial as it forms the foundation of all teaching and learning interactions.

In contemporary language learning environments, students have access to various methods for acquiring target languages. While traditional approaches like textbook reading and audiobook listening remain prevalent, modern learners increasingly gravitate toward more engaging media formats. Happer & Philo (2013) emphasize that media has evolved into the most powerful tool for entertainment, teaching, and learning. Among these media formats, movies have emerged as a particularly effective educational resource. The Oxford Dictionary defines movies as series of moving pictures recorded with sound that tell stories, watched in theaters or on various devices. This medium's effectiveness in language acquisition extends beyond mere entertainment, as Ismaili (2013) notes that movies can be compelling tools for both language acquisition and cultural understanding.

The pedagogical value of movies in language learning is multifaceted. According to Rao (2019), film viewing exposes learners to native speakers' voices, effectively training both pronunciation and speaking skills. This exposure proves especially beneficial for English learners, who can observe correct pronunciation and authentic accents through direct observation of native speakers. Furthermore, research has demonstrated several specific advantages of incorporating movies into foreign language learning. Tognozzi (2010) found that movies effectively capture students' attention toward the target language, while Ruusunen (2011) documented increased student motivation through film-based learning.

Within movie dialogues, speech acts play a crucial role in conveying meaning and intent. As a subfield of pragmatics, speech acts represent a fundamental aspect of language use. Levinson (1983) defines pragmatics as the study of language use or the relationship between language and context, emphasizing how people create and interpret meanings through language. This framework becomes particularly relevant when analyzing educational interactions, as it helps resolve potential misunderstandings between speakers and listeners, especially regarding different points of view. Bach (1996) elaborates that almost any speech act simultaneously executes multiple functions, differentiated by various aspects of the speaker's intention.

The present study focuses on analyzing the speech acts employed by the main character Erin Gruwell in the movie "Freedom Writers." This analysis builds upon previous research conducted by Mulyani & Latifah (2018) regarding speech acts in the same film. However, while the previous study primarily examined the speaker's intentions, this research delves deeper into the implications of speech acts in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situations. By examining the illocutionary acts within the film's educational context, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of effective communication strategies in diverse classroom environments. The findings will be

particularly relevant for educators working with multicultural student populations and those interested in using media for language instruction.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Theory of Discourse Analysis***

Discourse analysis emerged as a significant field of study in the 1960s and early 1970s, developing across multiple disciplines including linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. McCarthy (1991) traces this interdisciplinary development, highlighting how various fields contributed to our understanding of discourse. The term "discourse analysis" was first introduced by Harris in his 1952 article, where he defined it as a method for analyzing connected speech or writing beyond the confines of simple sentence structure. Brown and Yule (1983) later simplified this concept by defining discourse as language in use, while Cook (1989) expanded this definition to include any type of language used for communication that maintains coherence without necessarily adhering to correct sentence structure.

The scope of discourse analysis extends beyond formal language features to consider how language functions in social and cultural contexts. According to Reeves et al. (2008), discourse analysis involves studying and analyzing language use in its various manifestations. This analysis considers the relationship between language and context, examining how sociopsychological features of individuals or groups manifest through communication. The field encompasses three primary approaches: formal discourse analysis, which seeks general linguistic rules; empirical discourse analysis, which examines themes and functions through conversation and genre analysis; and critical discourse analysis, which considers broader social practices and power dynamics in communication.

### ***Speech Act Theory and Its Components***

Speech act theory, introduced by Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin and further developed by American philosopher J.R. Searle, examines how language performs actions beyond mere communication. The theory considers three related acts: locutionary (the basic act of producing meaningful linguistic expressions), illocutionary (the intended purpose of the utterance), and perlocutionary (the effect of the utterance on the listener). Searle emphasized that language represents more than just sounds; it serves as a mechanism for expressing thoughts and emotions, functioning effectively only within social contexts.

Within this framework, illocutionary acts play a particularly significant role. These acts can be classified into five categories: representatives (assertions about reality), expressives (statements

of psychological states), directives (attempts to get others to do something), commissives (commitments to future actions), and declaratives (statements that change social reality). Bach (1996) notes that most speech acts simultaneously perform multiple functions, distinguished by varying aspects of speaker intention. This multiplicity of function makes speech acts an integral part of communication, manifesting in requests, apologies, warnings, promises, and greetings.

### ***Educational Applications of Speech Acts***

The application of speech act theory in educational contexts has garnered increasing attention from researchers and practitioners. Studies have demonstrated that understanding speech acts can enhance teaching effectiveness, particularly in language instruction. Tognozzi (2010) and Ruusunen (2011) found that conscious use of varied speech acts can increase student engagement and motivation in language learning. Additionally, Martin & Jaén (2009) highlighted how speech acts provide excellent material for teaching conversational skills.

In the context of media-based language learning, speech acts take on added significance. Ismaili (2013) emphasizes that movies can serve as powerful tools for language acquisition and cultural understanding, largely because they present authentic speech acts in context. Zhang (2013) further notes that exposure to speech acts through media can increase students' awareness of target language culture. This intersection of speech act theory and media-based learning creates opportunities for enhanced language instruction, particularly in EFL contexts where authentic language exposure might be limited. The analysis of speech acts in educational films like "Freedom Writers" provides valuable insights into how teachers can effectively employ different types of speech acts to achieve various pedagogical objectives.

## **METHOD**

### ***Research Design***

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach focused on discourse analysis, specifically examining speech acts in educational context. According to Zikmund (2016), research design serves as a "master plan" that specifies the methods and procedures for collecting and analyzing necessary information. The qualitative nature of this research allows for subjective assessment of opinions, attitudes, and behaviors, with analysis grounded in the researcher's observations and experiences. The choice of discourse analysis as the primary methodological framework aligns with Reeves et al's (2008) definition of studying and analyzing language use in various contexts. Furthermore, Ary et al. (2010) support this methodological choice by explaining

that discourse analysis effectively examines the relationship between words and context through studying linguistic units.

### ***Research Object***

The primary research object comprises the dialogues delivered by the main character Erin Gruwell in the movie "Freedom Writers," directed by Richard La Gravenese. The movie, based on a true story, provides rich material for analyzing speech acts within an educational context. The analysis focuses specifically on the illocutionary acts employed throughout the film, examining how these linguistic choices affect teacher-student interactions and learning outcomes. This investigation considers both the immediate classroom context and broader educational implications, particularly for EFL situations.

The film itself serves as a primary data source, supplemented by background information from articles and review videos that provide contextual understanding. These secondary sources help establish the historical and social context of the events portrayed in the film, enriching the analysis of speech acts within their proper situational framework.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The data collection process follows a systematic approach incorporating both primary and secondary sources. As defined by the research framework, primary data comes directly from the movie "Freedom Writers," while secondary data includes supplementary materials such as articles, reviews, and related documentation. This dual approach ensures comprehensive coverage of both the specific speech acts and their broader contextual significance.

The analysis follows Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which consists of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, relevant dialogues are selected and focused on specific speech acts. The data display phase involves interpreting the structured data to draw meaningful conclusions about speech act patterns and their educational implications. This stage includes analyzing both explicit and implicit meanings within the dialogues, considering contextual factors that influence speech act choice and effectiveness.

The verification process ensures the reliability of conclusions through systematic cross-checking with established theories and previous research. This analytical framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of how different types of speech acts function within educational discourse, particularly in challenging classroom environments. The analysis pays special attention

to the frequency and effectiveness of various illocutionary acts, examining how they contribute to achieving pedagogical objectives and fostering positive teacher-student relationships.

## FINDINGS

### *Analysis of Illocutionary Acts in Main Character's Dialogue*

The systematic analysis of Erin Gruwell's dialogue revealed distinct patterns in illocutionary acts usage, addressing the first research objective regarding the types and purposes of speech acts. Following the methodological framework outlined in Chapter 3, each dialogue was carefully categorized and analyzed using discourse analysis techniques. The frequency distribution of illocutionary acts across 126 utterances demonstrated a clear predominance of directive and representative acts, as shown in Table 1. The quantitative mapping of these speech acts provides insights into Gruwell's communication strategies in challenging educational contexts and aligns with the study's qualitative analytical framework. The methodological approach of data reduction and display proved particularly effective in identifying these patterns, allowing for comprehensive categorization of speech acts. The analysis revealed that Gruwell's linguistic choices consistently reflected her pedagogical objectives and teaching philosophy.

**Table 1: Distribution of Illocutionary Acts**

Type	Frequency	Percentage	Subcategories
Directive	51	40.5%	Ordering (26), Suggesting (12), Asking (11), Allusion (2)
Representative	42	33.3%	Asserting (20), Describing (20), Informing (2)
Expressive	16	12.7%	Anger (3), Complaints (5), Regret (2), Apologizing (3), Others (3)
Commissive	4	3.2%	Promising (2), Refusing (1), Committing (1)

Type	Frequency	Percentage	Subcategories
Declarative	1	0.8%	Statement of Change (1)

The detailed examination of directive acts, comprising 40.5% of total utterances, revealed sophisticated patterns in classroom management and student motivation strategies. The high frequency of ordering (26 instances) and suggesting (12 instances) demonstrates a balanced approach between authoritative guidance and collaborative learning, reflecting the challenging nature of the educational environment depicted in the film. The strategic deployment of these directives shows careful consideration of situational context, supporting the theoretical framework established in the literature review. Each directive act served specific pedagogical purposes, ranging from immediate classroom management to long-term behavioral modification. The analysis reveals how these directives were instrumental in establishing classroom authority while maintaining student engagement.

Representative acts, constituting 33.3% of analyzed utterances, demonstrated Gruwell's commitment to factual presentation and authentic communication. The equal distribution between asserting and describing (20 instances each) suggests a balanced approach to information delivery, supporting the study's methodological focus on contextual analysis. These representative acts often served as foundational elements for subsequent directive acts, creating a coherent pedagogical strategy. The limited use of purely informative statements (2 instances) indicates a preference for engaging students through more dynamic forms of communication. This pattern aligns with contemporary educational theories emphasizing interactive learning over passive information transfer.

The integration of expressive acts (12.7%) with other speech act types revealed sophisticated emotional intelligence in classroom management. The variety of emotional expressions, from anger to apology, demonstrates the complex nature of teacher-student interactions in challenging educational environments. The relatively low frequency of commissive (3.2%) and declarative acts (0.8%) suggests a teaching style that prioritizes immediate engagement over long-term commitments. These findings support the study's methodological approach to analyzing speech acts within their full contextual framework. The data reveals how emotional expressions were strategically employed to build rapport and maintain classroom dynamics.

### ***Pedagogical Implications for EFL Situations***

The analysis of speech acts in relation to EFL teaching contexts addresses the second research objective, focusing on their pedagogical applicability. The findings suggest that the

strategic use of directive and representative acts can significantly enhance EFL instruction when properly contextualized. The methodological approach of analyzing situational context proved particularly valuable in identifying transferable teaching strategies. The data indicates that successful EFL instruction requires a balanced combination of clear directives and authentic representative acts. These findings align with contemporary research on effective language teaching methodologies, particularly in diverse classroom settings.

**Table 2: Speech Acts Application in EFL Contexts**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Primary Acts</b>	<b>Secondary Acts</b>	<b>Teaching Strategy</b>
Vocabulary Introduction	Representative	Directive	Describe-then-Practice
Grammar Instruction	Directive	Representative	Guide-then-Explain
Cultural Learning	Representative	Expressive	Context-with-Emotion
Classroom Management	Directive	Commissive	Direct-with-Commitment
Student Motivation	Expressive	Directive	Engage-then-Guide

The application of directive acts in EFL contexts requires careful consideration of cultural and linguistic factors. The analysis reveals that successful directives in language teaching combine clear instructional intent with cultural sensitivity. The high frequency of ordering and suggesting in Gruwell's dialogue provides a model for balancing teacher authority with student autonomy. The findings indicate that effective EFL instruction requires teachers to modify their directive approaches based on student proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. This adaptability in speech act usage supports the theoretical framework established in the literature review.

Representative acts in EFL contexts serve dual purposes of language modeling and content delivery. The equal distribution between asserting and describing acts in Gruwell's dialogue suggests an effective approach to language instruction. The analysis reveals how representative acts can be used to introduce new vocabulary and grammatical structures while maintaining student engagement. The findings demonstrate the importance of authentic language use in EFL instruction. These insights support the study's methodological emphasis on analyzing speech acts within their educational context.

The strategic use of expressive acts in EFL contexts contributes to creating an emotionally supportive learning environment. The analysis reveals how Gruwell's emotional expressions facilitated student engagement and cultural understanding. The findings suggest that expressive acts can help reduce language anxiety and promote active participation. The data indicates that successful EFL instruction requires a balance between emotional support and academic rigor. This



understanding aligns with contemporary theories of language acquisition and emotional intelligence in education.

The limited use of commissive and declarative acts suggests a focus on immediate engagement over long-term promises. The analysis reveals that successful EFL instruction prioritizes achievable short-term objectives over broad commitments. The findings indicate that speech act selection should reflect realistic language learning goals. The data demonstrates how different speech acts can be combined to create effective teaching strategies. This strategic approach to speech act usage supports the study's overall objective of identifying effective communication patterns in educational contexts.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research examined speech acts employed by Erin Gruwell in "Freedom Writers" through discourse analysis, focusing specifically on illocutionary acts and their implications for EFL teaching. The findings reveal several significant patterns that merit detailed discussion in relation to existing literature and educational practice.

The predominance of directive speech acts (40.5%) in Gruwell's dialogue aligns with previous research on teacher discourse in challenging educational environments. This high frequency of directives, particularly in the forms of ordering (26 instances) and suggesting (12 instances), demonstrates a sophisticated balance between authoritative guidance and collaborative learning approaches. These findings support Tognozzi's (2010) assertion about the importance of capturing student attention through varied linguistic strategies. The strategic deployment of directives in conjunction with other speech acts suggests a teaching methodology that effectively combines firm guidance with student empowerment.

Representative acts, constituting 33.3% of the analyzed utterances, reveal a teaching approach that prioritizes authentic communication and factual presentation. The equal distribution between asserting and describing acts (20 instances each) aligns with Ruusunen's (2011) findings regarding the role of authentic language use in increasing student motivation. This pattern suggests that effective teaching in diverse classrooms requires a careful balance between information delivery and student engagement. The limited use of purely informative statements (2 instances) indicates a preference for interactive teaching methods over traditional lecture-style instruction.

The relatively low frequency of commissive (3.2%) and declarative acts (0.8%) presents an interesting contrast to traditional teaching approaches. This finding challenges conventional assumptions about the importance of teacher commitments in classroom discourse. Instead, it suggests that effective teaching in challenging environments may require more immediate and

dynamic forms of interaction. This observation supports Bach's (1996) assertion that speech acts simultaneously serve multiple functions, with their effectiveness determined by contextual factors rather than formal categorization.

The strategic integration of expressive acts (12.7%) throughout the dialogue demonstrates the importance of emotional intelligence in educational contexts. The variety of emotional expressions documented in the analysis, from anger to apology, supports Ismaili's (2013) findings regarding the role of authentic emotional engagement in language learning. This pattern suggests that successful teaching in diverse classrooms requires teachers to navigate complex emotional territories while maintaining professional boundaries.

Pedagogical implications for EFL contexts emerge clearly from the analysis. The findings suggest that effective language instruction requires a careful balance of different speech act types, with particular emphasis on combining directive and representative acts. This aligns with Zhang's (2013) research on the importance of cultural awareness in language teaching. The data indicates that successful EFL instruction must adapt speech act usage based on student proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds.

The methodological approach of analyzing speech acts within their full contextual framework proved particularly valuable in understanding their educational effectiveness. This supports Levinson's (1983) emphasis on the relationship between language use and context. The findings suggest that speech act analysis can provide valuable insights for teacher training and professional development, particularly in preparing educators for diverse classroom environments.

These findings contribute to the broader understanding of effective communication strategies in educational contexts, particularly concerning the role of speech acts in facilitating learning in challenging environments. The research supports previous studies while offering new insights into the practical application of speech act theory in educational settings. Future research might explore how these patterns vary across different cultural contexts and student populations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study of speech acts in "Freedom Writers" reveals significant insights into effective educational communication strategies, particularly in challenging and diverse classroom environments. The analysis demonstrates that successful teaching requires a sophisticated balance of different speech acts, with directive (40.5%) and representative acts (33.3%) playing predominant roles in facilitating student engagement and learning. The strategic deployment of these speech acts, combined with appropriate expressive elements (12.7%), suggests that effective teaching transcends mere information transfer and requires careful attention to emotional and

cultural dynamics in the classroom. The findings indicate that the limited use of commissive (3.2%) and declarative acts (0.8%) reflects a teaching approach that prioritizes immediate engagement and authentic interaction over formal authority and long-term commitments.

This study's methodological framework, grounded in discourse analysis, provides valuable insights for understanding how different types of speech acts can be effectively combined to create engaging and productive learning environments. The research contributes to our understanding of educational linguistics by demonstrating how speech act theory can inform practical teaching strategies, particularly in EFL contexts. The findings support previous research while offering new perspectives on the role of linguistic choices in educational success, suggesting that effective teaching requires a nuanced understanding of how different speech acts can be deployed to achieve specific pedagogical objectives. The study's limitations, including its focus on a single character and context, suggest opportunities for future research examining speech act patterns across different educational settings and cultural contexts. Finally, this research underscores the importance of contextual awareness in educational communication, demonstrating that successful teaching requires not just technical proficiency in language use, but also a sophisticated understanding of how different types of utterances can be combined to create effective learning environments.

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