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# A Qualitative Inquiry into the Illocutionary Speech Acts Performed by Iranian EFL Learners on Facebook

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## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate speech acts performed by Iranian EFL learners on the social network of Facebook in their interaction with their teacher and with their peers in response to divergent and evaluative questions. A page was constructed for the students in order to provide the opportunity for their answering divergent and evaluative questions posed by the researchers. A total of 240 comments including 1680 speech acts were collected from five EFL students during an academic semester. Content analysis of the collected data revealed that participants primarily used expressive speech acts in response to divergent questions and directive speech acts in response to evaluative questions. The results also revealed differences in using emoticons regarding the difference in power relations between the teacher and students. Further findings and implications are discussed in the paper.

***Keywords:*** Facebook, speech acts, divergent questions, evaluative questions

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# 1. Introduction

Speech acts are defined as communicative activities with reference "to the intentions of speakers while speaking and the effects they achieve on listeners" (Crystal, 1991, p. 383). Studying speech acts is important in the context of English language education because speech acts are regarded as part of language learners' pragmatic competence, which is the major constitutive component of students' communicative competence (Ryan & Granville, 2020; Zand-Moghadam & Adeh, 2020). As Zand-Moghadam and Adeh indicate, learning the pragmatic aspects of a foreign language is highly important due to the differences that exist between the pragmatic systems of the language learners' native language and the foreign language they are learning. They also refer to the difficulty of learning a new pragmatic system because of the cross-linguistic influence, which stems from the pragmatic system of language learners' native language.

Despite the importance of learning speech acts in language education, Ryan and Granville (2020) believe that the current frameworks for teaching speech acts are based on inauthentic frameworks of interactions that are presented in textbooks. Accordingly, they call for authentic texts, which are mainly based on real-world interactions. Social Network Sites (SNSs) can provide the possibility of authentic and real-world communications for language learners. As Lin et al. (2016) assert, SNSs "bring together opportunities for students to receive structural tutorials and deploy what they learn in authentic communication" (p. 124). Referring to Vie (2007), they also point out that "SNSs provide a space for socialization in which learners are exposed to authentic language used for diverse social purpose" (p. 125). Taking a constructionist stance, Carr et al. (2012) argue that communication shapes actions and constructs the reality and context in which individuals interact. They state that "it is therefore appropriate to study humans, in part, through studying the messages that individuals produce. The phenomena of speech acts are especially relevant given the technological affordances of SNSs" (p. 177). As Liu, Wang, Min, and Li (2019) mention, Facebook is one of the most popular SNSs used by about 172 million users by 2019, which is largely utilized for maintaining existing social connections or creating new ones. Hinting at the important role that Facebook can play in English language education, Kabilan et al. (2010) acknowledge that Facebook can engage language learners in meaningful language-based communications and provide a possibility for collaboration and the exchange of ideas. In this regard, the present study aimed at examining the speech acts used by Iranian EFL learners on the social network of Facebook in their interaction with their teacher and with their peers in response to divergent and evaluative questions.

# 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

## *2.1. Speech Act Theory*

Speech Act theory is "a theory which analyses the role of utterances in relation to the behavior of speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication" (Crystal, 2003, p.427). Austin's

Speech Act Theory indicates that utterances have three types of meaning: (1) the propositional or locutionary meaning that is the literal meaning of the utterance, (2) the illocutionary meaning that implies the social function of the utterance or written text, and (3) perlocutionary force as the result or effect produced by the utterance in a given context. This theory was also developed by philosopher John Searle. In his book *Speech Acts,* Searle (1969) attempts to focus on the facts of language, utterances, references, predications, and acts of stating, questioning, commanding and promising. Therefore, in this more specific view, Speech Act Theory is concerned with the ways in which language can be used and is a theory of linguistic communication based on the assumption that "the minimal units of human communication are not linguistic expressions, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving directions, apologizing, thanking, and so on" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p.2). Searle (1976) also developed his own taxonomy of speech acts, which included five basic kinds of illocutionary acts: representatives, directives, expressive, commissives, and declaratives. These five classes of speech acts differentiated based on the illocutionary force of the act are explained with italicized examples taken from Yule (1996, pp. 53-54) as follows:

**Declaratives:** speech acts that change the world via their utterance such as appointing, dismissing, resigning, sentencing or excommunicating, etc.

*Priest: I now pronounce you husband and wife.*

*Referee: You're out.*

*Jury Foreman: We find the defendant guilty.*

**Representatives/Assertives:** speech acts that the speaker believes to be the case or not e.g., statement of facts, insistence, asserting, concluding, describing, claiming and complaining, etc.

Statements of fact (*The earth is round*)

Assertions *(Pragmatics deals with language in context*)

Descriptions (*It was a rainy day*)

**Expressive:** speech acts that state the speaker's feelings (psychological states) including pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes, joy, and sorrow. Some examples are thanking, apologizing, welcoming, insulting, congratulating, accusing and praising. They can be caused by something the speaker or the hearer do, but they are about the speaker's experience:

*a. I'm really sorry.*

*b. Congratulations!*

*c. Oh that's delicious!*

**Directives:** speech acts that speakers use to get someone else to do something. They express what the speaker wants such as commands, orders, requests, suggestions, etc. and can be positive or negative:

*a. Gimme a cup of tea. Make it strong.*

*b. Could you lend me a pencil, please?*

*c. Watch the step.*

**Commissives:** speech acts that the speakers use to commit themselves to some future action. They express what the speaker intends. Promises, threats, refusals, invitations, swears, and pledges are related to this type of speech acts and can be performed by the speaker alone or as a member of a group:

*a. I'l be back.*

*b. I'm going to get it right next time.*

*c. We will not do that.*

Nastri et al. (2006) considered quotations as a new type of speech acts which could involve "lyrics, famous quotes or even links to webpages" (p. 1034). They explained that quotation was the message not originally produced by the sender. "Quotations are the updates which the participant has not written. These include quotations, jokes, epigrams etc" (Ilyas & Khushi, 2012, p. 504).

## *2.2. Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Social Networks*

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is a new trend in teaching. Tavakoli et al. (2019) define CALL as a range of applications and approaches provided by information and communication technologies such as Web 2 that can be used for the purpose of teaching and learning the English language by creating the possibility of authentic communications and authentic learning experiences for learners. As a tool for language learning, Web 2.0 is the second wave of the World Wide Web that offers a new possibility for individuals to publish and share experiences with other individuals. As Williams and Chinn (2009) note, web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis, and social network sites have become popular and instructors need to find innovative ways to use such technologies in the classroom. They also add that the use of such technologies provides the chance for more active learning by recreating experiences similar to those occurring in real life. According to Wheeler and Wheeler (2009) "The World Wide Web is increasingly pervading all aspects of modern life, driving users to discover ever more sophisticated and ingenious uses, particularly for communication and social networking" (p. 1). Social networks are actually defined as "the social structure of nodes that represent individuals (or organizations) and the relationships between them within a certain domain" (Liccardi et al., 2007, p. 225). The secret to the popularity of social networks is that they are free and interactive. One of the most popular SNSs is Facebook. As Aydin (2012) describes, Facebook allows individuals over the age of 13 to create and upgrade personal profiles, add friends, exchange messages and chat online. Facebook also presents opportunities for members to organize themselves into groups in relation to personal and professional affiliations.

## *2.4. Related Studies*

Several studies investigated the benefits and reasons for using Facebook in the context of English language teaching and learning. For example, Blattner and Fiori (2009) examined the possibilities and promises of Facebook in English language classrooms to explain how Facebook

can provide language learners with opportunities such as authentic language interactions, relationship building, and language awareness by enhancing their sense of community and socio-pragmatic competence. Later, in order to investigate the effects of using Facebook as a medium for grammar and writing discussions, Suthiwatnarueput and Wasanasomsithi (2012) conducted a study on 83 first-year undergraduate students at the low-intermediate level of language proficiency from Thailand by collecting data from students gain scores in pre-test and post-test and interview responses. They concluded that Facebook could significantly improve students' writing and grammar as they engaged in discussions with their teachers and other users of language, who were more knowledgeable. Similarly and for improving the same skill, Mahmoud (2014) conducted a study on the role of Email and Facebook in promoting students' EFL writing. Participants' writing was improved because they found the opportunity to use the language outside the classroom and a more motivational learning atmosphere was created. Studying 146 EFL teachers, who worked at public schools in Turkey, Börekci and Aydin (2014) examined the level of Turkish EFL teachers' interactions with their students on the social network Facebook. The findings of the study revealed that Turkish EFL teachers preferred passive behaviors such as reading the posts on students' walls in their interaction with their learners because these behaviors did not require any direct contact with students.

There were also researchers interested in studying speech acts used in Computer-Mediated Communication. Nastri et al. (2006) investigated the speech acts used in away messages. Actually, they analyzed the speech acts used by 44 undergraduate students through the production of 483 away messages. The results indicated that the messages were most frequently assertive followed by expressive and commissives. They also found out that students rarely performed directives and argued that "away messages tend to reflect both informational and entertainment goals" (p. 1025). Carr et al. (2012) examined the use of speech acts in Computer-Mediated Communication, especially in the social network of Facebook. Participants of their study consisted of 46 undergraduate students, whose ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. These participants posted 204 Facebook status messages, which were analyzed using content analysis. The analysis of the data revealed that messages were mainly constructed with expressive speech acts, indicating that undergraduate students mainly use Facebook as an interpersonal medium.

Many local researchers tried to study the use of speech acts in the contexts of language teaching and learning in Iran. Addressing the context of English language education, several studies addressed different speech acts such as disagreement (Alemi & Motamedi, 2019), request, refusal, and apology (Allami & Naeimi, 2010; Maibodi & Dehghani, 2020; Malmir & Taji, 2021; Jalilifar, 2009; Sarani & Malmir, 2020), thanking and compliments (Allami & Montazeri, 2012; Azima & Hesabi, 2015; Ghaedrahmat et al., 2016; Karimnia & Afghari, 2011; Pishghadam & Zarei, 2011; Tajeddin & Malmir, 2014, 2015). Furthermore, Sharifi and Karimipour (2012) studied thematic roles and grammatical features of cursing and blessing speech acts in Ilami dialect of Kurdish. Additionally, Farnia et al. (2014) examined Iranian Farsi speakers' production and perception of

the speech act of suggestions. Although all these researchers addressed the speech acts in the context of Iran, none of them investigated the use of the speech acts in Computer-Mediated Communications. Of course, Gholamali Dehkordi and Chalak (2015) examined Iranian EFL learners' compliment response strategies in online communications. They studied 30 Iranian EFL learners studying at Islamic Azad University, by recording and classifying their compliments and compliment response strategies. They finally referred to acceptance strategies at the macro level and appreciation token at the micro level as the most frequent response strategies.

Similar to the study conducted by Nastri et al. in 2006 and the study carried out by Carr, Schrock, and Dauterman in 2012, the present study examined Iranian EFL learners' use of speech acts in their online communications. Although the above-mentioned studies generally addressed undergraduate students, our study specifically focused on EFL learners. Gholamali Dehkordi and Chalak (2015) also examined Iranian EFL learners' performance of speech acts in online communications. While they focused on the speech act of compliments and compliment response strategies, we explored Iranian EFL learners' use of speech acts in online communications on Facebook. Furthermore, what makes the present study different from previous ones is that, we, as the researchers of the current study, aimed at investigating speech acts used by Iranian EFL learners on the social network of Facebook in response to divergent and evaluative questions asked during an academic semester. Asking questions can lead to strengthening thinking, learning, action, and results (Adams, 2010). In the present study, we sought to ask divergent and evaluative questions in order to stimulate learners to think more deeply and allow learners to express their own voices. The motivation behind the present study was to investigate speech acts used by Iranian EFL learners in their interaction with their teachers and with their peers on the social network Facebook in response to divergent and evaluative questions. Indeed, there are multiple approaches for classification of questions. One of these approaches was proposed by Lindley (1993) including five basic types of factual, convergent, divergent, evaluative, and combination. These questions are explained by Mishra (2007) as follows:

1. **Factual:** Questions which require simple answers based on obvious facts.
2. **Convergent:** Questions that can be answered through comprehension, application, analysis, inference, or conjecture based on personal awareness, the material presented or read.
3. **Divergent:** Questions which make it possible for learners to explore alternative answers.

These questions are asked in order to stimulate imaginative and creative thought and are answered based on creation, imagination, inference or projection. One important feature of this type of question is that it may not have a definite answer.

4. **Evaluative:** Questions requiring higher levels of cognitive and/or emotional judgment. The answer to this type of question is often analyzed from different perspectives.
5. **Combination:** Questions that blend any combination of four other questions.

Accordingly, in this study, the following research questions were investigated:

1. How do Iranian EFL learners use speech acts on Facebook when interacting with their teacher in response to divergent questions?
2. How do Iranian EFL learners use speech acts on Facebook when interacting with their peers in response to divergent questions?
3. How do Iranian EFL learners use speech acts on Facebook when interacting with their teacher in response to evaluative questions?
4. How do Iranian EFL learners use speech acts on Facebook when interacting with their peers in response to evaluative questions?

# 3. Method

## *3.1. Participants*

The participants were 12 Iranian undergraduate students of English language and literature. Criterion sampling was used to select participants. Criterion sampling involves "selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 2002, p. 238) which in this study was general language proficiency. Thus, before carrying out the treatment, participants were given the standardized 200A test of Nelson English Tests (book 2, Intermediate) by Fowler and Coe (1976) to ensure their homogeneity.

To conduct the study, a page was constructed on Facebook to allow researchers and students to interact with each other. Facebook is one of the most popular social networking sites which allows users to post information, chat with others, and collaborate within the system. At the beginning of the semester, we informed the students that they were required to use Facebook to ask their questions or express their views.

## *3.3. Procedure*

Before carrying out the treatment, Nelson English Tests (book 2, Intermediate) were administered to a group of students. Twelve students who were homogeneous based on their general English language proficiency and volunteered for the study were selected as participants of the current study. All participants had an account on Facebook and were familiar with social networks. We constructed a page for this group of students in order to provide the opportunity for asking questions, receiving comments and interacting with each other. As the aim of this research was to create an opportunity for learners to share their ideas and feeling, we made comments on the students' posts and encouraged them to interact with each other. We also tried to correct the students' errors through the interaction. We focused on expressing meaning and tried to give a model of correct language without concentrating on students' errors that could block interaction. We also sought to manage the participants' interaction on Facebook by posting divergent and evaluative questions. Some examples of the guiding questions are as follows:

1. Imagine you were in a challenging situation, where you had to make an important decision. You made a decision to help a person, but this decision might indirectly oppress a simple and very nice character. How do you judge the situation? What do you do?
2. What is your understanding of the following sentence by Albert Camus:

In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.

3. As students of English language and literature, what are the limitations and problems you have? How can we solve them? What are strategies that we can use to achieve our goals despite problems?
4. What is your perception of freedom and how do you define a free person?

Furthermore, content analysis was used in order to analyze the collected data, whereby we sought to systematically identify the particular features of Facebook messages through the lens of Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962). As Nartey (2013) mentions, the content analysis makes it possible for researchers to understand the meaning of various aspects of documents or qualitative data as social products representing a social event.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The qualitative data of the present study consisted of the comments made by learners in their postings on Facebook. These comments were both in statement and question formats. A total of 240 comments were then extracted and analyzed based on the following categories related to the main research questions:

a) Speech acts learners used when interacting with their teacher in response to divergent questions.
b) Speech acts learners used when interacting with their peers in response to divergent questions.
c) Speech acts learners used when interacting with their teacher in response to evaluative questions.
d) Speech acts learners used when interacting with their peers in response to evaluative questions.

Content analysis was used to analyze the data collected. The content analysis used in the present study followed a deductive approach and collected data was analyzed based on some predetermined categorical schemes. The unit of analysis was taken to be the speech acts. Data gathered were categorized into six categories of speech acts including assertive, representatives, commissives, expressive, and declarations that were specified by Searle (1976), and quotations considered by Nastri et al. (2006) as a new type of speech act. To determine the extent to which participants used speech acts in their interactions, the percentages of student contributions demonstrating speech acts were determined. It should be added that we considered both direct and indirect speech acts. Defining indirect speech acts, Searle (1999) argues that "one can perform one speech act indirectly by performing another speech act directly" (p. 151).

Some examples of the speech acts learners used when interacting with their teacher or peers in response to divergent and evaluative questions are displayed in Table 1 and Table 2 as follows:

**Table 1**

*Examples of Speech Acts in Response to Divergent Questions*

| Speech Acts | Student-Student Interaction | Student-Teacher Interaction |
|---|---|---|
| Expressives | *1. I am so sorry for such a feeling in you. ;)☺*<br>*2. My dear friends, I am very happy reading such strange views: D* | *1. I am very happy because I can easily express my own views.*<br>*2. My dear teacher, such a great idea really motivates me because I enjoy participating in activities related to my course of study.* |
| Directives | *1. How can we do such a great work?*<br>*2. C*<br>*an you tell me what is in your mind?* | *1. Why should we study such books?*<br>*2. What is your own view as a teacher about these exams?* |
| Quotations | *1. Some are born great, others achieve greatness.*<br>*2. Beauty lay not in the thing, but in what the thing symbolized* | *1. To err is human.*<br>*2. No pain, no gain* |
| Commissives | *1. I come back to you as soon as possible.*<br>*2. You have my word.* | *1. I will present my lecture next week.*<br>*2. We will try to hold the conference.* |
| Representatives | *1. It was a boring class.*<br>*2. The result is that we ignore real learning* | |

**Table 2**

*Examples of Speech Acts in Response to Evaluative Questions*

| Speech Acts | Student-Student Interaction | Student-Teacher Interaction |
|---|---|---|
| Expressives | *1. I liked your judgment very much. ;)*<br>*2. I could not find my own summer because I could not overcome my strange anxiety and sadness. I was really sad those days.* | *1. I didn't intend to bother him. But I did and I extremely feel guilty.*<br>*2. I do apologize professor.* |
| Directives | *1. Tell us why you think so.*<br>*2. How can I find my own summer?* | *1. Please explain more. ☺*<br>*2. Please give us some examples. %)* |
| Quotations | *1. Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.*<br>*2. We cannot the wood for the trees.* | *1. The children of humanity are each other's limbs*<br>*That shares an origin in their creator*<br>*2. Knowledge is power.* |
| Commissives | | *1. I will read that book.*<br>*2. I send my message to you.* |
| Representatives | *1. Thus, we memorize instead of learning.*<br>*2. Campus is really small.* | |

Moreover, the percentages of student contributions demonstrating speech acts are presented in Table 3 as follows:

**Table 3**

*Use of Different Speech Acts in Response to DQ and EQ in S-T and S-T Interactions in Percentages*

| | Speech Acts | In Response to DQ | | In Response to EQ | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | S-S | S-T | S-S | S-T |
| 1 | Expressives | 37.56 | 33.33 | 33. 26 | 31.20 |
| 2 | Directives | 31.70 | 28.72 | 41.14 | 42.55 |
| 3 | Quotations | 12.20 | 21.80 | 17.51 | 16.08 |
| 4 | Commissives | 9.76 | 16.15 | ---- | 10.17 |
| 5 | Representatives | 8.78 | ---- | 8.09 | ------ |
| 6 | Declarations | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

DQ: Divergent Questions

EQ: Evaluative Questions

S-S: Student-Student Interaction

S-T: Student-Teacher Interaction

As shown in Table 3, the most frequently used speech acts were expressives followed by directives in response to divergent questions both in interaction with teacher (33.33% and 28.72 % respectively) and in interaction with peers (37.56 % and 31.70 % respectively). In response to evaluative questions, the most frequently used speech acts were directives followed by expressives both in interaction with teacher (42.55 % and 31.20 % respectively) and in interaction with peers (41.14 % and 33.26 % respectively). In contrast, the least frequently used ones were representatives in response to both question types and only in student-student interaction with no frequency observed during the student-teacher interaction. Declarations were not used by students in response to questions asked and were not included in the analysis. In order to check if there was any significant difference between the frequencies of speech acts, chi-square tests were calculated. The result indicated that there was a significant difference between the frequency of speech acts used in response to divergent questions, when students were interacting with their teacher ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$ =390)=26.80, $p$=.000) and when students were interacting with their peers ($\chi^2$ (4, $N$=410)=15.11, $p$ =.000). The result also indicated that there was a significant difference between the frequency of speech acts used in response to evaluative questions when students were interacting with their teacher ($\chi$2 (3, $N$=423)=10.94, $p$=.000) and with their peers ($\chi^2$ (3, $N$=457)=12.26, $p$=.000).

More specifically with regard to each specific speech act, it can be seen that the most frequently used ones in response to divergent questions when students were interacting with their teacher and their peers and the most frequently used speech acts in response to evaluative questions after directives belonged to expressive category that are related to expressing feelings. This result is in line with the findings in a study conducted by Carr et al. (2012), revealing that messages within social network were primarily constructed with expressive speech acts. This result also concurs with the results in a study by Nastri et al. (2006), which referred to expressive speech acts as one of the most frequent speech acts performed in status messages. As is argued by Nastri et al., "instead of providing factual or scheduling information, expressive speech acts reflect sentiments about specific events or people" (p.1038). Also, sharing status updates is a way of making other people know how one feels or what is going on in one's life (Gunter, 2010).

The only difference between the use of expressives addressed to teachers and peers was in using emoticons. Students used emoticons, when they were interacting with their peers. Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta (2014) explain that "the word "emoticon," a construction of the words "emotion" and "icon," refers to graphic representations of facial expressions, which often follow utterances in written Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)" (p. 780). Emoticons are created by either the use of ASCII symbols or pictograms as graphic symbols. They also stated that, when such emoticons follow expressive speech acts, they reflect sincerity of users in their expression and are used for the purpose of collaboration.

In addition, the most frequently used speech act in response to evaluative questions, when students were interacting with their teacher and their peers and the most frequently used speech acts in response to divergent questions after expressives, belonged to directives. This was in contrast

to the result of the study conducted by Nastri et al. (2006), which reported a very low production rate of directive speech acts in the construction of away messages. Searle (1991) acknowledges that "any directive counts as an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (p. 100).

Examples of directives include ordering, commanding, requesting, pleading, begging, entreating, daring, inviting, insisting, suggesting, permitting and challenging. Most of directives were also posed as questions and requests for more information. Asking questions made it possible for learners chosen as participants of the study to initiate. As Sampath (2001) argues, "to initiate means to make the first move, to lead, to begin, to introduce an idea or concept for the first time and to express one's own will" (p. 58). Indeed, the participants used emoticons in directives addressed to teachers and peers. According to Skovholt et al. (2014), when emoticons follow directives such as requests, "they seem to compensate for the threat towards recipient's negative face and their communicative function is to soften the illocutionary force and render the directive less authoritative" (p.790).

The third category of speech act frequently used in response to both divergent and evaluative questions was quotation. This result was in agreement with the findings of studies conducted by Baron, Squires, Tench, and Thompson (2005) and Nastri et al. (2006) that reported quotations as a common component of away messages, which are used primarily to entertain and provide personal information. It seems that quotations are also used for the purpose of self-expression. As stated by Ilyas and Khushi (2012), using quotations is a way to express specific themes, including love, relationship, and success. Ilyas and Khushi assert that such acts are "just a way of making other network members feel the participant's presence. It can also be that the writer has read something which s/he feels like sharing it with the members (p. 505). Also, the fourth category of speech acts included commissives. As is expressed by Qadir and Riloff (2011), commissives are rarely used in message boards. However, they were the fourth category of speech acts used in the present study. As Ilyas and Khushi (2012) mention, commissives can also be used in away messages to convey one's own thought, emotions and voice when language users try to commit themselves to others at national level.

The least frequently used speech acts used were representatives. This result was in contrast with findings of study carried out by Nastri et al. (2006) that reported representatives as the most frequently used speech acts in away messages that were used to convey information to other interlocutors. It seems that participants of the present study mainly tried to express their own views and emotions and to ask and request for more information rather than to transfer information. Although questioning in Facebook gave learners the opportunity to express their emotions and to ask and request for information, there was still a difference in relation between learners and their teacher and their relations with their peers as was revealed from emoticon applications. The participants mainly used expressives followed by directives in response to divergent questions and directives followed by expressives in response to evaluative questions. Despite this fact that both of these questions are higher order questions, they are different. As argued by Erickson (2007),

divergent questions make responders explore different answers understanding this point that there is no definitely correct answer. This type of questions stimulates creative and imaginative answers, whereas evaluative questions need a complex level of cognitive and emotional judgments. Responders of this type of questions should analyze their own response from different perspectives, before achieving the final answer. Olrich, Harder, Callahan, and Brown (2012) explain that "The basic difference between a divergent question and an evaluative question is that the evaluative has a built-in set of evaluative criteria" (p. 219). In fact, evaluative questions address why. According to Thomas (1988),

The spirit of struggling with difficult, even unanswerable questions is what keeps learning alive. "Why" is so important because it sits at the very heart of learning: the spirit of curiosity, the purposes for which we set up a school system at all, the reasons we teach. Without why . . . the hows and whats don't matter very much. (pp. 554-555).

Whereas divergent questions make it possible for learners to express their responses without interference of the teacher, evaluative questions allow them share various viewpoints.

## 5. Conclusions

The present study aimed at investigating speech acts used by Iranian EFL learners on the social network of Facebook in response to divergent and evaluative questions. The participants were 12 Iranian undergraduate students of English language and literature selected based on their level of English language proficiency. The result of data analysis using content analysis revealed that participants mainly used expressive speech acts in response to divergent questions both in interaction with their teachers and in interaction with their peers. They also used directives more than any other speech acts in response to evaluative questions. The present study was a qualitative study, which focused on 12 students. Thus, a deeper understanding of how Iranian EFL learners use speech acts on Facebook requires more approval from other quantitative studies, addressing a larger number of participants. Furthermore, the scope of this study was restricted to Facebook, whereas researchers can explore the use of speech acts on other social network sites.

Moreover, the results of this study will be helpful for teachers of Universities and can draw the attention of teachers to the importance of social networks such as Facebook. This study can also shed some light on the use of technology in order to support the use of language and shape relations. Questioning is also an important aspect of teaching, which can be used to improve learners' communicative skills, as was discussed in our study.

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