

## Language Functions as manipulated by Iraqi EFL University Students

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**Abstract** The core of this paper is about language functions as one of the important skills which are used in different daily situations. Besides, it focuses on what difficulties the students of English as a foreign language encounter in producing them. Therefore, the study has undertaken to identify the students' performance in recognizing and producing language functions and find out the causes of the students' errors and their sources. To achieve these objectives, the study has hypothesized that Iraqi university students face difficulty in using language functions. Then, a test has been designed and applied on a sample of (50) students at the Fourth Year, Department of English, College of Education, University of Babylon during the academic year (2015-2016). The results got from collecting and analyzing the students' performance affirm that the students encounter difficulty on the production level but they show efficiency on the recognition one. This is obvious from the number of their correct responses as compared with their incorrect ones on both levels.

**Key words:** Speech Acts; Performatives; Explicit; Felicitous.

### الخلاصة

يتناول هذا البحث وظائف اللغة الإنكليزية كواحد من المهارات المهمة التي تستخدم في مختلف المواقف اليومية. فضلا عن انها تسلط الأضواء على الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلبة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة اجنبيه في انتاج هذه الوظائف. لذلك تهدف الدراسة الى تحري مقدرة الطلبة على تمييز وانتاج هذه الوظائف. علاوة على اكتشاف اخطائهم واسبا بها على مستويي التمييز والانتاج. ولتحقيق اهداف الدراسة صمم الباحث اختبارا تشخيصيا ونفذه على عينه من خمسين طالب وطالبة من طلبة المرحلة الرابعة / قسم اللغة الانكليزية / كلية التربية / جامعة بابل. وبعد جمع البيانات وتحليلها اظهرت النتائج ان انجاز الطلبة على مستوى التمييز افضل من انجازهم على مستوى الانتاج حيث يواجهون صعوبات اكثر على مستوى الانتاج وهذا واضح من نسبة الاجابات الصحيحة مقارنة مع نسبة الاجابات الخاطئة وعلى المستويين التمييز والانتاج.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الافعال الكلامية ، جمل ، صريح ، لبق

## 1- Introduction

**1-1 The Problem :-** Language is used for many different purposes. It is a means to tell others what we know or think we know, and we express our feelings, ask questions, make requests, protest, criticize, insult, apologize, promise, thank, say hello and goodbye. Language seems to have as many different functions as there are occasions and situations for using language, but for all the apparent diversity the basic uses of language are rather limited (Kreidler, 2002:176). Hence, the study tries to highlight the functions of language which are traditionally carried out by the utterances. On the subject of the students of English are concerned, it is thought that the structures used to express language functions may be problematic for them and they may show inefficiency in their use of such skills. Moreover, the form of the utterances they produce don't always go with the speaker's real intention.

## 1-2 Aims of the Study

The study aims at:

1-Identifying the Iraqi EFL university students' performance in recognizing and producing language functions.

2-Finding out the causes of the students' errors and their sources.

### 1-3 The Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

- 1-Most of Iraqi EFL university students face difficulty in using language functions.
- 2-Such students may not always determine the illocutionary acts of their sentences.

### 1-4 The Procedures

To fulfill the aims of the study, the following steps are adopted:

- 1- Presenting material about speech acts and their types.
- 2- Administrating a diagnostic test to find out the students' abilities in using language functions.
- 3-Analyzing the students' errors through the results so as to reach a conclusion.

### 1-5 The Scope of the Study

- 1-The study deals with language functions.
- 2- The sample of the study is restricted to college students at their fourth stage in the Department of English at the College of Education, University of Babylon during the academic year (2015-2016) since they are the most advanced students at the university level.

### 1-6 The Value of the Study

The researchers believe that the present study may be helpful for the teachers and syllabus designers as it can serve to adopt a new technique to reflect the students' capacity in using language functions.

## 2 . Speech Acts in English

### 2-1 The Concept of Speech Act

Austin (1962) as cited in Cutting (2002:15) defined speech act as the action performed in saying something. Speech act theory said that the action performed when an utterance is produced can be analyzed on three different levels. Generally the first level is the words themselves while the second one is what the speaker is doing with his / her words, 'the specific purpose' in his mind. The last level of analysis is the result of the words.

Leech (1983: 199) briefly defines the three different levels performed in every utterance as such:

- a. **Locutionary act:** the act of saying something.
- b. **Illocutionary act:** the act performed in saying something.
- c. **Perlocutionary act:** the act performed by saying something.

This can be demonstrated through the following example:

**1. Would you close the door, please?**

In uttering these words, the speaker performs the locutionary act of stating while the illocutionary act communicates the speaker's intention. Lastly, the perlocutionary act reveals the intended effect on the hearer by the means of the utterance.

Quirk et al., (1985-804) say that utterances of sentences are speech acts, i.e., acts of verbal behavior (spoken or written). So when a person performs a speech act (s) he performs three kinds of acts simultaneously. They speak about what they call " illocutionary force" which indicates the intended effect of an illocutionary act. Occasionally, the speaker explicitly refers to illocutionary act being performed by using performative verbs. For instance:

## 2. I apologize for my remarks.

An apology is a pragmatic category that indicates how the semantic classes of sentences are used in actual utterances. For Yule (1996:47) speech acts are actions performed via utterances and, in English, are commonly given more specific labels, such as apology, complaint, invitation, promise, request and so on. These descriptive terms for different kinds of speech acts apply to the speaker's communicative intention in producing an utterance. Normally, the speaker expects that his / her communicative intention will be recognized by the hearer. In the same direction, Cruse (2000:332) views that communication is not just a matter of expressing propositions. Therefore, a 'naked' proposition cannot communicate anything at all. So to communicate, we must express propositions with a particular illocutionary force, and in doing so we perform particular kinds of action such as stating, promising, warning, ordering, advising and so on, which have come to be called speech acts (See also McCarthy and Carter 2006: 680). Kreidler (2002:176) proposes that speech acts are utterances which can be classified according to the general purpose of the speaker, which, when communication is successful, is also the addressee's interpretation. He clarifies that they have various functions that are independent in form though a single utterance may have overlapping purposes. That is to say, an utterance may occur in more than one illocutionary force. There are straightforward, almost non-technical ways of describing people's linguistic interactions such as greet, apply for, tell what, confirm on appointment- (the acts not the labels) are called speech act. These can be done not only in writing but also in speaking (Griffiths, 2006:148). Finally, Crystal (2008:446) refers to speech act as a term used widely in linguistics to refer to a theory which analyzes the role of utterances in relation to the behavior of speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication. It is not an 'act of speech' (in the sense of parole), but a communicative activity performed through an utterance which consists of three types of act present in every utterance.

### 2-2 Kinds of Speech Acts

Searle (1969) as cited in Holtgraves (2002:14-15) makes an important attempt to classify actions that the speakers can perform with their utterances which probably counts as the most well-known one. He lists five types of speech acts:

**a. Directives:** A directive considers as an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something, e.g., requesting, ordering, questioning, etc.. With these speech acts, a speaker is attempting to change the world in some way with words. Hence, directives show a world-to-words fit; the speaker is attempting to bring the world in line with words.

**b. Assertives:** An assertive purpose is to commit the speaker to something being the case, e.g., asserting, concluding, informing, predicting, reporting, etc.. With assertives a speaker is trying to describe the nature of the world. Hence, one is attempting to get one's words to match the world; assertives represent a words-to-world fit.

**c. Commissives:** A commissive commits the speaker to some future course of action such as warning, promising, threatening, guaranteeing, etc. Like directives, the speaker of a commissive is attempting to alter the world in some way; they show a world-to-words fit. In contrast with directives, it is the speaker's (rather than the hearer's) subsequent actions that will alter the world.

**d. Declaratives:** A declarative counts as an attempt to bring about a change in some state of affairs such as declaring, performing, calling, etc. Declaratives have a double direction of fit (both words-to-world and world-to-words). The point of a declarative (e.g., declaring war) is to alter the state of the

world (world-to-words) by stating that the propositional content matches the state of the world (words-to-world).

**e.Expressives:** An expressive expresses a psychological state of the speaker, e.g., thanking, complaining, greeting, and apologizing. For expressives, there is no fit between words and the world. Instead, the point of an expressive is simply to express the speaker's inner psychological state or to express a particular attitude that is represented by the propositional content of the utterance.

From what has been mentioned above, it is clear that each type of speech act includes particular kinds of actions. To communicate well is to express a given attitude and the type of speech act being performed corresponds to the type of attitude being expressed.

### 3- Performatives

As the first writer on speech act Austin (1962) defines performatives as utterances by which the speaker carries out an action, hence the term speech act. Examples of performatives are utterances such as:

**3-I congratulate you.**

**4- We authorize the payment.**

He observes that not all utterances have 'truth value' and thus makes a distinction between constatives, which are assertions which are either true or false, and the performatives which cannot be characterized as either true or false but are, in Austin's terms, felicitous or infelicitous. As in the examples given, a speech act may contain an explicit performative verb which is usually first person and present tense. A performative can occur with 'hereby'. Austin further states that there are 1000 such verbs in English (cited in Brinton, 2000:301).

Performative verbs are those verbs whose function is to signal specific speech acts and have certain peculiar properties that set them apart from non-performative ones. Generally they can occur with **hereby**.

**5- I hereby declare the bridge open.**

They can be used performatively and descriptively but in the latter use they differ from non-performative verbs.

**6- He ordered them to leave the premises.**

Here the use of **hereby** is ruled out since it is not possible with non-performative verbs. Moreover, the performative use of performative verbs is extremely restricted grammatically. They must be in present and may be either active or passive; if active they must be in the first person (Cruse, 2000: 334-335).

Holtgraves (2002:11) suggests that performatives are a class of utterances which are conventionally used as means of reporting certain actions. They can be either successful or not but are neither true or false.

On the other hand, constatives report or describe the world hence should be amenable to a truth-conditional analysis.

For Hurford et. al., (2007: 263-264) claim a performative verb is one which typically designates a speech act that it performs, i.e. it performs some act and at the same time describes that act. **I promise to repay you tomorrow** is performative because in saying it the speaker actually does what the utterance describes, i.e. **he promises to repay the next day**. That is to say, the utterance both describes and is a promise. They (ibid) draw a distinction between a performative utterance and a constative utterance which makes an assertion (the utterance of a declarative sentence) which is not performative since it does not simultaneously describe and perform the same act as the performative utterance does.

### 3-1 Explicit and Implicit Performatives

Lyons (1977: 728) attracts attention to Austin's (1962:69) distinction between explicit and primary performatives. This can be clarified through the following simple examples:

**7- I will be there at two o'clock.**

**8- I promise to be there at two o'clock.**

The first of these utterances is primary performative whereas the second which contains a performative verb 'promise' is an explicit performative.

Further, an explicit performative is typically more specific in meaning than a primary one although they may be used to perform the same speech act. In sentence (8), in the appropriate circumstances, the speaker can hardly deny since he has made a promise whereas in sentence (7), the speaker was predicting rather than promising. That is to say, he would be there at two o'clock; and the fulfillment of his prediction might be conditioned upon factors over which he had no control (ibid).

Searle (1969) admits that a speaker in using a direct speech act wants to communicate literal meaning which the words conventionally express. This means that there is a direct function between the form and function. Thus an imperative form such as, '**Get me one**', has the function of a request or order.

On the other hand, the indirect speech act is used to communicate a different meaning; the form and the function are not directly related. Thus, '**You get me a tuna and sweet corn one**' might have the function of a request or order meaning '**Get me one**'. He further explains that it is not easy task to classify the utterance in categories of direct or indirect speech acts since much of what are said operates on both levels ( cited in Cutting (2002:19).

Cruse (2006:168) announces that for every illocutionary act, there is a particular illocutionary force which may be explicitly signalled by the use of performative verb such as beg, promise, command, suggest or it may be implicit, in which case it must be inferred, largely on the basis of contextual evidence. For instance, an utterance may function, in different circumstances, as a threat, a promise, a simple statement or a prediction etc.

In this regard, Yule (2006:16) identifies that whenever a speaker uses certain utterances with their suitable functions to perform action, it is described as direct speech act, for example, the utterance '**Can you ride a bicycle?**' is interrogative usually achieving a question to provide information. But when the utterance is used to perform function other than its function, the result is indirect speech act, for example, the utterance, '**Can you pass the salt?**' is not a question asking about someone's ability, in fact, it is used to make a request.

#### **4-Felicity Conditions**

Certain felicity conditions have to be met in order for the speech acts to be successfully performed. As Austin (1962) declares that the felicity conditions are that the context and roles of participants must be recognized by all parties; the action must be carried out completely and the persons have the right intentions (cited in Cutting, 2002:18) Searle (1969:12) shows that the conditions for the felicitous performance of speech act can be seen as constituting the performance of speech act. That is to say, the felicity conditions for a particular speech act must be met appropriately and the meeting of these conditions forms the performance of that speech act. Moreover, speech acts differ in terms of the specifics of the conditions emphasizing their performance, and hence these conditions serve as a framework for comparing different speech acts (cited in Holtgraves, 2002:11). In this context, Yule (1996: 50) states that there are certain expected or appropriate circumstances, technically known as felicity conditions, for the performance of a speech act to be recognized as intended. To clarify this case, the performance will be infelicitous if the speaker is not a specific person in a special context, as in:

#### **9- I sentence you to six month in prison.**

In this case, the specific person is a judge in a courtroom. He further talks about general conditions on the participants, for example, they can understand the language being used. Then there are content conditions, for example, for both a promise and a warning, the content of the utterance must be about future event.

Hurford et al., (2007:281) asserts Yule's definition, therefore, he says that the felicity conditions of an illocutionary act are conditions that must be fulfilled in the situation in which the act is carried out if the act is to be said to be carried out properly or felicitously. For example, one of the felicity conditions for the illocutionary act of ordering is that the speaker must superior to, or in authority over, the hearer. Many linguists agree that for a particular illocutionary act to perform normally, it is typically that there are certain contextual conditions that must be satisfied for a speech act to be properly performed (also known as 'happiness conditions'). Cruse (2006:62) briefly groups them like this:

- a- Preparatory conditions define an appropriate setting for the act, including the speaker's intentions and qualifications.
- b- Sincerity conditions require the speaker to be sincere. For instance,

someone congratulating someone must feel pleasure at the person's good luck or success.

c- Essential conditions define the essential nature of the speech act. For instance, if someone makes a promise, he/she must intend his/her utterance to be carried out.

**5- The Test**

According to Lado, (1961:32) a good test is one which actually measures what is intended to measure. Ingram, (1968:70) affirms that a test is only worth having if it measures accurately what a tester wants it to measure. As any other type of measurement, a test has to do with the consistency with which it measures the same thing at any time ( Harrison, 1893:11).

According to this information a test has been designed to discover the ability of the university students to master language functions. The study involves (50) students chosen randomly from Department of English, College of Education for Human science, University of Babylon. The test consists of two questions. The first one is constructed to measure the students' responses at the recognition level.It includes (10) items. The students are asked to tick the correct items.

The second question is put to measure the students' production in using language functions. It also consists of (10) items and the students are required to respond to each one. The face validity of the test is insured by exposing the test to a jury and the method adopted to estimate the reliability of the present study isKurder- Richardson. This method has the following formula:

$R = N / N-1 (m( N-m) / NX^2)$ , Where **R** represents reliability, **N** represents the number of items in the test, **m** represent the means of the test scores and **X** represent the standard deviation of the test scores.

**5 -1 Results of the Test**

This subsection is devoted to discussing the results of the test which reflect the extent to which the students have the ability to reply to different language functions.These results are necessary to verify or refute the hypotheses of the current study.

**5-1-1 Students' Performance of the First Question**

The first question measures the students' performance at therecognition level. As it has been mentioned in Section (5), the student are asked to choose the correct item. The results obtained on each item are illustrated in the following table:

**Table (1) Students' Responses at the Recognition level in Question (1)**

.of NoItems	No. of CorrectResponses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided items	%
1	45	90	5	10		
2	42	84	8	16		
3	42	84	8	16		
4	30	60	19	38	1	2
5	22	44	27	54	1	2
6	33	66	11	22	6	12
7	39	78	10	20	1	2
8	38	76	11	22	1	2
9	31	62	18	36	1	2
10	31	62	17	34	2	4
<b>Total</b>	353	70.6	134	26.8	13	2.6

The table above shows that the total number of the correct responses is (353, 70. 6),whereas the total number of the incorrect responses (**including the avoided items**) is (147, 29.4).The highest percentage of the correct responses is (90%) in item (1). This result reveals that the students are knowing a lot about the structure of this item, whereas the lowest percentage of the correct responses is

(44) in item (5). From this rate, we infer that the students do not have the necessary skills to answer this item.

### 5-1-2 Students' Performance of the Second Question

Question two measures the performance of the students at the production level. The students are requested to respond to each item. The students' responses on each item are shown in Table (2) below:

**Table (2) Students' Responses at the production level in Question (2)**

.of NoItems	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided items	%
1	33	66	15	30	2	4
2	33	66	15	30	2	4
3	15	30	32	64	3	6
4	10	20	37	74	3	6
5	24	48	19	38	7	14
6	13	26	31	62	6	12
7	20	40	24	48	6	12
8	12	24	36	72	2	4
9	31	62	16	32	3	6
10	9	18	26	52	15	30
<b>Total</b>	200	40	251	50.2	49	9.8

The table above indicates that the total number of the correct responses is (200, 40.0), whereas the total number of the incorrect responses (**including the avoided items**) is (300, 60.0).

The highest percentage of the correct responses is (66%) in items (1) and 2). This result shows that the students are having good knowledge of these items, whereas the lowest percentage of the correct responses is (18%) in item (9). From this rate, it seems that the students unfamiliar with the structure of this item.

The results of the whole test are demonstrated in Table (3) below which contains both the recognition and production levels.

**Table (3) Students' Total Performance at the Recognition and Production Levels**

Level	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%
<b>Recognition</b>	353	70.6	147	29.4
<b>Production</b>	200	40	300	60
<b>Total</b>	553	55.3	447	44.7

The student' general performance at both the recognition and production levels which appear in Table (3) above reveals that the highest rate of the students' correct responses has stood at ( 553, 55,3 %) which is a high performance rate than that of their incorrect ones which has stood at (447, 44.7%) . This suggests that the students did well in this aspect. Therefore, the hypothesis which says that most of Iraqi EFL face difficulty in using language functions is refuted.

At the production level, the students' non-mastery to produce language functions reflects their incompetence in this area since the total number of their incorrect responses has stood at (300, 60%) which is higher than that of their correct ones which has stood at (200, 40%). Such figures indicate that the students encounter more problems at the production level. Thus, this result gives an assertion to the second hypothesis which reads that such students do not always determine the illocutionary acts of their sentences.

Concerning the types of errors which are made by the largest number of the students can be summarized as follows :

Incorrect arrangement of sentences, no use of punctuation marks, wrong choice of acts, failure to reply in grammatical sentences, giving no responses and lack of agreement between the subject and the verb.

### 5-2 Error Analysis

Error explanation is a difficult task as it requires hypothesizing about the causes of error occurrence. In this area the analyst, can only suggest plausible answers as being explanations of the facts since there may be more than one plausible answer or source ( Bell, 1981:175).

According to the sources of errors, they can be categorized into four types:

1-Interlingual interference whereby the students try to use rules from the negative language before they become familiar with the system of the second language ( Brown, 1987:177), as in:

Item (10), Question (2) the possible answer:

Please, look at the TV progamme.

\* Watch the movie with me.

2. Intralingual transfer whereby the students make use of their prior knowledge of the system of the target language in the process of learning the material of that target language or ignore the rule restriction (ibid: 183), as in:

Item (8), Question 2 the possible answer :

Why are you getting sad?

\* Something wrong.

3-Context of learning refers to the negative influence of certain elements of learning situation, such as, the classroom, the teacher and the textbook which may lead the students to form false concepts about the material (Keshavarz, 199: 112), as in:

Item (3), Question (2) the possible answer:

I don't agree with you. I think it is boring.

\* I am afraid that I 'm not like you.

4. Communication strategies which are selected by the students to fill the gap of their knowledge such as guessing. Approximation and avoidance are another strategies that may lead the students to make errors (Ellis, 2003:340). Its influence can be seen through the students' responses to items (7) and (10), Question (2) which are left with no answers.

### 6-Conclusions

From the results of the test, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The rate of the students' incorrect responses in the whole test, (447, 44,7%), is lower than their correct ones, (553, 55.3%) because the students show efficiency at the part of the test that relates to the recognition level. This refutes the first hypothesis of the present study.
2. At the production level, the students' incorrect responses in Question (2) (300,60%) reveal that the students are unable to use language functions correctly. This validates the second hypothesis of the study.
3. The following factors are behind the rate of the students' incorrect responses at both performance levels:
  - a. Interlingual transfer refers to the students' use the rules of the native language in the production of the target language.
  - b. Intralingual transfer is exemplified through overgeneralization, ignorance of rules restrictions and false concepts.
  - c. Context of learning refers to the classroom, with its teacher and its material.
  - d. Communicative strategies such as guessing, avoidance and approximation indicate the use of language in order to communicate when the linguistic forms are not available to the learner.

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### Appendix 1 The Test

#### Q1: Label the right option:

1. Shall we have a rest? ..... . **a. Not at all.**  
**b. That's a good idea.** **c. Don't mention it.** **d. Thank you.** 2. May I see your identity card?  
 ..... . **a. Never mind.** **b. Do you think so?** **c. Thanks a lots.** **d. Yes, here it is.** 3.  
 See you tomorrow. .... . **a. Welcome.**  
**b. Best of luck.** **c. OK, see you.** **d. What do you want?** 4. How is it going?  
 ..... . **a. Fine thanks.** **b. Nice to see**  
**you.** **c. With pleasure.** **d. You are welcome.** 5. Could I have another piece,  
 please? ..... . **a. So do I.** **b. Neither do I.** **c. Yes, it is.**  
**d. Please do.** 6. What about your father's health? ..... .  
**a. See you around.** **b. Bad luck.** **c. Pretty good.** **d. Thank you.**  
 7. Please take a seat. .... . **a. I apologize.**  
**b. Good luck.** **c. Yes, thank you.** **d. See you later.** 8. I am sorry. .... .  
**a. Not at all.** **b. Excuse me.** **c. Thank you.**  
**d. Don't mention it.** 9. .... . Thanks a lot.  
**a. Yes, of course.** **b. All right.** **c. Congratulations!** **d. Yes, it is.**

10. ....? Completely. a. What about  
you? **b. Are you sure?** **c. What's wrong?** **d. What** **happened?**

**Q2: Reply to the following:**

1. You want to know the way to the Public Library. Ask somebody to lead you.
2. You are invited to a friend's wedding. How would you apologize.
3. Someone asks your idea about a sport he likes. You disagree with him.
4. Your sister is on a diet and asks for advice about fruit. What do you suggest?
5. Colleague of you has won the first prize. Congratulate him.
6. You want to ask your friend about the job he would like to do after graduation.
7. Your friend has got a temperature and feels shivery. Advise him.
8. You want to know why your neighbour seems sad.
9. Your car isn't working well. Ask the electrician to fix it.
10. You wish to call your classmate's attention at television set.

**Appendix 2**  
**The Possible Answers**

**Q1:**

1. **b.** That's a good idea.
2. **d.** Yes, here it is.
3. **c.** Ok, see you.
4. **a.** Fine thanks.
5. **d.** Please do.
6. **c.** Pretty good.
7. **c.** Yes, thank you.
8. **d.** Don't mention it.
9. **c.** Congratulations!
10. **b.** Are you sure ?

**Q2:**

1. I wonder if you can tell me the way to the Public Library.
2. I am sorry. I can't. I have an appointment tomorrow.
3. I don't agree with you. I think it is boring.
4. You have to eat some apples.
5. Congratulations!
6. What would you like to work after leaving university.
7. You must see a doctor.
8. Why are you getting sad?
9. Excuse me. Can you fix my car, please ?
10. Please, look at the TV programme.