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*Aziz Mousa Khalil*  
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## INVESTIGATING SPEECH ACT REALIZATION IN *ENGLISH* FOR PALESTINE TEXTBOOKS: FOCUS ON GRATITUDE, AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT

AZIZ MOUSA KHALIL

*PhD, Professor of Applied Linguistics,  
Palestine Ahliya University, Bethlehem, Palestine a.khalil@paluniv.edu.ps*

### ABSTRACT

This research investigates the realization of the speech acts of Gratitude, Agreement and Disagreement in English for Palestine Textbooks taught at Grades 5 to 11 at public schools in Palestine. All the occurrences of the three speech acts were identified and the strategies by which they were realized classified. Cheng's (2010) classification of Gratitude strategies and Khammari's (2021) classification of Disagreement strategies were adopted. The results revealed that only (28) instances of Gratitude, (13) instances of Agreement and (9) Disagreement were covered in the seven textbooks. Moreover, very few mitigating devices were used to reduce the face-threatening effect of Disagreement. All these frequencies indicate that the coverage of the three speech acts under study is so inadequate. The paper concludes with some recommendations for material developers and EFL instructors.

**Keywords: speech acts; pragmatic content; gratitude; agreement; disagreement**

### INTRODUCTION

Research on textbooks analysis and evaluation abounds with studies that focus on the occurrences of pragmatic elements in the textbooks. Special focus on pragmatic competence coincides with the popularity of communicative language teaching, which advocates as its major objective the development of students' communicative competence (CC) in English as a foreign/second (EFL/ESL) learning and teaching. CC, according to Tarvin (2015), is the "ability to use language, or to communicate, in a culturally appropriate manner in order to make meaning and accomplish social tasks with efficacy and fluency through extended interaction. (p. 6). Communicative Competence comprises four sub-competencies: linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and discourse. Pragmatics is the use of language in context. Pragmatic competence, according to Ishihara (2007), is "the ability to use language effectively to achieve a specific purpose and understand language in context." (p. 21)

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Searle et al. (1980) stressed that, "The theory of speech acts starts with the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence or other expression, but rather the performance of 31 certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating, etc." (p. 7).

Materials writers responded to this movement for developing L2 pragmatic competence by including pragmatic content in textbooks. There has been a shift of focus in textbook analysis and evaluation studies on speech acts realizations, such as requests, apologies, compliments, thanks, promises, among others. The present study focuses on the realizations of the Gratitude, Agreement and Disagreement speech acts in the seven English for Palestine (EFP) textbooks (Grades 5 to 11), used at public schools in Palestine.

In 1999 the Palestinian Ministry of Education formed teams initiated commissioned to design and produce national curricula for all the subjects taught at the twelve grades in public schools. The Guidelines for the English curricula were prepared by a team of Palestinian educationalists for all school subjects with the exception of the English language textbooks, which were written by British authors.

**The General Guidelines for the English Language Curriculum** (2015) clearly emphasize that the curriculum is based on the communicative language teaching principles. The overriding goal of EFL teaching and learning is to develop students' communicative competence (both linguistic and pragmatic), which prepares them well for engaging in cross-cultural interactions with others who hold different world views, life experiences, cultures and language.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is limited to a review of previous research studies that investigated the realizations of different speech acts in English as a foreign/second language textbooks, with special focus on the expressions of Gratitude and (dis)agreement speech acts, the subject of this study.

### A. *Gratitude*

Trosborg (1994:15) provides more general definition of thanking as "the speaker expresses gratitude for the hearer's participation in a prior action which was beneficial to the speaker".

This section will only review studies that deal with Gratitude in EFL Textbooks, which is the focus of the present study.





The great majority of research done on the gratitude speech act has been limited to its use by foreign language learners, mostly English as a foreign/second language (e.g., Yasmini and Rastegar (Iranian), Faqe et al (2019): Kurdish, Hanz and Burgucu (2016): Turkish.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, Al-Khayyat and Abdul Razaq's (2019) study focuses on the occurrences of the thanking speech act in the themes, subjects and illustrations in the 6<sup>th</sup> primary student's textbook taught at Iraqi schools. The results showed that the occurrences of thanking are so limited.

Cheng (2010) investigated native English speakers' use of the speech act of thanking, using a corpus-based approach. The corpora consisted of the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English and the spoken part of the British National Corpus. He identified six thanking strategies: Thanking, Appreciation, Non-gratitude, Combination, Thanking a 3<sup>rd</sup> person, Formal speech. He identified 342 instances thanking expressions, distributed among the six categories.

Thanking: 257 (75.15%)

Non-gratitude: 62 (18.13%)

Appreciation: 7 (2.05%)

Combinations: 7 (2.05%)

Thanking a 3<sup>rd</sup> person: 5 (1.46%)

Formal speech: 4 (1.17%)

He concluded: "Neither *appreciation* nor *appreciative(ly)* occurs in either corpus. It seems, thus, that appreciation strategy is not so commonly used in daily interactions." (p. 270)

The only study that investigates the pragmatic content in *English for Palestine* textbook taught at the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade is Qawasmi (2016). She also found very few instances of thanking speech act in the dialogues.

The scarcity and paucity of research on thanking speech act in EFL/ESL textbooks highlights a gap in the literature. The present study aims at investigating the thanking/gratitude speech act occurrences in seven *English for Palestine* textbooks.





**B. (Dis)agreement**

Leech (1983) was the first scholar who referred to the speech acts of agreement and disagreement in his agreement maxim: “minimize disagreement and maximize agreement”. That is why disagreement has been described in the literature as a face-threatening act.

Song (2020) analyzed authentic data collected from 2-hour interviews with native speakers of English. He identified the strategies that native speakers adopt in realizing disagreement. Besides, he aimed to review the scarcity of focus on disagreement in EFL materials. He says:

...studies show that the focus on disagreement as a speech act is still minimal as global textbooks rarely provide comprehensive explanations on vital elements to achieve pragmatic competence such as the level of formality, the relationship between the interlocutors or the topic of the speech act (Ren W. and Han 2016, Velenga 2004)

(p. 29)

Moreover, Song states that such materials lack pragmatic information, such as politeness and appropriateness.

Nu and Murray (2020) analyzed the speech acts presented in 6 textbooks, taught at Vietnamese schools. The results revealed that only one textbook included occurrences of dis(agreement) speech act.

Liew (2016) explored how agreement and disagreement are presented in Malaysian and *New Headway* course books. The results showed that there are differences between the two sets of textbooks.

In his analysis of 13 business ELT materials, Bjorge (2012) found that 80% of these textbooks included “no” and partial agreement plus “but” to express disagreement.

Pearson (1986) noted that disagreement and agreement speech acts are usually presented equally in language textbooks, which is misleading since native speakers usually agree with each other and often use face-saving strategies when they disagree (p. 100).

Pearson (1985) compared how the speech acts (disagreement) occur in recorded natural conversational data and language learning textbooks. The results revealed that the textbook presented expressions which did not appear in conversations among native speakers.

Song (2020) proposed 9 strategies for realizing disagreement speech act:

absolute or unmitigated disagreement (e.g. *No, you're not gonna challenge me.*)

hesitation sounds or words (e.g., *well uh*)

a question (e.g., *Would you agree that this is different.*)





words to express slight agreement (right, sure) before *but* (*Sure, but you my integrity is pretty powerful as well*)

humor (e.g., *I will believe it when I see it.*)

a personal or emotional reason to avert being disagreeable (e.g., *I think I would look at it like a baseball team*)

modal verbs (e.g., *may, might, could*) (e.g., *Certain players may be popular than others, but you need to feel the team to win*)

repeating some part of the proposition (*Making a joke of it?*)

placing responsibility in a more general context (*(it) depends on who you who ask*)

(PP. 27-28)

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The above survey of relevant literature shows that there exists a gap in the research on the pragmatic content of the EFL textbook series (*English for Palestine*) used at the Palestinian





public schools. Even the only study by Qawasmi (2016) is limited to Grade 9 textbook. The present study, in contrast, aims to study the occurrences of Gratitude and (Dis)agreement speech acts expressions in seven **EFP** textbooks taught at Grades 5 to 11.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addressed five research questions:

First Research Question: To what extent is the Gratitude speech act covered in the materials?

Second Research Question: What strategies are employed in the realization of the Gratitude speech act?

Third Research Question: Are the Gratitude expressions followed by a response? If yes, what type of response?

Fourth Research Question: To what extent are the agreement and disagreement speech acts covered in the materials?

Fifth Research Question: What strategies are employed in the realization of the disagreement speech acts? And what mitigating devices are used to soften disagreement?

### METHODOLOGY

This research study uses a descriptive-analytic method, with a qualitative approach.

#### *Materials*

The materials under study are the English curriculum textbooks (*English for Palestine*) taught at Grades 1 to 12 in Palestinian public schools. Initial screening of textbooks 1-4 and 12 revealed that these textbooks do not cover pragmatic content. So, the analysis focused on Grades 5 to 11. Each Grade has two textbooks A and B. Therefore the corpus covered 11 textbooks.

EFP textbooks were based on the Guidelines prepared by a team of ELT experts consisting of members representing university professors and schools supervisors and commissioned by the Curriculum Directorate at the Ministry of Education. The English Curriculum Guidelines were sent to Macmillan publishing company to write the materials.





The Guidelines explicitly state that the syllabi should be designed according to communicative language teaching principles.

*In the present curriculum, communicative competence (CC) is the goal. CC consists of the knowledge that users of a language have internalized which enables them to understand and produce messages in the language. Various models of communicative competence have been proposed; however, most of these models recognize that it entails both linguistic competence (i.e. knowledge of grammatical rules) and pragmatic competence (i.e. knowledge of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior in a particular situation). Thus, the core objectives for teaching English in Palestine fall under these two categories with sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence included under the rubric “pragmatic competence”. (p. 17)*

The Guidelines also stress the importance of the functional-notional approach to language teaching, which considers language as a vehicle for performing language functions and notions.

### ***Instruments***

Expressions of Gratitude in the materials were analyzed according to Cheng’s (2010) classification of gratitude strategies. He proposed six strategies:

Thanking

simple thanking:

Thank you or Thanks

elaborated thanking:

Thank you very much.

Thank you for your help.

Appreciation:

I appreciate it.

It’s much appreciated.

Non-gratitude:

Thank God for that.





No, thanks.

Combinations:

Thank you dear. Very kind of you.

Thank you very much. I'm sorry to bother you.

Thanking a 3<sup>rd</sup> person:

Many thanks to Eunice and Matt for lots of hard work.

Formal speech: I thank you Pam, because I think the committee's done a great job.

(pp. 262-265)

As for disagreement speech acts, the analysis adopted Khammari's (2021) classification of disagreement strategies and mitigation devices. He proposed the following strategies:

*Bald on record strategies*

They "are direct ways of saying things, without any minimization to the imposition, in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way".

*Direct refusal*

e.g. I'm sorry to tell you we are taking the wrong turn.

*Positive Politeness:* It attempts to attend the hearer's interest, wants, and goods

Partial agreement (to soften disagreement):

e.g. That's a great topic too but .....

Explanation (to reduce face-threatening effect)

e.g. You know, I bought a Dell and it had a defective hard drive. And Dell would not let me use the warranty.

*Negative politeness*

Request e.g. This is unfair dad, I gave my word?

*Off record strategies:* indirect to avoid imposition on the listener

Indirect refusal: e.g., Wow. That's a really interesting topic but I'm not very familiar with it at all.

(p. 5-8)



*Mitigation devices*

Mitigation devices are used to soften the face-threatening load of an utterance, reduce effect of face loss and limit the effect of imposition of disagreements. Among the most common devices are:

Modal verbs: might, could

Discourse markers: but, well

Verbs like: guess, seem think

Hedges: sort of, a little bit, somewhat

***Procedure***

Each occurrence of Gratitude and (Dis)agreement in the dialogues and conversations that appeared in the textbooks was identified and classified according to the strategies used in realizing these speech acts.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Results of the data analysis are presented according to the relevant research questions.

***First Research Question: To what extent is the Gratitude speech act covered in the materials?***

Table I presents the frequency and percentage of the Gratitude expressions by Grade Textbooks.

*Table I: Frequency and Percentages of Gratitude Expressions by Grade Textbooks*

GRADE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
5 <sup>th</sup>	1	3.6
6 <sup>th</sup>	0	0
7 <sup>th</sup>	6	21
8 <sup>th</sup>	10	36
9 <sup>th</sup>	11	39
10 <sup>th</sup>	0	0
11 <sup>th</sup>	0	0
Total	28	



The above figures reveal that the total number of thanking occurrences in the seven textbooks is extremely limited. Three textbooks lack any examples of thanking expressions. This result reveals a mismatch between these figures and the clear claim made in the Guidelines for designing the English curriculum, which state that the a major goal of the curriculum is to provide students with adequate opportunities to acquire pragmatic competence, which is one of the four competencies that make up communicative competence. Moreover, thanking is one of the speech acts that should receive adequate coverage in the textbooks. Moreover, the paucity of coverage was highlighted by Qawasmi in her (2016) MA thesis in which she investigated the pragmatic content in *English for Palestine* textbook taught for 9<sup>th</sup> Grade. Furthermore, Khalil's (2021) investigation of the speech acts of requests and apology arrived at the same conclusion.

With regard to the inclusion of contextual and social factors, such as social distance (familiarity) and social power, the results show that the 28 thanking occurrences took place between friends (13), strangers (5) and relatives (10).

***Second Research Question: What strategies are employed in the realization of the Gratitude speech act?***

Classification of gratitude strategies followed Cheng's nine gratitude strategies, presented above in the instrument section. The gratitude strategies identified in the data are presented in Table II.

Table II: Frequency and Percentage of Strategies Employed in the Realization of Gratitude Speech Act

STRATEGY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	EXAMPLES
Simple thanking	16	57.1%	Thank you. Thanks.
Elaborated thanking and compliment	2	7.1%	Thank you, Uncle Basim, Amal, Nadia. It's lovely to be here.
Elaborated thanking and reason	6	21.4%	Thank you very much. You've been a great help.
Compliment and thanking	1	3.5%	That's a good example, thank you.
Compliment	3	10.6%	That's really kind.
Total	28		





The figures above reveal that more than half of the thanking instances were realized by simple thanking strategy (57.1%), followed by elaborated thanking and reason (21.4%), compliment (10.6%), elaborated thanking and compliment (7.1%) and compliment and thanking (3.5%). Appreciation, non-gratitude and formal speech strategies are not covered in the seven textbooks.

***Third Research Question: Are the Gratitude expressions followed by a response? If yes, what type of response?***

The analysis showed that only three out of the 28 gratitude expressions are followed by a response. That means students have very little exposure to possible responses to gratitude expressions.

7<sup>th</sup> Grade Unit 12 (p. 20)

Nisreen: Ok. Turn left at the mosque. Finally, you'll find the gift shop on the right.

Jade: Thank you very much. You've been a great help.

Nisreen: You're welcome. Goodbye

Jade: Goodbye

Unit 6, P. 64 Strangers: unequal status

Othman: Go along the road for a bit and you'll get the restaurant at the left.

James: Thank you.

Othman: You're welcome. (polite response)

8<sup>th</sup> Grade Unit 14, p. 76

Omar: I've got some magazines, and they're heavier than anything else. Would you like them

Yasmeen: Thanks, take them in your paperback. You can carry them with you on the plane.

Omar: Good, I'm ready.

Yasmeen: Great! Let's go.



**Fourth Research Question: To what extent are the agreement and disagreement speech acts covered in the materials?**

Table III presents the frequencies and percentages of Agreement and Disagreement by Grade Textbook

Table III: Frequency and Percentage of Agreement and Disagreement Expressions by Grade Textbooks

GRADE	AGREEMENT FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	DISAGREEMENT FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	TOTAL
5 <sup>th</sup>	0	0	1	11	1
6 <sup>th</sup>	7	54	2	22	9
7 <sup>th</sup>	5	38	3	33	8
8 <sup>th</sup>	1	8	3	33	4
9 <sup>th</sup>	0	0	0	0	0
10 <sup>th</sup>	0	0	0	0	0
11 <sup>th</sup>	0	0	0	0	0
Total	13		9		22

The above figures reveal that the seven textbooks included (13) and (9) instances of agreement and disagreement, respectively, which reflects striking paucity of coverage. Moreover, all the expressions are covered in three textbooks: Grades 6, 7 and 8. These figures show that these two speech acts are not adequately covered in *English for Palestine* textbooks. This result is surprising in light of the fact that the syllabus Ministry of Education Guidelines clearly states that the English syllabus is based on the communicative and functional-notional approaches. Moreover, the Guidelines state that the overriding goal of English language teaching is to develop students' communicative competence. This goal necessitates that pragmatic content should be adequately covered with many authentic examples of speech acts and their realization strategies. Such coverage should reflect what native speakers express in a variety of contexts that incorporate social factors such as social power and social distance.

*Fifth Research Question: What strategies are employed in the realization of the disagreement speech act? And what mitigating devices are used to reduce the effect of disagreement face-threat?*

Table IV presents the frequency and percentage of the strategies employed in realizing the speech act of Disagreement.

Table IV: Frequency and Percentage of Disagreement Strategies

Strategy	Frequency	%	Examples
Performative disag. and reason/explanation	4	44.4	- I don't agree with you Alia. I think it is more interesting than exploring the oceans. Oh no. Look the weather is going to get worse in the afternoon.
Questioning	2	22.2	Really? Do you understand dogs?
Performative disag.	1	11.1	I don't agree.
Bald on record and personal opinion	1	11.1	I don't either. Lots of girls play it here.
Repeating the proposition, disag. and personal opinion	1	11.1	Really good? I don't think so. Football is boring.
Total	9		

The above figures show that five strategies were used in realizing disagreement in the data. About half of the disagreement expressions were realized by performative disagreement and reason or explanation (44.4%), followed by Questioning, Performative disagreement, Bald on record and personal opinion and Repeating the proposition, disagreement and personal opinion.

Since disagreement generally constitutes a face threat on the addressee, native speakers use a variety of mitigating devices to soften or limit the effect of both face loss and the imposition of disagreement. Such devices help the interlocutors avoid conflict, which may result from disagreement. Surprisingly, the collected data included three types of mitigation:

Discourse marker: **Oh**, no.

Verb: I don't **think** so.



## CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the coverage of three speech acts (gratitude, agreement and disagreement) and the strategies used to realize them in *English for Palestine* textbooks used at Palestinian public schools. Based on the above findings, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, the coverage of the speech acts of gratitude, agreement and disagreement in the seven textbooks is inadequate in light of the fact that the syllabus Ministry of Education Guidelines clearly states that the English syllabus is based on the communicative and functional-notional approaches.

The frequencies of occurrences of the three speech acts in the seven textbooks under study are so low. That is, the three speech acts are underrepresented in English for Palestine textbooks taught at Grades 5 to 11. There are twenty-eight thanking instances, thirteen agreement and nine disagreement. Besides, the strategies used in realizing these speech acts are so limited. Neither do they mirror how native speakers express speech acts.

The findings of the current study can be of value for material writers and classroom teachers. Material writers should revise the textbooks and fill the gaps identified in the research studies. Moreover, speech acts should be recycled in the different grades so that there is progression in the presentation of examples and the strategies used in realizing speech acts. As for classroom teachers, the gaps identified in the analysis can help them in preparing supplementary materials (activities and exercises) with more examples of the three speech acts under study to fill these gaps. Besides, they can benefit from the findings in including more contextual information and social factors (e.g., social distance and social power between the addresser and addressee) in the supplementary materials.

The study focused on the coverage of three speech acts in the English for Palestine textbooks taught at grades 5 to 11. Grades 1 to 4 focus on listening and speaking and do not contain dialogues or conversations that usually include speech acts. Moreover, Grade 12 textbook prepares students for the secondary school-leaving examination. It also does not include dialogues or conversations. This explains the reason for limiting the study to the three speech acts taught at Grades 5 to 11.





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