

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN IN-CLASS DEBATES: SPEECH ACTS AND MODIFICATION OF THE ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE

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Abstract

Information technology (IT) professionals are a specific discourse community whose oral communication in English as a second language (ESL) predominates at all levels of workplace activities in the multinational IT sector. Since IT students' pragmatic competence in performing communicative functions is essential for their effective communication in an academic setting and a global work environment, it is important to investigate this aspect of their language systematically and carefully. This paper focuses on IT students' speech acts and the ways they modify the illocutionary force while participating in in-class debates. The analysis revealed that students used a wide range of speech acts and different metadiscourse markers for both increasing and reducing the illocutionary force. The ways IT students used boosters and hedges also reflect how they assume and share their professional knowledge and experience in their discourse community.

Keywords

in-class debates, ESP learners, pragmatic competence, speech acts, illocutionary force, boosters, hedges

1 Introduction

In-class competitive debates between two opposing teams who discuss controversial topics related to their field of study enable English for specific purposes (ESP) learners to develop the ability to collect, organize and critically evaluate information from different sources, clearly communicate ideas, examine and evaluate evidence, and effectively present, consider and refute arguments. Several studies have revealed educational benefits of debates, such as improving communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Colbert & Biggers 1985, Freeley & Steinberg 2009, Ginganotto 2019), enhancing disciplinary (el Majidi et al. 2018) and interdisciplinary learning (Freeley & Steinberg 2009), providing a very unique educational experience, and offering excellent pre-professional training (Colbert & Biggers 1985, Freeley & Steinberg 2009). In an ESP language teaching and learning context, in-class debating is consistent with a learner-centred approach since it encourages authentic interaction between learners as active agents who share their own

knowledge, experience, skills and ideas. Moreover, it facilitates the integration and development of four language skills (el Majidi et al. 2018, Ginganotto 2019). Besides, the communicative demands of debating tasks help learners to produce output of greater syntactic complexity (Duff 1986), accuracy (Duff 1986, Bygate 1987, Long 2014), automate their procedural knowledge and achieve greater fluency (Thornbury 2005, Goh & Burns 2012, Long 2014). Debating controversial issues allows ESP learners to acquire and broaden their disciplinary discourse knowledge, develop rhetorical strategies and a wide range of communicative functions or speech acts, such as asserting, agreeing, disagreeing, reasoning, suggesting, predicting, expressing an opinion and asking for clarification.

Despite the intensive research into speech acts and metadiscourse markers used by native speakers of English (e.g. Bach & Harnish 1979, Van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, Holmes 1984, Searle & Vanderveken 1985, Urbanová 1996, Hyland 1998a, 1998b, 2005, Ajimer 2013, Beeching 2016), there is still a lack of analysis of speech acts of learners of spoken ESL. Most studies focus on individual speech acts, such as requesting, offering and apologizing (e.g. Trosborg 1987, Fukushima 1991, Bergman & Kasper 1993, Cohen & Olshtain 1993, Istifçi 2009), but a comprehensive corpus-based analysis of speech acts of learners of spoken English in university settings is still relatively rare. Empirical research into metadiscourse markers in ESL learners' spoken discourse is even rarer. Müller (2005) and Buysse (2012, 2015, 2017) analyse and compare how native and non-native (German, Dutch, French, Spanish and Chinese) speakers of English use metadiscourse markers *so*, *well*, *you know* and *like*. Gilquin's (2008) study on hesitation markers reveals that, while advanced French-speaking learners of English overuse pauses and other non-lexical devices, they tend to underuse *like*, *I mean*, or *you know* that are important for maintaining fluency. Aijmer's (2011) analysis of similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers of English showed that Swedish learners overused *well* as a fluency device to cope with speech management problems, but they underused it for attitudinal purposes.

While most empirical studies focus on either a particular speech act or metadiscourse marker used by ESL learners in a general academic English context, a more complex and systematic analysis of ESP learners' spoken technical discourse focused on speech acts performance and modification of the illocutionary force is still missing. For this reason, the present paper deals with ESP learners' realization of speech acts and modification of the illocutionary force in online debates related to the field of IT. The research findings might be used for reference for future comparison with similar debates by native speakers. The following research questions were addressed:

- 1) What types of speech acts do IT students use in online debates?
- 2) What communicative functions do the individual speech acts serve in selected stages of the debate?
- 3) How do IT students modify the illocutionary force?

2 Speech acts in argumentative discussions and modification of the illocutionary force

Argumentative discourse is conceived as a social activity, and how the argumentation is analysed depends on the kind of verbal interaction that takes place between the interlocutors in this communication process. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 53) present a model of an argumentative discussion grounded in their pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation that views argumentation as a complex speech act occurring as part of natural language activities and focusing “on the way in which language is used, or should be used, in argumentative practice to achieve communicational and interactional goals”. The model of an argumentative discussion is based on the premise that a difference of opinion is only resolved when the opposing parties reach agreement on the question of whether the standpoints at issue are acceptable or not, which means that one party must be convinced by the argumentation of the other party. In argumentative discussions or online debates, the two parties involved in a difference of opinion attempt to resolve this difference by achieving agreement on the acceptability or unacceptability of the standpoints involved through the conduct of a regulated exchange of views.

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 2004) regard Searle’s speech act theory as the best analytical instrument for dealing with verbal communication involved in argumentative discussions following the pragma-dialectical principles of functionalization, externalization, socialization and dialectification. Functionalization is achieved by treating every language activity as a purposive act. Socialization is achieved by extending the speech act perspective to the level of interaction. Externalization is achieved by capturing the propositional and interactional commitments created by the speech acts performed. And finally, dialectification is achieved by regimenting the exchange of speech acts to an ideal model of an argumentative discussion (for further details, cf. Van Eemeren et al. 2007).

Following Searle’s (1975) taxonomy, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 2004) indicate which types of speech acts can contribute to the resolution of a difference of opinion in the various stages of an argumentative discussion (see Table 1). Assertives may not only serve to express the standpoint that is under discussion, but they also form a part of the argumentation that is advanced to

defend that standpoint, or they can be used to establish the result of the discussion. Directives may serve to challenge the party that has advanced a standpoint to defend that standpoint, to request this party to provide argumentation in support of the standpoint or to request a party to provide a definition or an explanation. Directives such as orders and prohibitions, if they are intended literally, are taboo in a critical discussion. As Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 64) explain, "neither can the party that has advanced a standpoint be challenged to do anything else other than provide argumentation for that standpoint – a challenge to a fight, for example, is not allowed in a critical discussion". Commissives can play different roles in a critical discussion, such as accepting or not accepting a standpoint, accepting the challenge to defend a standpoint, deciding to start a discussion, agreeing to assume the role of protagonist or antagonist, agreeing to the discussion rules, accepting or not accepting argumentation and, when relevant, deciding to start a new discussion. Even though expressives do not play a direct role in a critical discussion because the mere expressing of emotions does not create any commitments for the speaker that are directly relevant to the resolution of a difference of opinion, they may strongly affect the further course of events.

As Table 1 indicates, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984: 109) introduce the term 'usage declaratives' (UDs) as a subtype of declaratives that is not linked to a specific institutional context. These acts may occur in any stage of an argumentative discussion, and they contribute to the resolution of a dispute since they enhance the understanding of other relevant speech acts. The purpose of UD is to ensure mutual comprehension of the interlocutor's speech acts, e.g. *In my view women have a logic of their own for they solve problems by a totally different methods than men. Of course I'm talking now about women in present-day western societies – things were quite different in the past* (ibid.: 116). In order to achieve a perlocutionary act in an argumentative discussion, the illocutionary act must occur so that the listener understands the speaker's speech act. UD such as definitions, specifications, amplification, and explanations may help this illocutionary act to be achieved. Even though Van Eemeren and Grootendorst regard UD as a subtype of declaratives, the communicative functions of explaining, specifying and exemplifying they perform place them in the category of Searle's representatives.

Stage	Type of speech act and its role in the resolution
I	Confrontation
Assertive	Expressing a standpoint
Commissive	Acceptance or non-acceptance of a standpoint Maintaining non-acceptance of a standpoint
(Directive	Requesting a usage declarative)
(Usage declarative	Definition, specification, explanation, clarification, amplification, etc.)
II	Opening
Directive	Challenge to defend the standpoint
Commissive	Acceptance of the challenge to defend the standpoint Agreement on premises and the discussion rules Decision to start a discussion
(Directive	Requesting a usage declarative)
(Usage declarative	Definition, specification, explanation, clarification, amplification, etc.)
III	Argumentation
Directive	Requesting argumentation
Assertive	Advancing argumentation
Commissive	Acceptance or non-acceptance of argumentation
(Directive	Requesting a usage declarative)
(Usage declarative	Definition, specification, explanation, clarification, amplification, etc.)
IV	Concluding
Commissive	Acceptance or non-acceptance of the standpoint
Assertive	Maintaining or retracting a standpoint Establishing the result of the discussion
(Directive	Requesting a usage declarative)
(Usage declarative	Definition, specification, explanation, clarification, amplification, etc.)

Table 1: Distribution of speech acts in an argumentative discussion; adapted from Van Eemeren Grootendorst (2004: 68) and Van Eemeren et al. (2007: 16)

Communicative strategies used for increasing or reducing the illocutionary force are boosting and hedging. Boosters and hedges are considered as complementary devices, so their role in argumentative discussions is to maintain stability between conflictive objectives. Their use can tell us something about the force the speaker uses to make their assertion, and their estimation of the situation. Through hedges, the speaker implies that a statement is based on plausible reasoning rather than on certain knowledge, and it allows the audience certain freedom to dispute it, whereas boosters allow the speaker to negotiate the status of their information, help them to establish its perceived truth by strategically presenting it as consensually given (cf. Holmes 1984, Myers 1989, Hyland 1998a). Hyland (1998a: 354) observes that “both hedges and boosters work to balance objective information, subjective evaluation and interpersonal

negotiation”, which can be a “powerful persuasive factor in gaining acceptance for claims”. Van Eemeren et al. (2007) use the alternative terms “propositional attitude indicators” for boosters and “force modifying expressions” for hedges, and they classify them as “indicators of standpoints”. In argumentative discussions, the following criterion must be adopted for considering the performance of an assertive speech act as advancing a standpoint: “An assertive may be considered a standpoint if it is clear that the speaker supposes (or may be expected to suppose on the basis of the listener’s response) that the assertive is not immediately acceptable to the listener” (ibid.: 29).

3 Methodology and data

3.1 In-class debates in the course ‘English for Information Technology’

The present paper is based on the analysis of in-class debates in the course ‘English for IT’ taught at the Department of Foreign Languages at Brno University of Technology. Students are always divided into two teams (the affirmative team and the negative team) who discuss a particular proposition related to IT. Prior to a debate, a coin is tossed and the team that wins the toss may choose which side of the proposition they wish to defend. Students have two weeks to prepare for the debate, which includes defining their roles within each team, conducting a literature review, collecting evidence and examples, critically evaluating different sources and establishing an argumentative framework. The affirmative team starts the debate and must advocate everything required by the proposition itself. The role of the negative team is to oppose the idea presented in the proposition. The main stages of the debate are the following: 1) affirmative team’s speech (team members should choose one main speaker or two main speakers who take turns); 2) cross-questioning when the negative team tries to rebut or cast doubts upon the affirmative team’s argumentation and the affirmative team defends, deepens and completes their arguments; 3) negative team’s speech when the debaters present, rebuild and complete their counterarguments; 4) cross-questioning where the affirmative team tries to rebut or cast doubts upon the negative team’s argumentation and the negative team defends, deepens and completes their arguments; 5) affirmative team’s conclusion, and 6) negative team’s conclusion.

Either debater may question and/or answer at will during the cross-questioning stage. During the concluding stage, one speaker from each team signposts and analyses the key clashes of the debate from the viewpoint of their team and tries to persuade the audience that their team has defended the motion with its case. The time allocated for the affirmative/negative team’s speech is two minutes, one

cross-questioning stage should last four minutes, and each team has one minute to conclude the debate.

3.2 Participants' background and learner corpus

A total of 34 students (16 Czechs, 18 Slovaks) in the first year of a bachelor's study programme at the Faculty of Information Technology at Brno University of Technology participated in eight debates that lasted 131 minutes in total. The students' English language level is B2 according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). The debates were recorded in Microsoft Teams during the summer semester of 2021 when all university courses were taught online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. An advantage of recording students' debates online is the high sound quality of the recordings since the recording of in-class debates is often adversely affected by a lot of background noise. Moreover, students are used to communicating face-to-face online via Skype, FB Messenger, WhatsApp Messenger or Google Duo in their everyday life, so they act more naturally than with a video camera in the classroom, which seems to be rather intrusive due to students' intense awareness of its presence.

Students discussed the following propositions related to their study programme focused on IT:

- 1) Human labour should be replaced with artificial intelligence,
- 2) The Dark Net should be regulated like the rest of the Internet,
- 3) Closed platform (iOS) is better than open platform,
- 4) Firefox is better than Google Chrome.

Each of the above-mentioned propositions was discussed twice by two different teams, so the learner corpus consists of eight debates in total. Transcripts of all debates were uploaded and analysed in the corpus manager and text analysis software *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al. 2004). The whole corpus of IT students' online debates includes eight transcribed debates, 20,052 tokens comprising 17,016 words, and I as a transcriber identified some 1,110 sentences.

3.3 Identification and analysis of speech acts and metadiscourse markers

Two methodological approaches were used to identify and analyse speech acts and modification of the illocutionary force: a corpus analysis and a manual analysis. The corpus analysis of transcribed texts was mainly used for the identification and analysis of metadiscourse markers. The aim was to examine boosters and hedges which contribute to the modification of the illocutionary force and their functional and distributional patterns in the data under investigation. In some cases, there were also different meanings of boosters and hedges (e.g. *just, like, I think, of course, you know, kind of*) which had to be assessed manually.

The manual analysis was primarily used for the identification of speech acts since some of the identified forms found through *Sketch Engine* can perform more than one speech act.

In order to identify different kinds of speech act expressions in the corpus, it was necessary to determine a taxonomy as an organizing principle according to which speech acts will be classified. The approach was mainly grounded in Searle's (1975) speech act theory, focused primarily on the cognitive state of the speaker, combined with some elements from Bach and Harnish's (1979) more refined taxonomy, based on the speaker-listener relationship, and adapted for the context of online debates based on Van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (2004) model of argumentative discussions. The analysis focused on four categories of speech acts: representatives (including UDs), directives, commissives and expressives.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Occurrence of speech acts in IT students' debates

In this section, the speech acts performed by IT students will be examined with regard to their basic linguistic features. Besides, different metadiscourse markers employed to modify the illocutionary force will be discussed. To answer the first research question, I analysed and classified 1,105 speech acts. The statistical outline of different speech acts in all eight debates is presented in Table 2.

Speech acts	Frequency	Relative frequency
Representatives	872	78.91
Directives	165	14.93
Commissives	10	0.91
Expressives	58	5.25
Total	1,105	100.00%

Table 2: Frequency of different speech acts in debates

Table 2 shows that the most frequent speech acts were representatives (78.91%), which is obvious since students committed themselves more strongly or less strongly to the acceptability of a proposition, i.e. a statement that asserts the value or worth of something or that some course of action should be followed. Representatives occurred mainly in the stages of debates where both teams (affirmative and negative) delivered their opening speeches that made a case for adopting the resolution and their closing speeches to establish the result of the debate.

When defending one approach to the debate proposition – whether the negative or affirmative side – students undertook to act as advocates of only one point of view in all stages of the debate. For this reason, they used representative speech acts to perform different communicative functions, such as asserting, reasoning, agreeing, disagreeing, confirming, explaining, reporting, stating and hypothesizing. As Table 3 demonstrates, the most frequent communicative function was asserting (41.86%) where different boosters served as propositional attitude indicators of standpoints in the debate (see Example 1).

(1) *Oh well yes **we do believe** that many people can become better with this system.*

Using a speaker-oriented attitudinal booster *I/we believe*, a speaker not only makes it obvious that they believe in the information they are providing, but they also assume that their opponents need this extra information to understand that the assertion involves their subjective notion (cf. Van Eemeren et al. 2007). A highly assertive booster *really* signals the speaker’s certainty and conviction. An inclusive first-person plural pronoun *we do believe* and *we all know* implies respect and open-mindedness toward the audience and acts as a positive politeness device because it links the speaker and the audience as members of the same discourse community (cf. Hyland 2005, Fahnestock 2011, Dontcheva-Navratilova et al. 2020). In Example 1, students use inclusive *we* when referring to shared knowledge related to their field of study (Android operating system), thus stressing the common ground and suggesting the need to adequately meet the audience’s expectations of inclusion and disciplinary solidarity. A discourse-organizing booster *the more... the quicker* emphasizes the content of the message, thus helping the listeners to focus on the parts of the message which are important.

A special type of representative speech acts that can be found in some debates are rhetorical questions. Chen (2011: 611) points out that rhetorical questions “can perform a wide range of indirect assertives including asserting, blaming, protesting and complaining, etc. and indirect directives such as advising, requesting, commanding, and warning”. On the other hand, Weigand (2010: 183) claims that the rhetorical questions are “virtually representative speech acts” since the potential reply would have to be based on arguments. The rhetorical questions that occurred in the opening speeches of the debates fulfil the communicative function of asserting because, as illustrated in Example 2, the speaker does not expect the opposing team to answer his sequence of rhetorical questions directly, but he wants to engage the listeners and persuade them to agree with his proposition. The opening speech ends with a commissive speech

act of promising which indicates the acceptance of the challenge to defend the standpoint.

- (2) ... *So should we replace human labour with machinery AIs and robots? What are the consequences of such a decisive action? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Are there any risks involved? Today we will be discussing that and much... much more.*

The second most common communicative function of representative speech acts was reasoning (13.19%). By a process of reasoning, students tried to reach a conclusion they wanted their opponents to accept. Reasoning enabled them to establish their grounds, support their claims, weaken their opponents' claims and produce new conclusions. The most common linking devices were *because* (see Example 3), *because of* and *as*.

- (3) *And um... this is **because** closed platforms forbid third-party products.*

The communicative function of confirming (9.98%) was mainly used in the passages with frequent turn-taking, characteristic of minimal response times or no overlaps, where students confirmed that they can hear or see each other, are ready to start listening and asking questions, or indicated that they understand the meaning of what was communicated. The common expressions they used for this purpose were *okay, yes, yeah, yep, uh-huh, exactly, and right*.

Reporting (5.73%) was the fourth most frequent communicative function of the representative speech acts. In their opening and closing speeches, students reported and quoted (Example 4) to enhance their credibility and sound persuasive.

- (4) *As **Mark Hughes a former United States senator once said** the balance between freedom and security is a delicate one.*

In the cross-questioning stages, they often paraphrased what was said by the other participants in the debate in order to support their arguments and claims (Example 5), rebut their opponents' standpoints or disagree.

- (5) *But you don't have to use it and **as you just said** there are apps that are that encrypt your data and so that even the app itself can't read it.*

Stating (4.01%) was the fifth most frequent representative speech act performed by students to declare something as a fact (Example 6). It often occurred as a series of statements following one another in opening speeches.

- (6) *Automatization is a process which won't happen overnight.*

Students explained (3.78%) when they wanted to make their standpoints clear, describe the issues in more detail and reveal relevant facts (Example 7). Frequent expressions used for introducing an explanation included *I mean, that/it means, the thing is, my point is* and *in other words*.

- (7) *Well **the thing is** that all the social media already monitors all of your conversations.*

Agreeing (3.67%) often occurred as a response to what had been said in the cross-questioning stages of the debates. The most common expressions were *yes I agree, yeah sure* and *okay*. The purpose of agreeing was either to support the arguments of a team member (Example 8) or to express that the opposing team's argumentation was at least partially acceptable (Example 9).

- (8) *That's what I wanted to say...*

- (9) *Well yeah that's true to a certain extent...*

A speech act of predicting (2.75%) was used to express students' full beliefs in the truth of their claims about the future (Example 10).

- (10) *Surely there will be new jobs created to manage this automation process.*

Students most frequently performed the speech act of hypothesizing (2.64%) when they discussed the propositions 'Human labour should be replaced with artificial intelligence' (12 speech acts out of 23) and 'The Dark Net should be regulated like the rest of the Internet' (10 speech acts out of 23), as illustrated in Example 11. This can probably be explained by the scientific, economic, social, and moral issues arising from these propositions which offer a wide field for hypothesizing, speculating, and contemplating.

- (11) *...if the current technologies didn't exist and it wasn't possible to use them such as encryption and Tor people would just find different ways to be anonymous while using their computers.*

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Representatives	Frequency	Relative frequency
Accepting	8	0.92
Admitting	1	0.11
Agreeing	32	3.67
Announcing	2	0.23
Asserting	365	41.86
Assuming	7	0.80
Assuring	1	0.11
Concluding	12	1.38
Confirming	87	9.98
Deducing	5	0.57
Describing	6	0.69
Disagreeing	18	2.06
Exemplifying	19	2.18
Explaining	33	3.78
Hypothesizing	23	2.64
Informing	21	2.41
Predicting	24	2.75
Reasoning	115	13.19
Rebutting	3	0.46
Reminding	4	0.46
Reporting	50	5.73
Stating	35	4.01
Total	872	100.00%

Table 3: Frequency of different types of representative speech acts in debates

Directives (14.93%) were mostly used in the cross-questioning stages of the debates. Table 4 shows that asking for opinion (43.03%) was the most frequently used directive speech act (Example 12).

(12) *But... er... what about VPN and other alternatives?*

Requests (26.67%) were the second most frequent speech acts belonging to the group of directives. They usually occurred in the form of indirect speech acts (Example 13), the purpose of which was to convey politeness.

(13) *Let me explain that.*

While the benefits obtained by performing requests, which belong to the impositive speech acts, are exclusively for the speaker, the benefits of suggestions as the non-impositive speech acts are for the hearer (cf. Haverkate 1984). Suggesting (9.70%) was the third most frequent directive speech act. The most frequent forms of suggestions were using a semi-modal *should* (Example 14), a performative *I suggest* and questions.

- (14) *Meanwhile we should not take AI as something that can outperform us at work but instead we should cooperate together and bring out the best of both humans and AI.*

Directives	Frequency	Relative frequency
Asking for opinions	71	43.03
Asking for confirmation	13	7.88
Challenging	2	1.21
Commanding	5	3.03
Inviting	13	7.88
Permitting	1	0.61
Requesting	44	26.67
Suggesting	16	9.70
Total	165	100.00%

Table 4: Frequency of different types of directive speech acts in debates

As Table 5 shows, expressives (5.25%) were mostly used for thanking (48.28%), especially in closing speeches where speakers thanked all participants for their involvement and attention, apologizing (12.07%) when speakers apologised for their misunderstanding (Example 15) or interrupting the other speaker's speech, complimenting (12.07%) when they expressed approval of the other speaker's arguments (Example 16), greeting (8.62%), expressing pleasure (8.62%) and amusement (6.90%), welcoming (1.72%), and wishing (1.72%).

- (15) *Er... sorry I didn't get that.*
- (16) *Mm good answer.*

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Expressives	Frequency	Relative frequency
Apologizing	7	12.07
Complimenting	7	12.07
Expressing amusement	4	6.90
Expressing pleasure	5	8.62
Greeting	5	8.62
Thanking	28	48.28
Welcoming	1	1.72
Wishing	1	1.72
Total	58	100.00%

Table 5: Frequency of different types of expressive speech acts in debates

As regards the commissive speech acts (0.91%), students usually used them in their opening and closing speeches to make a promise or commitment related to the content of their speeches (see Example 17).

- (17) *My name is Tomáš and I'm going to tell you why I think that closed platform is better than open platform.*

4.2 Modification of the illocutionary force in selected stages of the debates

This section will focus on the analysis of two stages of the debates, in particular the affirmative team's opening speech and one cross-questioning stage, with regard to the speech acts and modification of the illocutionary force. Example 18 shows the occurrence of speech acts including metadiscourse markers used to modify the illocutionary force (boosters are in bold, hedges are underlined) in an affirmative team's opening speech of the debate's proposition 'The Dark Net should be regulated like the rest of the Internet'.

- (18) *Good afternoon everyone. (Expressive: greeting) We've come here to discuss a **really controversial** topic which is the Dark Net. (Representative: informing) So let me start then. (Directive: requesting) **Even though** Dark Net itself isn't illegal the activity going on there can be **pretty disturbing** and it's not **entirely legal**. (Representative: asserting) Er... most of the sites **do offer** drugs people guns stolen items child porn... child pornography and **even worse** murders and contract killings. (Representative: stating, UD) Therefore **I think there are reasons why** this part of the internet should be regulated. (Representative: asserting) Thanks to sites like Silk Road drugs are easily accessible to everyone. (Representative: reasoning, UD) **You just have to pay** with bitcoin and in a few weeks you'll receive a package. (Representative: describing, UD) It **really** is as simple as it sounds therefore it's **really dangerous** and **this all** comes with*

*a big risk as well because you might just get scams and not get anything at all. (Representative: reasoning, UD) The **entire concept** of Dark Net... er... is a **pure anonymity** and thanks to bitcoin and **basically** all the cryptocurrencies in general you can anonymously pay for such things without the worry of being tracked. (Representative: reasoning, UD) Er... the same goes with guns and stolen items. (Representative: stating, UD) Selling and buying stolen or lost credit cards is a **big thing too**. (Representative: asserting) You get an information about a credit card clone it onto an empty one and use it in ATM. (Representative: describing, UD) But these things are **still** not as bad in comparison with pornography murders or streams where they torture people rape them and some individuals watch these as an entertainment which is **really disgusting**. (Representative: asserting) **Not only** streams **but also** forums where these monsters share how they killed someone what they did and so on. (Representative: asserting) It's **not only** with people **but also** animals and it should be stopped **as soon as possible**. (Representative: asserting) The FBI has already taken down dozens of sites but it's **still** not enough. (Representative: asserting) There are **still** new ones being created and I would compare it to hydra. (Representative: asserting) You cut a hatch and tomorrow two more will grow in its place (Representative: describing, UD) so I suggest there should be made a much bigger precaution. (Directive: suggesting)*

As illustrated in Example 18, the affirmative team's speaker first uses the expressive speech act of greeting, then introduces the topic they are going to discuss, requests permission to begin their speech, and afterwards develops their affirmative case area, providing positive support for the proposition through asserting, stating, reasoning and describing. The speech acts of stating, describing and reasoning performed in the opening speech can be considered as UDs which, as Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 2004) note, contribute to explicitization and amplification. UDs also occur in the cross-questioning stage (see Example 23) where their function is definition, precization and explication. Students probably used them to frame the fundamental concepts, develop their arguments, particularize information, and explain and clarify complex issues that arouse from this stage.

In the final speech act of the opening speech, the affirmative team's speaker tries to appeal to the negative team to accept their proposition using the direct speech act of suggesting performed through a performative verb *I suggest*. Using the hedge *suggest* expresses the speaker's willingness to negotiate a claim thereby reducing commitment and conveying respect for the negative team's alternative views (cf. Hyland 1998b, 2005, Myers 1989).

The affirmative speaker (see Example 18) increases the illocutionary force through the emphasizees *really* (one of the most frequent boosters, 55 occurrences), *even* and *do* to sound persuasive, an assurance *It really is as simple as...* to express certainty and confidence, a hearer-oriented booster

You just have to... to stress the relevance of his utterance, the speaker-oriented attitudinal boosters *pretty* (10 occurrences), *entire*, *entirely*, *pure* and *big thing* to express the degree of a certain quality, and *I think* to show involvement. The opening speech also includes the discourse-organizing boosters *even though*, *reasons why*, *just*, *not only... but also*, *this all*, *basically*, *still* and *as soon as possible* to emphasize parts of the utterance and make them more prominent in the context of the opening speech.

The metadiscourse marker *I think* belongs to context-sensitive markers that can have different functions in different contexts (cf. Holmes 1986, 1990, Urbanová 2003). The affirmative team's speaker uses a 'deliberative' booster *I think* (35 occurrences out of 492 analysed boosters in the corpus) in the initial position with level stress to add weight to his statement and express certainty and reassurance. *I think* as a 'tentative' hedge occurred more frequently in the corpus (53 instances out of 645 analysed hedges). In Examples 19 and 20 from the other debates *I think* occurs in final position pronounced with falling intonation, which expresses uncertainty and tentativeness (cf. Holmes 1986) and acts as a softener or negative politeness marker, expressing primarily affective meaning.

(19) *It automatically offers you to translate this page I think.*

(20) *That is kinda you know... I think that browser should have nowadays I think.*

Example 20 illustrates a cluster of hedges *kinda* and *you know*. Students used markers of unspecified reference or vagueness such as *kinda* (1 occurrence), *kind of* (5 occurrences) and *something like that* or *stuff like that* (5 hits) in the parts of the debates when they felt it was unnecessary to provide a detailed explanation and make explicit references to the extralinguistic reality. A context-sensitive marker *you know* as a hedge (14 occurrences) expresses both addressee-oriented uncertainty and message-oriented uncertainty. According to Holmes (1990: 189), "the former relates to the speaker's uncertainty concerning the addressee's attitudes or likely response in the interaction; the latter reflects uncertainty regarding the linguistic encoding of the message". In Example 20, *you know* functions as a word-search marker – the speaker is struggling to find a way to express himself, but at the same time he is appealing to common knowledge of Google Chrome's features. *You know*, as a booster (4 occurrences), expresses the speaker's confidence concerning the addressee's relevant background knowledge and experience, attitudes and anticipated response. Example 21 from another debate illustrates its emphatic function to reassure the opposing team of the validity of the proposition.

- (21) *You know monetary barriers for entry to the App Store are not only for the developers...*

Another context-sensitive marker in Example 18 is *just* which was one of the most frequent markers occurring in debates (61 occurrences as boosters and 24 as hedges). A possible reason might be the students' enthusiastic involvement with the content of the discussed topics related to their field of study since *just*, as Holmes (1984) notes, belongs to content-oriented boosters and hedges. Despite Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Wierzbicka's (1991) claim that *just* reduces the illocutionary force, Aijmer (2002) and Beeching (2016) argue that *just* can either reduce or increase the illocutionary force. In the minimising contexts, Beeching (2016) relates *just* to the conventional implicature of 'merely', which applies at the speech act level, rather than at the word level. *Just* as a hedge delimits the extent of a face-threatening act and thus functions as a negative politeness device. Erman (1997, as quoted in Beeching 2016: 76) observes that in particular young people often use *just* to maximise the effect of their utterance, which corresponds to the prevalence of *just* used as a booster in the analysed debates. Aijmer (2002) points out that *just* as a booster occurs in collocations with attenuating markers (such as *might just get* in Example 18 and *just a bit* in Example 23), gradable adjectives, exaggerative prosody, and in negated sentences when the speaker wants to dispute a point, while *just* as a hedge often occurs in requests and reflects negative politeness (see Example 22 from another debate).

- (22) *If I may just step in...*

Boosters in the affirmative team's opening speech (Example 18) are obviously used to assert a proposition with confidence, stress students' shared concerns and goals and to enhance the desirability of their proposal; however, in some parts of the opening speech, the speaker uses hedges in the form of modal verbs *would* (102 occurrences, the most frequent hedge in the corpus), *should* (54 occurrences) and *might* (15 occurrences) and an epistemic verb *suggest* (2 occurrences), which reflects his uncertainty and attenuates the force of the proposition. A content-oriented hedge *in general* (2 occurrences) is used to present a situation in terms of how far it varies from the ways the discourse community of IT students conventionally sees the world. The majority of boosters in the opening speech are associated with positive politeness since the speaker aims to express solidarity through intensification of meaning.

Example 23 shows the occurrence of speech acts in the first cross-questioning stage of the debate that followed the affirmative team's opening speech.

- (23) S1N: *If you don't mind I'll start the questions. (Directive: requesting) You mentioned all the negatives (Representative: reporting) but what would happen if people were being oppressed by their government and the entirety of the internet was monitored by their sacred services? (Directive: asking for an opinion) There would be no anonymity anymore no place for free speech. (Representative: hypothesizing)*
- S2A: ***I believe that those people should be looking more into VPNs.** (Representative: asserting) Even though Dark Net should be perfect there's still too much crime to outweigh the free speech. (Representative: asserting) *In China for example they have something called the Great Firewall and government monitors everything going in or out but thanks to VPNs you can easily bypass it.* (Representative: exemplifying, UD)*
- S1N: *Yes that could be true that a VPN would help. (Representative: agreeing) *But can you be certain that the company itself won't share your information once it is under a corrupted power-hungry government?* (Directive: asking for an opinion)*
- S1A: *Well **I do get your argue... argument** (Representative: accepting) *but these VPNs operate from the most for free speech countries in the world like Switzerland in Europe or America.* (Representative: rebutting) *And if America or Europe succumbs to the totalitarian powers then **it's doomed anyway and it doesn't even matter** honestly.* (Representative: asserting)*
- S2A: *I'm curious about your stance on drug trafficking and other similar illegal things that are only possible thanks to the Dark Net anonymity.* (Directive: challenging)
- S2N: ***No one is saying** that these things are okay but it's not possible **just** because of the Dark Net. (Representative: asserting) *You can do most of these things on the normal internet that most people use every day.* (Representative: reasoning, UD) *It is just a bit easier to track down the users who are participating in these activities but you can **still** do a lot with more conventional tools like for example the VPNs you mentioned which also help to conceal your identity.* (Representative: reasoning, UD)*
- S1N: ***On the other hand** how do you imagine they would censor the Dark Net? (Directive: asking about an opinion) I mean it's not like they're letting it be free and do all those things that are illegal. (Representative: explaining, UD) *FBI and other officials are hard working on busting these drug sellers paedophiles money launchers and so on.* (Representative: stating, UD)*
- S2A: ***I think** they would probably start at the ISP level and then move on onto the DNS level. (Representative: hypothesizing)*
- S2N: *Well **you don't really need** DNS if you want to connect to a server so that wouldn't really make that big of a difference. (Representative: rebutting) *So it is way harder if you... if you want to **just** use the IP but it's not impossible.* (Representative: reasoning, UD) ***And that is when** you are on the normal internet. (Representative: explaining, UD) *If you use Tor for example and***

connect to a dot onion address the **entire** connection is handled through the Tor network which doesn't do any DNS lookups. (Representative: describing) **And when it comes to ISPs in a lot probably most countries they already... they are already required to provide data to law enforcement.** (Representative: asserting) **So and ISPs do a lot of surveillance even if it's not for the government.... er... and yet crime still happens on the internet.** (Representative: asserting) **So just monitoring the traffic like this will not really fix anything.** (Representative: asserting)

(Note: S1A – Speaker 1 Affirmative, S2A – Speaker 2 Affirmative, S1N – Speaker 1 Negative, S2N – Speaker 2 Negative)

While boosters were typically prevalent in opening speeches since students wanted to sound confident and persuasive, cross-questioning stages demonstrated a balance between boosters and hedges. This was probably because students had to consider all the arguments that were put forward in the opening speeches and they were more tentative when expressing their propositions. Another reason might be the fact that while students could prepare their opening speeches in advance, they had to respond spontaneously in the cross-questioning stages. Urbanová (2003: 68) and Hyland (1998a: 354) note that the co-existence of boosters and hedges reflects the constant need for balancing objective information, subjective evaluation and interpersonal negotiation. As Example 23 shows, students often used the combination of boosters and hedges (e.g. *I believe that those people should be looking...; Even though Dark Net should be perfect there's still too much crime...; It is just a bit easier...*) in their utterances to head off possible objections while leaving their opponents in no doubt of their views, which helped them gain acceptance for their claims. Such combinations can also have a “polite downtoning function” (cf. Aijmer 2002: 189).

Speaker-oriented attitudinal boosters *I believe* (31 occurrences) and *I think* (35 occurrences) emphasize the subjective attitude of S2A and make his utterance more assertive. Clusters of boosters *I do get..., it's doomed anyway, it doesn't even matter..., even if..., and yet..., still, just and will not really fix anything* in S1A's and S2N's sequences of utterances and several discourse-organizing boosters, such as *No one is saying..., On the other hand..., And that is when..., pinpoint parts of the speakers' messages and foreground specific pieces of information.* Boosters increase the illocutionary force of propositions and demonstrate commitment to statements, thereby asserting the speakers' conviction and restricting the negotiating space available to their opponents. However, they can also serve the ends of positive politeness because they reflect respect for the listeners' views and the assumed background professional knowledge in the

discourse community of IT students. For example, S2N uses a hearer-oriented booster *Well you don't really need...* to show S2A that he respects his knowledge and experience and wants him to engage with the discourse community of IT students, thus "effecting interpersonal solidarity and membership of a disciplinary in-group" (cf. Hyland 1998a: 353).

As already mentioned, directives occurred in cross-questioning stages quite frequently. The cross-questioning stage in Example 23 begins with an indirect speech act of requesting *If you don't mind...*, performed by S1N, which makes a request less infringing and reflects a negative politeness strategy. S2A performs another indirect speech act *I'm curious about your stance on drug trafficking...* to challenge the negative team and suggest that he disagrees with their standpoints. The negative politeness strategy employed through hedges, such as *would probably*, *could be* and *should be*, also reflects the need to avoid face-threatening acts when discussing the controversial and to a certain extent sensitive topic related to the Dark Net. Besides, the use of *would* and *could* (20 occurrences) and *probably* (19 occurrences) by all speakers involved in the cross-questioning stage demonstrates their need to signal the lack of relevant information when making their judgements.

The expression *I'm curious about...* functions as a conversational gambit opening a new topic. Another conversational gambit is performed through the speaker-oriented hedge *I mean* (19 occurrences in the analysed corpus) used by S1N to clarify the content of his preceding question (cf. Urbanová 2003, Beeching 2016). Similarly, *well* signals a "change of topic or speech act according to an agenda or an 'interpretative frame'" (Aijmer 2013: 35), so in Example 23, the function of *well* can be explained concerning the rules of the structured debate. S1A and S2N use *well* to raise an objection to what has been said by their opponents, which suggests that both speakers act according to their roles in the debate. While S1A uses *well* for agreement with some reservation (representative speech act of accepting), S2N's combination of *well* with the booster *really* emphasizes and qualifies the following rebuttal.

5 Conclusion

This paper examined the concept of speech acts and modification of illocutionary force in a genre of ESP learners' spoken discourse, namely IT students' in-class debates, which previously has not attracted much attention of researchers. Oral communication either interpersonal, in small groups or teams, predominates at all levels of workplace activities in the engineering and IT sector (e.g. Crosling & Ward 2002, Darling & Dannels 2003). IT students as a specific discourse community are a very complex group encompassing

many specializations whose goals may vary with the rapid developments in their field. Members of this community communicate with each other by attending lectures, seminars, meetings, workshops and conferences within an international environment. Their pragmatic competence is therefore indispensable for achieving success in both academic and future professional settings. Participating in in-class debates encourages students to stay focused on meaningful communication while simultaneously using targeted linguistic forms. Besides, it also provides them with an opportunity to use the target language to achieve their communication goals through the appropriate modification of the illocutionary force. Since knowing how to express and interpret speech acts is an important part of ESP learners' pragmatic competence (Goh & Burns 2012, Taguchi 2019), the examined debates may be viewed as manifestations of IT students' pragmatic competence vital for communication success. Even though the in-class debates have a certain fixed structure that might predetermine the range and sequence of speech acts, they allowed me to analyse the speech act data across the interaction. Moreover, speech act performance in particular in cross-questioning stages of the debates can be considered as the result of naturally occurring language use.

The analysis revealed that the most frequent speech acts were representatives, which IT students used mainly for the purpose of asserting (including rhetorical questions), reasoning, confirming, reporting, stating, explaining, agreeing, predicting and hypothesizing. While representatives occurred in all stages of the debates, directives were more frequent in cross-questioning stages where students asked for opinions, made requests and suggestions, and asked for confirmations. Expressive speech acts were performed to thank and greet the audience, apologise for misunderstanding or interrupting the other speaker's speech, compliment the other speaker on their convincing and valid arguments, and express pleasure. The least frequent were commissive speech acts used especially in opening and closing speeches when students made a commitment or promise related to the discussed issues.

Despite the number of studies claiming that pragmatic competence of ESL learners is insufficient (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig 1996, Kasper 1996, Jiang 2006) and spoken production and interaction are particularly difficult for university students of technical study programmes (e.g. Laroche 2003, Myles 2009, Hossain 2013, Jindathai 2015, Magauina et al. 2017), the analysis of IT students' speech acts performed in debates revealed that they were able to interact and communicate their ideas through a wide range of speech acts. Their frequent combination of pre-expansion (e.g. reasoning, explaining, exemplifying) and post-expansion (requesting, asking for opinions) reflects their upper-proficiency level (cf. Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger 2011, Lee 2017).

Increasing the illocutionary force functioned as a positive politeness device and indicated that students assumed shared ground and stressed their discourse community membership. Boosters, such as *I/we believe, I/we know, really, pretty, entirely, basically, even, still and just*, thus allowed students to negotiate the importance of their information and establish its perceived truth by strategically presenting it as something consensually given. Asserting, disagreeing and rebutting during a debate also constitute face-threatening acts or impositions on the self-image of their opponents which students mitigated by using different types of hedges. In cross-questioning stages in particular, students tended to soften and reduce the assertiveness of some speech acts using the hedges *I suggest, you know, I mean and kind of*, which made the discussion more interactive.

This paper might be regarded as a contribution to the studies of ESP learner language. Its results show that focusing on communicative functions is a crucial aspect of ESP learning and teaching and should not be neglected and that research of learner spoken language might provide interesting and valuable insights for ESP teachers. Even though ESP coursebooks and learning materials usually include sections with linguistic means to express different communicative functions or speech acts, analysing ESP students' performance of speech acts in in-class debates might help teachers to identify both frequent and rare speech acts and metadiscourse markers and adapt the learning materials accordingly. Moreover, by engaging in a variety of different speaking activities (debates, role plays, simulations, etc.) with different purposes, students can develop and improve their pragmatic competence.

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