

Pragmatic Features of Teachers' Classroom Discourse: Directives, Praise, and Mitigation in Secondary Schools in Bududa District, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the pragmatic features of teachers' classroom discourse in secondary schools in Bududa District, Eastern Uganda. Guided by Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, the study explored how teachers use directives, praise, and mitigation strategies to manage classroom interaction, exercise institutional authority, and foster positive teacher–learner relationships in multilingual learning environments. A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted, and data were collected through non-participant classroom observation and semi-structured interviews involving purposively selected secondary school teachers. Findings revealed that directives constituted the most dominant speech acts in classroom interaction and were realized through both direct and mitigated forms. Praise functioned as an expressive strategy for learner motivation, behavioural reinforcement, and classroom management, while mitigation strategies such as hedging, politeness markers, and softened corrections reduced face-threatening acts during instruction and disciplinary interaction. The study further established that teachers' pragmatic choices were influenced by pedagogical goals, institutional power relations, and sociocultural expectations within Ugandan classrooms. The findings underscore the importance of integrating pragmatic competence and classroom discourse awareness into teacher education and professional development programs in Uganda.

Keywords: classroom pragmatics, classroom discourse, speech acts, directives, praise, mitigation, Uganda

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Classroom communication plays a central role in shaping teaching and learning processes. Teachers' talk not only conveys academic content but also regulates classroom interaction, manages learner behaviour, and establishes interpersonal relationships. From a pragmatic perspective, classroom discourse consists of speech acts such as directives, expressives, representatives, and mitigated utterances whose meanings are interpreted within specific institutional and sociocultural contexts (Modern Education and Development, 2025).

Recent developments in applied linguistics indicate that teachers' pragmatic competence significantly influences learner participation, motivation, classroom climate, and academic engagement (Wati et al., 2025). In most instructional settings, directives dominate classroom interaction because teachers are institutionally mandated to guide learning activities, maintain discipline, and control turn-taking during lessons. However, the effectiveness of directives depends not only on what teachers say but also on how they say it. Pragmatic choices such as politeness markers, hedging expressions, and inclusive pronouns may soften commands and encourage learner cooperation.

Praise also functions as an important expressive speech act in classroom discourse. Teachers use praise to reinforce desirable behaviour, motivate learners, acknowledge academic achievement, and sustain classroom participation. Similarly, mitigation strategies help reduce the face-threatening nature of correction, criticism, and disciplinary interaction, thereby fostering respectful teacher–learner relationships.

Although classroom pragmatics has attracted increasing scholarly attention globally, empirical studies focusing

on Ugandan secondary school contexts remain limited, particularly in rural and multilingual settings such as Bududa District in Eastern Uganda. Most existing studies on classroom communication in Uganda focus primarily on pedagogy and academic performance rather than the pragmatic dimensions of teacher talk. This study therefore sought to address this gap by examining the pragmatic features of teachers' classroom discourse in authentic secondary school classroom settings.

Statement of the Problem

Effective classroom communication is essential for learner participation, classroom engagement, and academic success. However, many secondary school classrooms in Uganda continue to be characterized by highly directive and authoritative teacher talk, often dominated by direct commands and corrective utterances. Excessive reliance on unmitigated directives may discourage learner participation, reduce interactional confidence, and negatively affect teacher–student relationships.

Research conducted in other educational contexts suggests that pragmatic strategies such as praise, mitigation, and polite directives contribute to positive classroom interaction, learner motivation, and supportive learning environments (Nuraeni et al., 2025; Tabelessy et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there remains limited empirical and context-specific research examining how secondary school teachers in rural Ugandan classrooms pragmatically construct classroom interaction through directives, praise, and mitigation strategies.

Without such evidence, teacher education and professional development programs may overlook pragmatic competence as a critical component of effective classroom communication. This study therefore sought to examine the pragmatic features of teachers' classroom discourse in secondary schools in Bududa District, Uganda.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To examine the pragmatic features of teachers' classroom discourse in secondary schools in Bududa District, Uganda.

Specific Objectives

- i. To identify the types of speech acts used by secondary school teachers during classroom interaction.
- ii. To analyze how directives are pragmatically realized in classroom discourse.
- iii. To examine the pragmatic functions of praise and mitigation strategies in teacher–learner interaction.

Research Questions

- i. What types of speech acts are used by secondary school teachers during classroom interaction?
- ii. How are directives pragmatically realized in Ugandan secondary school classrooms?
- iii. What pragmatic functions do praise and mitigation strategies serve in classroom discourse?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, which together provide an appropriate framework for understanding the pragmatic features of classroom discourse.

Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory was developed by John Austin and later expanded by John Searle. The theory explains how language performs actions such as requesting, commanding, praising, apologizing, and instructing. According

to Searle (2020), utterances perform communicative functions depending on speaker intention and social context.

The theory was relevant to this study because classroom interaction largely consists of speech acts through which teachers organize instruction, manage learner behaviour, and facilitate participation. Directives, praise, and correction were therefore analyzed as pragmatic actions rather than merely grammatical structures.

Politeness Theory

Politeness Theory was developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. The theory explains how speakers strategically use language to maintain interpersonal relationships and minimize face-threatening acts during communication.

The theory was particularly useful in examining mitigation strategies used by teachers during classroom interaction. Teachers frequently softened directives and corrections through hedging expressions, polite requests, modal verbs, and inclusive pronouns to reduce imposition and maintain positive teacher–learner relationships.

Together, Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory provided complementary perspectives for analyzing how teachers use language pragmatically to achieve pedagogical goals while simultaneously managing interpersonal interaction within multilingual classroom environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Acts and Classroom Discourse

Speech Act Theory explains how utterances perform communicative actions such as instructing, requesting, praising, and correcting. In educational settings, teacher talk is predominantly directive because teachers are responsible for organizing learning activities and managing classroom behaviour (Modern Education and Development, 2025). Recent studies indicate that the pragmatic realization of speech acts significantly influences learner participation and classroom interaction patterns.

Directives in Classroom Interaction

Directives are central to classroom discourse because they regulate classroom activities and structure instructional interaction. Research demonstrates that indirect and mitigated directives promote cooperation and learner participation more effectively than bald imperatives (Nuraeni et al., 2025). Teachers therefore often combine institutional authority with politeness strategies to maintain classroom order while minimizing learner resistance.

Praise as an Expressive Speech Act

Praise functions as an expressive speech act through which teachers acknowledge learner effort, participation, and achievement. Studies show that praise contributes positively to learner motivation, confidence, and classroom climate when strategically employed (Tabelessy et al., 2023). Effective praise also encourages active participation and reinforces desirable classroom behaviour.

Politeness and Mitigation in Teaching

Politeness strategies such as hedging, softeners, indirectness, and modal expressions help mitigate face-threatening acts during classroom interaction. Wati et al. (2025) argue that mitigation promotes respectful interaction and supports learner confidence, particularly during corrective feedback and disciplinary communication. In multilingual classrooms, mitigation may also reduce anxiety and facilitate learner engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore pragmatic features of teacher discourse in authentic classroom settings. The design was appropriate because it enabled in-depth and contextualized analysis of naturally occurring classroom interaction without imposing artificial experimental conditions (Creswell, 2021). Qualitative descriptive designs are particularly suitable in applied linguistics research where the focus is on understanding language use, meaning, and interaction within social contexts (Flick, 2020).

Research Approach

A qualitative approach was adopted to capture the contextualized meanings of teachers' utterances during classroom interaction. The approach enabled the researcher to investigate not only what teachers said but also how and why specific speech acts were pragmatically realized during instruction (Patton, 2022).

Area of Study

The study was conducted in selected secondary schools in Bududa District, Eastern Uganda. The district was selected because of its multilingual classroom environment and varied teaching practices. The setting provided authentic insights into pragmatic strategies used within rural Ugandan classrooms (Wanyenya, 2013; Wabwire, 2022).

Target Population

The target population comprised secondary school teachers and their Senior One and Senior Two classes. These lower secondary classes were selected because instructional communication at this level strongly influences learner participation, classroom adjustment, and academic engagement.

Sample Size

A total of 30 teachers were purposively selected to participate in the study. This sample size was considered adequate for achieving data saturation in qualitative inquiry, where no substantially new patterns of speech acts emerged during analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on teaching experience, subject specialization, and willingness to participate. This technique ensured the selection of participants capable of providing rich and relevant information regarding classroom discourse practices (Etikan et al., 2020).

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observation. Interviews enabled teachers to explain their communicative intentions, classroom management approaches, and perceptions regarding directives, praise, and mitigation strategies. Classroom observations provided contextualized data on naturally occurring interaction, including non-verbal cues accompanying speech acts.

The combination of interviews and observations facilitated triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability was enhanced through systematic coding and thematic categorization of classroom utterances across observation sessions. Validity was strengthened through member checking, whereby participating

teachers reviewed selected interpretations to confirm the accuracy of meaning and representation (Cohen et al., 2022).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant educational authorities and participating schools. Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty (UBOS, 2022).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using pragmatic categories such as directives, praise, mitigation, and other speech acts. The analysis involved identifying recurrent classroom utterances, classifying directive forms, examining expressive functions of praise, and analyzing mitigation strategies used during correction and classroom management. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to relate observed discourse practices to Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 2020).

FINDINGS

Types of Speech Acts Used by Teachers

Table 1: Distribution of Teachers' Speech Acts

Speech Act Type	Frequency (%)
Directives	60%
Praise	20%
Representatives	12%
Mitigated Forms	8%

The findings revealed that directives constituted the most dominant speech acts in classroom discourse. Teachers frequently used directives to organize classroom activities, maintain discipline, and guide learner participation. Praise occurred regularly as an expressive strategy intended to motivate learners and reinforce desirable classroom behaviour, while mitigated forms reduced face-threatening interaction during correction and disciplinary communication.

Examples observed during classroom interaction included:

“Open your books to page twenty.”

“Please try again.”

“Excellent answer.”

These findings suggest that classroom discourse in Bududa secondary schools reflects both institutional authority and interpersonal negotiation within teacher–learner interaction.

Pragmatic Realization of Directives

Table 2: Forms of Directive Speech Acts

Directive Type	Examples	Frequency
Direct imperatives	“Open your books.”	High

Indirect directives	“Could we start now?”	Moderate
Mitigated directives	“Let us try to answer this together.”	Moderate

The study established that directives were realized through both direct and mitigated forms. Direct imperatives were commonly used during classroom control and task management, whereas mitigated directives incorporated politeness markers, modal verbs, and inclusive pronouns to encourage cooperation and reduce imposition.

Some variation was also observed across subject areas and teacher experience levels. Language teachers tended to employ more mitigated directives and expressive praise compared to science teachers, whose interaction was generally more direct and task-oriented. Experienced teachers also demonstrated greater use of softened correction and inclusive classroom language.

Functions of Praise and Mitigation

Praise functioned as an important motivational and interpersonal strategy within classroom discourse. Teachers used praise to reinforce correct responses, encourage participation, and sustain learner confidence.

Examples included:

“Very good. You have understood the concept.”

“Excellent work today.”

Mitigation strategies such as hedging, softened correction, and polite requests were particularly common during error correction and disciplinary interaction.

Examples included:

“Maybe we could rethink that answer.”

“Try to explain it differently.”

These pragmatic strategies reduced face threats and promoted supportive classroom interaction, thereby enhancing learner willingness to participate.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings revealed that directives dominated classroom discourse because teachers occupy institutional positions that require them to regulate interaction and manage instructional activities. This finding supports Speech Act Theory, which views directives as communicative acts intended to influence the behaviour of hearers (Searle, 2020). The predominance of directives also aligns with findings by Nuraeni et al. (2025), who observed that teacher talk in classroom settings is largely directive and managerial.

The study further established that teachers frequently mitigated directives through politeness markers, inclusive pronouns, and softened expressions. Such pragmatic strategies minimized the imposition of commands and fostered collaborative interaction between teachers and learners. This finding supports Brown and Levinson’s (2020) Politeness Theory, which emphasizes that speakers employ mitigation strategies to preserve social harmony and reduce face-threatening acts.

Praise emerged as a significant expressive speech act that enhanced learner motivation, reinforced positive behaviour, and encouraged participation. Strategic praise contributed to supportive classroom climates and strengthened teacher–learner relationships. These findings are consistent with Tabelessy et al. (2023), who found that praise positively influences learner engagement and classroom participation.

The findings additionally suggest that classroom pragmatics extends beyond verbal language to include non-verbal communication such as gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, and eye contact. These multimodal features often reinforced or softened directives and praise, thereby influencing learner interpretation and response during interaction.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was limited to purposively selected secondary school teachers from Bududa District, which may limit the transferability of findings to urban schools or other regions of Uganda. In addition, the study focused primarily on teachers' classroom discourse and did not directly incorporate learners' perspectives regarding how they interpret directives, praise, and mitigation strategies. Furthermore, although some variation in pragmatic strategies was observed across subjects and teacher experience levels, these variables were not systematically quantified. Future studies may therefore employ broader comparative and multimodal approaches to classroom pragmatics.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that directives constitute the dominant pragmatic feature of teachers' classroom discourse in secondary schools in Bududa District. However, teachers increasingly employ praise and mitigation strategies to foster learner participation, maintain positive interpersonal relationships, and reduce face-threatening interaction during classroom communication.

The study further concludes that teachers' pragmatic choices are shaped by pedagogical goals, institutional authority, and sociocultural norms within multilingual Ugandan classrooms. Effective classroom communication therefore requires not only subject knowledge but also pragmatic competence in the strategic use of language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teacher education programs should integrate pragmatic awareness and classroom discourse analysis into teacher preparation curricula. Pre-service teachers should be equipped with knowledge of speech acts, politeness strategies, mitigation, and expressive classroom communication.

In-service professional development programs should emphasize the use of polite and mitigated instructional strategies. Workshops, peer observation, and reflective teaching sessions can help teachers adopt interactional approaches that balance classroom authority with learner participation.

Future studies should incorporate learners' perspectives through interviews, focus group discussions, or reflective classroom journals to better understand how students interpret teacher directives, praise, and mitigation strategies.

Comparative research examining pragmatic variation across subject areas, class sizes, urban and rural schools, and teacher experience levels is also recommended.

Researchers are further encouraged to adopt multimodal discourse analysis approaches that examine gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and tone of voice alongside verbal classroom interaction.

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