

Teaching ideas

A-level English Language and Literature 7707

Dramatic Encounters: Speech acts

Introduction

These teaching ideas can be used with students when exploring the types of speech acts given to character and the effects of these. They offer students the opportunity to explore the nature of different speech acts and their significance in relation to the overall focus of 'conflict', and how understanding these is important to interpreting key aspects of dramatic discourse, the themes, characterisation and the links with contextual factors. They also encourage students to think about how the playwright represents natural speech features, show characters' asserting power through the writer's choice of speech acts.

The suggested activities are intended to span two lessons lasting one hour each.

Learning objectives

Students will:

- define speech acts and recognise the different types of speech acts
- explore how playwrights use speech acts to craft characteristics of conflict, for characterisation and to link to the key themes of the play
- evaluate the significance of different speech acts in their use within the play and their likely interpretative effects, as well as the influence of contextual factors.

Prior knowledge needed

Students should have some knowledge of the following:

- language levels
- how playwrights represent natural speech features
- power – how it is presented, negotiated and shifts
- aspects of stagecraft and dramatic conventions.

Lesson preparation

Teachers will need the following resources:

- **lesson 1:** mini-whiteboards, definitions of speech acts and examples (PowerPoint, IWB or written on board), role play scenarios for each pair of student
- **lesson 2:** A3/poster paper to note down group feedback, 'force' table presented via PowerPoint, IWB or written on board
- arrangement of tables suitable for collaborative pair work.

Activities

Lesson 1

- **Starter:** give students the following sentence, '*it's warm in here*' in the context of a student coming into the classroom for a lesson. Ask them to write down what functions this might have, or its different possible interpretations. For example, as an *indirect request* (to open the window), an *indirect refusal* (to not open the window because of the cold outside) or as a *complaint* (that someone should already have opened the window).

Discuss in terms of establishing the three elements of a speech act:

- propositional meaning (its literal meaning)
- illocutionary meaning (its social function eg a request, a refusal, a complaint)
- perlocutionary meaning (the effect of what is said) – *someone opens the window*.
- **Activity 1:** Based on Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) theory, Cohen (1996) suggests five categories of speech acts.
- Give students this table which includes a definition and a description of the speech acts and the typical verbs used to perform them.

Representatives	Directives	Expressives	Comissives	Declaratives
the speaker is committed to the truth of the proposition	the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something	the speaker expresses an attitude about a state of affairs	the speaker is committed to a (future) course of action	the speaker alters the outward status or condition of an object or situation, solely by making the utterance
<i>assertions</i> <i>claims</i> <i>reports</i>	<i>suggestions</i> <i>requests</i> <i>commands</i>	<i>apologies</i> <i>complaint</i> <i>thanks</i>	<i>promises</i> <i>threats</i> <i>offers</i>	<i>decrees</i> <i>declarations</i>
examples of verbs: affirm, deny, believe, conclude, report	examples of verbs: command, dare, challenge, ask, , insist, request,	examples of verbs: apologize, deplore, thank, congratulate, regret, welcome	examples of verbs: swear, vow, guarantee, pledge, promise	examples of verbs: baptize, sentence, resign

- Ask the students, in pairs, to discuss situations where they would use the different types of speech acts, or actual ones they can remember. They should write down examples and share with the whole group. (Alternatively the could experiment with different contexts/situations for one speech act eg promises in marriage service, to teachers about homework or parents about tidiness, politicians and elections promises etc.)

- **Activity 2:** Give students the 'scenario' cards. Give one situation (there are two for each speech act) to each pair. (These can be doubled up depending on the group size or further situations could be added.) In pairs, the students role play one of the scenarios and record the conversations they have in response to these. These should be no longer than a minute. They then transcribe these and then identify the speech features they have used and explore the strategies they have used for complaints, requests or refusals. (They could use the transcription conventions used in the *AQA Anthology: Paris* for familiarity.)

- Complaints

You visit a shop where you bought a T-shirt recently. It has got holes in it.	You have ordered a meal. It has arrived after a long wait but it is cold.
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- Requests

You have got a test back from your teacher. You think that they have missed giving you marks that would result in you getting a higher grade.	You want to rearrange a hair appointment as you have been given the opportunity to go to a theme park for the day instead.
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- Refusals

Your grandmother has tickets for a concert and wants to you to go with her. It's going to be attended by all her friends and you don't like the music.	Your friend has a spare ticket to a gig. It will cost you £50 and you think it's too expensive. It's your friend's 18 th birthday on the same day as the gig.
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- Get each pair of students to join up with the pair(s) who have the same speech act as them, but a different situation. Ask them to identify and list the similarities and differences in the speech features and strategies used.

Plenary and preparation for next lesson

- Plenary placemat – students write down an example of a speech act and identify what type of act it is (eg a commissive, expressive etc.)
- For the next lesson, students will look over the feedback from Activity 2 and consider the impact of contextual factors (age, relationship etc) on the ways that speakers behaved in the role plays.

Lesson 2

- **Starter:** using their preparation for the lesson and the transcripts and lists of similarities/differences, students explore the impact of the following contextual factors on the realisation of speech acts:
 - social status
 - gender
 - age
 - social distance
 - culture
 - personality
 - (time period – they could reflect on how the language choices might have been different in the past and associated social/historical factors).
- **Activity 1:** introduce students to the notion of *felicity conditions* (the set of contextual conditions which are needed if a speech act is going to work). In the first lesson, they explored the elements of a speech act, but they could now be introduced to ideas about *force*.

Act performed by speaking	Speech act/ illocutionary force	Your room is a disgrace. Tidy your room now.
Intended effect as a consequence of performing a speech act	Intended perlocutionary force/ effect	The room is tidied.
Actual effect caused by the act	Actual perlocutionary force/ effect	A refusal or laughter.

- You could also link speech acts to grammatical structures eg questions (interrogatives), command (imperatives) and statements (declaratives). It is worth also exploring some of the complexities eg 'you can shut the door' which can be seen as a statement until the context is given, for example a teacher speaking to late student where the illocutionary force is more that of a command or in another context where it may be a question. Give the students extracts from the play they are studying. (If there are film / TV versions of the play, these selected extracts or scenes could be shown.) Ask them to explore:
 - the context of the extract such as where it occurs in the play, the relationship between the characters, information given in stage directions etc)
 - the speech acts being presented
 - what this says about the characters, their relationships, power and conflict, and the events of the play
 - any mismatch between the intended effects and actual effects and interpretations of these.

Further work

- A-level students could begin to think about possible areas of exploration for their NEA (it would be possible to explore in detail the fictional representations of speech acts in other plays and then do some comparative work with non-literary material such as transcripts, TV programmes or how speech acts are represented in political speeches or in election manifestos).

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