

# Teaching Turn-Taking Rules and Pragmatic Principles to Empower EFL Students and Enhance Their Learning in Speaking Modules

O. F. Elkommos

**Abstract**—Teaching and learning EFL speaking modules is one of the most challenging productive modules for both instructors and learners. In a student-centered interactive communicative language teaching approach, learners and instructors should be aware of the fact that the target language must be taught as/for communication. The student must be empowered by tools that will work on more than one level of their communicative competence. Communicative learning will need a teaching and learning methodology that will address the goal. Teaching turn-taking rules, pragmatic principles and speech acts will enhance students' sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence together with discourse competence. Sociolinguistic competence entails the mastering of speech act conventions and illocutionary acts of refusing, agreeing/disagreeing; emotive acts like, thanking, apologizing, inviting, offering; directives like, ordering, requesting, advising, and hinting, among others. Strategic competence includes enlightening students' consciousness of the various particular turn-taking systemic rules of organizing techniques of opening and closing conversation, adjacency pairs, interrupting, back-channeling, asking for/giving opinion, agreeing/disagreeing, using natural fillers for pauses, gaps, speaker select, self-select, and silence among others. Students will have the tools to manage a conversation. Students are engaged in opportunities of experiencing the natural language not as a mere extra student talking time but rather an empowerment of knowing and using the strategies. They will have the component items they need to use as well as the opportunity to communicate in the target language using topics of their interest and choice. This enhances students' communicative abilities. Available websites and textbooks now use one or more of these tools of turn-taking or pragmatics. These will be students' support in self-study in their independent learning study hours. This will be their reinforcement practice on e-Learning interactive activities. The students' target is to be able to communicate the intended meaning to an addressee that is in turn able to infer that intended meaning. The combination of these tools will be assertive and encouraging to the student to beat the struggle with what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. Teaching the rules, principles and techniques is an act of awareness raising method engaging students in activities that will lead to their pragmatic discourse competence. The aim of the paper is to show how the suggested pragmatic model will empower students with tools and systems that would support their learning. Supporting students with turn taking rules, speech act theory, applying both to texts and practical analysis and using it in speaking classes empowers students' pragmatic discourse competence and assists them to understand language and its context. They become more spontaneous and ready to learn the discourse pragmatic dimension of the speaking techniques and suitable content. Students showed a better performance and a good motivation to learn. The model is therefore

suggested for speaking modules in EFL classes.

**Keywords**—Communicative competence, EFL, empowering learners, enhance learning, speech acts, teaching speaking, turn-taking, learner centered, pragmatics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

TEACHING language in EFL classes is a challenging task, since the student is learning the language in a context where the foreign language is not spoken in the everyday community. The second challenge is that there are differences between the two languages, especially if their origin is different. For example, English is of a Latin origin, while Arabic is not. The challenge is even stronger for both instructor and learner when the L2 target skill is the speaking skill or module which is a productive skill. For EFL students, receptive skills (reading and listening) are believed to be less challenging. The teacher's challenge is to select interactive teaching techniques by relating discourse analysis (DA) to teaching discourse [1]-[5] and to provide students with tools drawn from DA that would support their EFL teaching and learning in context [6]-[8]. The student's challenge is to use these tools and to manipulate learning strategies [9] that would develop their speaking skill. A third challenge is to acquire the interpretive competence [10] of speech and speech event as part of acquiring a communicative competence (CC) [11] by which he/she can produce fluent appropriate speech in language interaction. Through a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach [12]-[14], students should acquire a CC of discourse. As [15] explains, simply "creating a discourse... it will only be completed when it is received and interpreted by... participants". Techniques of teaching speaking are now more developed than the earlier methods reviewed in many previous studies and research, e.g. [16]. The new approach to teaching EFL modules is to follow a student/learner-centered approach [17], [18] and a technology enhanced teaching and learning. Both these approaches support developing the EFL learner skill [19]-[23].

Pragmatic and discourse competence are essential components of EFL/ESL student CC (see Fig. 1).

Pragmatic discourse competence entails an understanding of what is being said in a particular context and the ability to know and to choose what to say when. This competence is one of the important aspects of language learning. Therefore, it must be part of the teaching in EFL/ESL classes in general and in the teaching of speaking in particular.

O. F. Elkommos is with the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, British University in Egypt, Ph.D.in Applied Linguistics (phone: 00202-01222434381; e-mail: oelkommos@bue.edu.eg).



Fig. 1 CC components

## II. PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE AND THE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN EFL

### A. Teaching Pragmatics to EFL Students

Although there were arguments about whether pragmatics can be taught to L2 students [24], [25] and about how it can be taught [26], there were stronger assertions that pragmatics must be explicitly taught [27]. Pragmatic competence is an essentially significant competence in EFL classes. Reference [28] emphasizes the importance of pragmatic competence in the language teaching and learning process: ‘For avoiding miscommunication caused by cultural difference, being familiar with diverse cultures and pragmatics is essential. Studies of pragmatics emphasize the appropriateness in intercultural discourses. Through learning pragmatics, the English speakers’ intercultural communication competence should be raised. Their pragmatic competence would be better because of knowing cultural differences and being aware of the significance in appropriate languages. In other words, the teaching and learning of pragmatics would release the difficulties of international communications for both native and non-native speakers [28]. In fact, pragmatic competence includes more than mere cultural differences as part of the varying contextual change. Therefore, the teaching of pragmatics should also include the teaching of speech acts.

Research done in the area of pragmatic competence [29], [30] showed a necessity of the teaching of pragmatics and particularly the teaching of the speech acts theory (SAT).

### B. Teaching Speech Acts in EFL Classes

The pair books rich with EFL classroom teaching material [31], [32] are useful and suggestive of the explicit teaching of the speech acts and turn taking techniques. Speech acts, like giving advice, refusal of invitation, and expressing opinion, were used as teaching material. Making complaints were also used in [32], as well as in an earlier work: a student centered study [33]. Complaints are considered a ‘positive strategy’ in L2 classes, a tool to teach students how to negotiate meaning. Reference [34], among others, emphasizes the importance of teaching pragmatics including speech acts and turn taking tools, *explicitly*, in the EFL classroom [8], [25], [34], [35]. As [29] describes, the instructor can use the speech act sets (SAS) technique that would involve the teaching of speech acts.

“These SASs include strategic options, linguistic moves, and semantic formulas that allow users to accomplish a given function. They consist of patterns of output in an effort to establish frameworks and options

typically employed for specific purposes. As this article relates to EFL learners and teachers in particular, English-based SASs are used; however, SAS patterns may vary by language and culture” (see Fig. 2) [29].

Another study also employed the SAS method technique of teaching speech acts as ritualized scenarios of speech-act sets rather than single acts, described as

“ritualized scenarios of speech-act sets rather than single acts... speech-act-sets, apologies, ... demonstrate a procedure which can be used to identify, analyze, describe and cross-culturally compare the validity of speech-act-set theory” [36].

More specifically, other research that studied and examined speech acts use in the classroom interaction and therefore were included in the EFL teaching [36], [37].

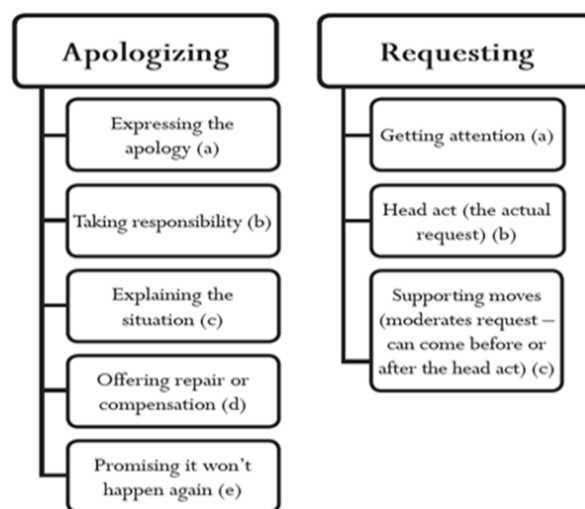


Fig. 2 Apologizing and requesting in [29]

In [38], the directive speech act was studied with a clarification of the power scale of the act. In a later study [39], commissives and directive were studied and explicitly taught. The classification of the different speech act categories (see Fig. 3) should be part of the teaching techniques in the speaking classes. This explicit teaching will enhance the students’ learning and will be an eye opening method providing them with the suitable tool.

In [41], [42], text books were studied, examined and used for the development of material for the speaking modules. The research examined the teaching of apologies, and other speech act teaching as well as the conversational techniques related, e.g. greetings [35] and closing of conversations [42]. The use of speech acts is related to the use of turn taking techniques. Reference [35]

“has long realized that knowing the words of a language is only part of speaking it. Knowing how to interpret a communicative act is equally important, and it needs to be taught explicitly. ...a regular part of the class experience”.

Part of the effect of the speech act is how the hearer

interprets and receives the act. It is always believed that people at talk, the same goes for students in class, are cooperative and want the conversation to be successful, understood and would have an effect on both speaker and listener. The speech act is an act if/when it is received and interpreted as per the intention of the speaker. In EFL

instruction, one will

“need information on this important speech act and instructional strategies for use in the classroom to help teachers equip their students with a critical component to successful interactions” [35].

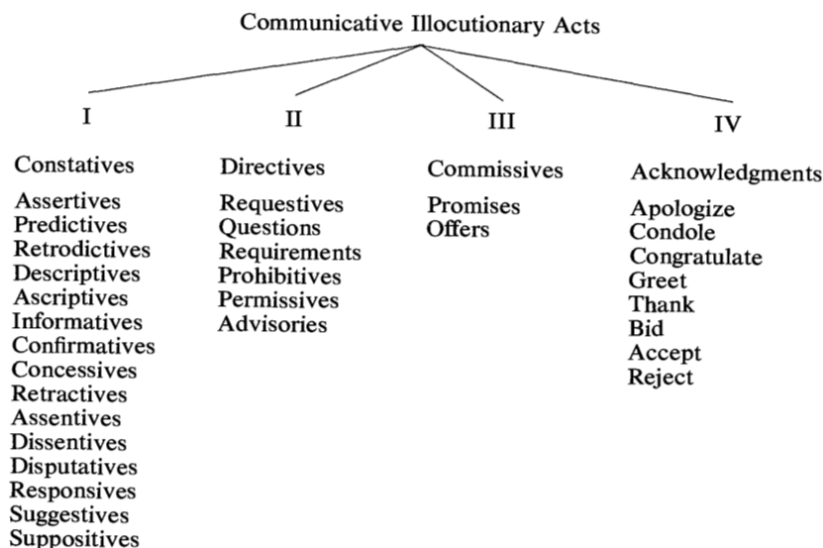


Fig. 3 Speech Acts/ illocutionary acts' classification, in [40]

### C. Teaching Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) and Student's Learning Strategies: a Pragmatic Perspective

Reference [43] formulated the theory of cooperation in communication:

“We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE. On the assumption that some such general principle as this is acceptable, one may perhaps distinguish four categories under one or another of which will fall certain more specific maxims and submaxims, the following of which will, in general, yield results in accordance with the Cooperative Principle. ... I call these categories Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner” (See also Appendix 1 [70], [71]) [43].

The Cooperative Principle (CP) is a universal principle and, therefore, is absolutely important for EFL students, and learners of any other languages. Learners are longing to acquire a spontaneous fluent spoken English. Learning to speak a language and being able to communicate using it, one needs to understand the general principles of discourse in general and the peculiarities of the target language. In conversation in a breaking of any of the maxims, conversational implicatures [44] on the part of both reader and speaker becomes activated so that they both understand the intents of their interlocutors. CP is a universal principle of

intended and agreed cooperation at talk. This should be explained and explicitly taught to learners. Learning the principles and rules of CP is an awareness raising method [45]-[47].

### III. TEACHING TURN TAKING RULES TO EFL /ESL STUDENTS

Conversational DA in the teaching of the speaking modules is part of the actual teaching and training of learners on the use to the language. While teaching SAT and CP is all about the teaching of what to say: content, meaning, messages and ideas, the teaching of ‘the simplest systematics of organizing turn taking in conversation is more or less the mechanics of the conversation rules [48]. The pragmatic discourse competence involves more the content: thoughts and the intentions. The turn taking rules are more of the form by which the content of the message is transferred. They are all intrinsic to the process of teaching and learning speaking to EFL learners.

Turn taking mechanism is a systematic logical system that is governed by the logic of communication and is also universal. It becomes language specific when it comes to and relates to the socio-cultural aspect of the language.

“Turn-taking in conversations not only helps us apportion the floor, but also serves a symbolic function of helping the interactants to define their relationship. The way in which this ritual is managed by one interactant will affect the judgments made about him or her by the other interactant... it is the management of the small, unnoticed, ritualistic behaviors that has the

greatest effect upon our attributions about others; it may be these behaviors that determine whether or not we are successful interactants" [49].

It is, therefore, important for the teacher of speaking should teach and the learner should acquire both the macro turn taking technique as well as the smaller unnoticed and sometimes untaught techniques like the use of signals of back channeling, fumbling (e.g. 'the starters', 'the let-me-explains', 'the underscorers', 'the cajolers', and 'the asides' [1]), endearment, and reassurance, among others. These might differ sometimes from one culture to the other. Utterances are speech acts and need to abide by the CP rules.

#### A. The Hierarchical Levels of Interactional Structure of Turn-Taking in Conversations

In [50], the five hierarchical levels of discourse are identified and defined (see Table I).

TABLE I  
HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF TURNS IN CONVERSATION [50]

The Transaction	consists of one or more exchanges dealing with one single topic; one or more transactions make a conversation
The Exchange	is the smallest interactive unit consisting, minimally, of two turns produced by two different speakers
The Turn	is everything the current speaker says before the next speaker takes over; it consists of one or more moves
The Move	is what the speaker does in a turn in order to start, carry on and finish an exchange, i.e. the way s/he interacts; it consists of one or more acts
The Act	signals what the speaker intends, what s/he wants to communicate; it is the smallest interactive unit

Becoming aware of the structural units in conversation is important for speakers and learners so that the mechanism in which these units are used is of use for interlocutors, speaker and listener.

#### B. Interactional Strategies of Turn-Taking

The units are used within an interactional strategy described as the turn-taking system or mechanism [48], [51], summarized in Appendix 2, and explained in [52]. These need to be taught to EFL students. The instructor will need to use

the different types of important turn exchange strategies in the classroom practice. The strategies were studied by researchers in classroom interaction e.g. [53] and in other contexts as reviewed before. The research objective was "to examine how signals of conversation strategies enhance the quality of speeches and conversations regarding the choice of the strategies (e.g., asking, proposing, checking, wait-time, turn taking, etc.)... (T)his study suggests the explicit method of teaching conversation strategies in teaching conversations and oral performances" [53].

Some of these strategies are believed to be most essential and basic in the teaching of turn taking to support student learning speaking in EFL modules. The following are some examples.

##### 1. Opening and Closing

It is believed by all instructors and researchers targeting a learner-centered approach to open interactive engaging conversations in the classroom [54]. An explicit teaching of how to open a conversation and how to close them is a target for the speaking modules [55]. One of the most common and most reliable techniques of opening a conversation is asking a yes/ no question. It is a sure to be responded to question, unless a dis-preferred silence occurs, thus breaking the rule of cooperation and implications can be drawn from the nonverbal act of silence (see Table II).

##### 2. Adjacency Pairs

In general, adjacency pairs are opening and closing strategies. They are reviewed and studied by many of the researchers, among which are [56], [46]. Adjacency pairs are two-turn parts like question and answer; greeting and greeting; congratulating and thanking; apologizing and accepting apology; informing and acknowledging; leave-taking and leave-taking; farewell and farewell; summoning and responding; among others. These are an essential part of any teaching of speaking mechanism [56], [57], (see Table II).

TABLE II  
CORRELATING OF CONTENT AND FORM IN ADJACENCY PAIR SECONDS [57]

First Part	Request	Offer/ Invite	Assessment	Question	Blame
<b>Second Parts</b>					
<i>Preferred</i>	Acceptance	Acceptance	Agreement	Expected answer	Denial/admission
<i>Dis preferred</i>	refusal	refusal	Disagreement	Unexpected answer or non-answer	

##### 3. Repair

Self-repair and other-repair are strategies distinct of everyday conversational strategies that are used by speakers and hearers to support cooperatively the mutual understanding of the message in talk. Research done on the repair techniques showed that they must be taught in L2 speaking modules [58]-[60].

"Some advanced learners of a foreign language may have the difficulty of gaining and holding the floor. This is because of lack of command of the turn taking system.

Turn taking is the prominent feature of conversation analysis. Moreover, another strategy which is used to deal with some sort of trouble is repair" [58]-[60].

##### 4. Overlap

Although overlap is a natural thing to occur in conversations, both two part and group events, yet it should be corrected as per the turn-taking rules. The strategy of overcoming overlap should be taught in English language speaking classes. Overlap and its correction might have

different strategies in different cultures. Research done on overlap, e.g. [61], promoted the importance of its instruction.

Back channeling, interruptions, restarts, pre turns, and many other turn-taking strategies were discussed and analysed together with SAT and CP [62], [63].

*C.EFL Classroom Material for Turn Taking Techniques (TTT)*

In several of the previously reviewed material in the present

research, all suggest the explicit teaching of pragmatics, SAT, CP, and Turn-taking rules. In [64], a very thorough description of how turn taking techniques are employed. Moreover, [65] suggested seven steps/ strategies as to what to use and how in a speaking module (see Fig. 4). An online interactive website for the teaching of speaking [66].



Fig. 4 Seven Turn-taking strategies for EFL speaking modules [65]

A model that would integrate all three techniques is suggested as a better development for the teaching speaking in EFL classes.

#### IV. RELATING TTT, SAT, AND CP SOME SUGGESTIONS: A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE MODEL

"An EFL classroom can provide the context and the explicit instruction necessary for learners to begin developing pragmatic competence in English. If our goal as teachers of English is for our students to leave our classrooms with the ability, at least on some level, to communicate successfully in English, then we have to move beyond the bare bones approach to teaching language. We must put flesh and blood on those bones by using English for both classroom management and language instruction and by creating opportunities for students to see, use, review and experience the English

language communicative contexts" [25], [67].

Classroom instruction, online material, learner-centered approach, technology enhanced teaching and learning are the approaches that should be leading the teaching and learning process. The model that will use the three suggested tools: pragmatic perspective, SAT, CP and Turn –Taking rules and strategies, can be of use when they are explicitly taught in the English speaking module for EFL students.

Turn-taking mechanics, rules and techniques are important since they mirror the real everyday conversational language. Each turn is a speech act that the speaker produces in the turn. The speaker intends an illocutionary act that might be received by the hearer who in turn interprets the intention of the speaker. The different contextual situations of the different utterances at talk change the intended meaning. The pragmatic dimension is therefore the tool needed. In conversations the speaker and hearer are cooperating to communicate. The CP is

governing the cooperation and even if it were broken, there is a way to recover it. The interrelation between all the theories, tools and techniques will be a model for the teacher to enlighten students.

#### V.CONCLUSION

“Teaching need not be a teacher oriented activity but a consciousness raising activity engaging students in perception and acquisition of the communicative aspects of discourse” [68]. EFL students, being equipped with the pragmatic discourse tools that support them to acquire a ‘discourse pragmatic competence’, become interpreters and producers of discourse. “Now they are aware and well equipped with the rules. They may be said to have gained an interpretive competence” [69].

#### APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Cooperative Principle (CP) [43], [70], [71]

Appendix 2. Turn-Taking Techniques/Rules [48], [72], [73],

Appendix 3. General Rule for TTT [48], [74], [75].

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