

## Speech Acts: Awareness, Recognition, and Production

by [Jolene Jaquays](#), [Sara Okello](#), and [Kathrine Colpaert](#)

English language learners (ELLs) typically learn fundamentals of language in class, but most textbooks minimally address the functional language and pragmatic knowledge needed to perform various speech acts. Speech acts are defined as “patterned, routinized phrases used regularly to perform a variety of functions such as requesting, refusing, complimenting, greeting, thanking, and apologizing” (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005). These speech acts activities were developed when the English Language Program at the University of Michigan-Flint, where we used to teach, started incorporating speech acts into the Listening and Speaking classes. Each level was assigned various speech acts to learn and practice during the course of the semester (see chart in [Appendix A](#)). In this article, we give an overview of speech acts, explaining a variety of activities for noticing, producing, and evaluating speech acts to use in the classroom.

Most ELL textbooks do not contain enough information on speech acts or activities and exercises for students to practice. In the textbooks that do present speech acts, there is a limited range, lack of models, and little contextual and pragmatic information (Vellenga, 2004). Research has found that teaching speech acts “can help learners to improve their performance of speech acts and thus their interactions with native speakers” (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, n.d.). By teaching our students frames or scripts, students of all levels can begin to learn these speech acts and the formulaic language required to complete them (Gumperz & Tannen, 1979). There are three phases of teaching speech acts: awareness, recognition, and production of speech acts.

### Phase 1: Awareness

The first phase, awareness, involves raising the consciousness of teachers so they can educate their students. According to Austin (1962), the three components of a speech act are illocution (what the speaker means to convey), locution (the actual words of the message), and perlocution (the hearer’s reaction to the speaker’s message). The procedure must be executed completely and correctly (Austin, 1962). For example, if a baby, rather than your boss, says you’re fired, the speech act is not successfully completed. Sometimes speech acts are direct (*Please shut the door*), and other times they are indirect, more implied (*Brr. It’s cold in here* [while glancing at the open door]).

### Phase 2: Recognition

The second phase is recognition, which is the noticing aspect of the students. This step raises student awareness of speech acts, and we find it is most successful through the use of comics, sitcoms, commercials, songs, and memes. For comics, you can show comic strips that illustrate the speech act that is being presented. For example, the comic “[Last Kiss](#)” features a man saying, “I’m sorry, but...” to a woman. The woman, with a pained expression on her face, states, “Stop at but! We’ll both be happier.” This comic strip can be used to teach apologies using the example of a relationship breakup. You can also use sitcoms to teach speech acts, specifically the speech act of apology, such as in Joey’s “funny” apology in the sitcom [Friends](#) where Joey mistakenly uses air quotes when he says, “I’m sorry” to Ross.

You can also use commercials, such as the Milky Way commercials that feature various embarrassing scenarios in which somebody states, “Sorry; I was eating a Milky Way” as an excuse for making a mistake. For example, in [one commercial](#), a tattoo artist accidentally writes “No Regerts” instead of “No Regrets” on a man’s arm. This commercial can be used to show the appropriate way to apologize when making a mistake. Songs also work well for the recognition phase. For example, if students are learning the speech act of showing gratitude, you can provide various songs on the theme ([Appendix B](#)). You can ask students why they think there are so many songs about giving thanks and look for useful phrases in the lyrics. Memes are another medium to teach speech acts. For example, there is a meme from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* in which Sheldon apologizes to another character by saying, “I said I’m sorry! Forgive me...Please?” Because memes are so popular on social media websites, students will be attracted to the picture and message of this medium of communication.

### Phase 3: Production

The final phase of teaching speech acts is production, in which students practice using the speech acts in real-life situations. Activities for production are role-plays, speed dating, photo dialogues, and phone calls and messages.

#### Role-Plays

Role-plays are great for practicing speech acts such as inviting, refusing, disagreeing, warning, or suggesting. Try the following role-play scenarios:

1. It is Mother’s Day, and you and your sibling need to buy a present for your mom. Take turns making suggestions of different items (Provide props or pictures of different items).
2. You and your best friend decide to take a weekend trip. Take turns making suggestions about where you can go and what you can do there for a day out.
3. What’s the best way to \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., get a job, plan a party, study for a test)?

#### Speed Dating

Speed dating is another activity to practice the speech act of inviting. Students stand in two lines face to face. Each student in one line has been given an event to which he or she needs to invite his or her partner. Their partners in the other line have a response. Students proceed with the exchange with one partner at a time, rotating to the next. After each person has gone through the line, the roles are switched. This activity provides repetitive practice with multiple partners (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Speed Dating Sample Invitations and Responses

Invitations	Responses
Invite your friend to your home for a potluck dinner.	Sure. I’d love to.
Invite your neighbor to a barbecue.	What a great idea. What can I bring?
Invite your friend to go to a movie.	I appreciate the invitation, but I’m busy.

Invite your classmate to go to lunch after class.	Sorry, but no.
Invite your classmate to study with you at the library.	Can I have a rain check?
Invite your friend to go to a local museum.	I already have plans. Maybe another time.

### Photo Dialogues

In photo dialogues, students explain what is happening in a picture or act out the scenario depicted in a picture. For example, you can show students a picture of two people shaking hands and have the students create a dialogue of greeting.

### Phone Calls and Messages

A final method for producing speech acts is through phone calls and messages. Students can practice live with their own cell phones or they can leave messages for the teacher using Google Voice. Google Voice is a free app that allows an individual to set up a free phone number. The app provides a voice transcription of the messages that are left, which are then sent to email. (If the message is incomprehensible, the message will not be transcribed.) Students can be given a speech act task such as calling to apologize for something.

### Conclusion

Many activities exist for incorporating noticing, producing, and evaluating into class to teach speech acts. A sample week of teaching a speech act would begin with noticing and establishing the needed strategies and language form. The next couple of days would involve producing in various forms—written, oral, individual, pair, and group. As a culmination, students would be evaluated, preferably with a rubric using methods such as reflections, presentations, or videos.

Teaching speech acts is essential to help students improve their interactions with fluent speakers. When emphasis is put only on speaking, reading, writing, and grammar, a gap exists in practical application. Learning the practical skills of communicative competence is useful in activities, events, and situations where learned roles can help complete functions and improve mutual understanding.

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**Jolene Jaquays** has been a teacher in the English Language Program at University of Michigan-Flint since 2011. She completed both her MA in TESOL and her BS in education at Central Michigan University. Her 30+ year teaching repertoire includes teaching English, ESL, Spanish, and yearbook. She has taught in preschool through graduate level settings.

**Sara Okello** has taught in China, Korea, and France as well as in the United States, most recently as a high school ELL teacher in Knoxville, Tennessee. Before that, she taught at the University of Michigan-Flint. She received her BA in English education from Cedarville University and her MA in TESOL from Eastern Michigan University. She has presented at both the Michigan and TESOL International Association conferences and has several publications.

**Kathrine Colpaert** has taught in France, Saudi Arabia, China, and the United States. She received her bachelor's degree in French from Michigan State University and master's in TESOL from St. Cloud State University. She taught ESL for 6 years and has recently moved into the role of global outreach coordinator at University of Michigan-Flint.

## Appendix A: UM-Flint Listening/Speaking Speech Acts

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
stating	asking	claiming	attributing	affirming	claiming
answering	suggesting	classifying	concurring	announcing	attributing
greeting	apologizing	disagreeing	disputing	disclosing	concurring
thanking	congratulating	informing	predicting	insisting	disputing
agreeing	accepting	concluding	believing	denying	reporting
apologizing	appreciating	reporting	urging	challenging	concluding
denying	regretting	advising	warning	dismissing	
reporting		requesting	volunteering	guaranteeing	
		promising			
		inviting			
		offering			

## Appendix B: Songs for Gratitude

Song	Artist
Gratitude	Ani Difranco
Thank You	Dido
Thank U	Alanis Morissette
Thank You for Being a Friend	Andrew Gold
Thank You	Solomon Burke
Thank You for Loving Me	Bon Jovi
Thank You	Kris Kristofferson
Thank You	The Commodores
Thank You	Bonnie Raitt
Thank God for Hometowns	Carrie Underwood