

Directive Strategies in Czech Classroom Communication

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Abstract: The study analyses teachers' directive utterances recorded during spontaneous classroom interactions in Czech schools with pupils aged 11–16. Transcripts from the AKCES 2 corpus were examined using a coding scheme based on speech act theory. Teachers employed a range of communicative strategies, most of them direct. Imperatives were the most frequent, alongside performative verbs and modal constructions. Numerous non-sentential forms, such as adverbs, interjections, and elliptical expressions, also served directive functions. Teachers varied grammatical features like tense, person, and number to express politeness, reduce imposition, and achieve communicative efficiency.

Keywords: directive speech acts; classroom communication; pragmatics; communicative strategies; power distance

Introduction

The educational policy of the Czech Republic is based on two major objectives:

1. To orient education toward the development of competencies essential for active civic, professional, and personal life.
2. To reduce inequalities in access to quality education and to foster the maximum development of each child's potential.

Communicative competence is one of the key objectives emphasised in the Framework Educational Programmes (*Rámcové vzdělávací programy*), which define expected outcomes across all levels of education. Communicative competence does not involve only the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also includes sociopragmatic competence.

Sociopragmatic competence refers to the speaker's ability to interpret and produce language appropriately within the norms, expectations, and conventions of a given social and cultural context. It involves an understanding of how social variables such as power, distance, age, gender, and institutional roles influence language use, especially in performing speech acts (e.g., requests, refusals, compliments). This competence enables speakers to select contextually appropriate linguistic strategies that reflect politeness norms, levels of formality, and interpersonal sensitivity within the target language community.

Research shows that young children acquire pragmatic skills through real-life interaction, by observing others and participating in everyday communication (Bates, 1976). While teachers and institutional figures serve as early role models, peer influence and media exposure become increasingly prominent as children grow older. Nevertheless, the language strategies used by teachers remain impactful and help shape pupils' pragmatic awareness.

Speech acts with *directive illocutionary force* are among the most face-threatening acts due to their inherently imposing nature (Brown, & Levinson, 1978). Even preschool-aged children learn that modifying a request linguistically can improve their chances of achieving communicative goals. By the end of lower secondary school (age 15/16), pupils are expected to master a range of strategies for mitigating directive speech according to social and situational context. However, the curriculum itself – particularly in stylistics, literature, and grammar – offers limited opportunities for practising such skills. In



contrast, pupils engage daily in interactions with teachers, in which directive utterances are common. If teachers employ a rich variety of linguistic strategies in these interactions, pupils may internalise them as part of their mental grammar and lexicon.

The aim of this study is to analyse the linguistic strategies that teachers use in authentic classroom communication in Czech basic schools. The research questions are as follows:

1. Which linguistic means do teachers employ in their directive utterances addressed to basic school pupils?
2. What levels of directness do teachers use in their directive utterances addressed to basic school pupils?

To address these questions, the study draws on authentic corpus data and applies a speech-act-based analytical framework, which will be described in the following sections.

Previous research

There is a wide range of foreign scientific studies on the topic of speech acts available to Czech researchers, mostly published in English. Among the most extensively studied speech acts are requests, apologies, and compliments. One of the most influential contrastive studies in this area was conducted within the framework of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). This project analysed the forms of requests and apologies across several languages, including Australian English, American English, British English, Canadian French, Danish, German, Hebrew, and Russian. The researchers also developed a coding scheme for requests and apologies, largely based on the earlier work of Edmondson and House (Edmondson, 1981; Edmondson, & House, 1981).

The CCSARP project sparked widespread scholarly interest, leading to a large number of follow-up studies on speech act realisation. Researchers have investigated both spontaneous and elicited language production, and computer-mediated communication has become increasingly popular as a source of data.

In the Czech Republic, several studies have focused on speech acts such as requests, apologies, and compliments. For example, requests have been analysed by Chejnová (2014, 2015a), compliments by Válková (2012) and Dvořáková (2017), and apologies by Chejnová (2012, 2021). The speech acts of teachers in preschool settings were examined by Slančová (1999).

Perhaps the most comprehensive research on classroom communication in the Czech context has been conducted by Šed'ová and her colleagues. Their studies (Šed'ová et al., 2012, 2019) explored various aspects of classroom interaction, including verbal and non-verbal communication, types of classroom dialogue, relational dynamics, teacher questioning strategies, and feedback. These studies are based on authentic classroom settings and investigate both relational and cognitive dimensions of communication. However, while the work of Šed'ová et al. covers a wide range of pedagogical aspects, a detailed linguistic analysis of speech acts and their interpretation in classroom discourse remains lacking.

Speech acts in educational settings have also been analysed from the perspective of pupils' understanding and interpretation of communicative functions – specifically, how their preconceptions of speech act function influence their ability to produce contextually appropriate utterances. Hájková et al. (2013) examined how elementary school pupils formulate utterances with various communicative functions. The findings showed that pupils were capable of producing questions, requests, directive and assertive utterances, threats, commands, etc. A follow-up study (Hájková et al., 2014) explored whether pupils could identify the communicative function of utterances in a questionnaire, which proved to be significantly more challenging. However, after carefully structured training, their performance improved notably.

Finally, the development of directive speech acts in the spontaneous production of a Czech-speaking child was analysed by Chejnová (2015b), offering valuable insights into early pragmalinguistic development.

Data and methodology

The analysis is based on authentic classroom data. The source material is the AKCES 2 corpus (see <https://akces.ff.cuni.cz>), which consists of unreduced transcripts of recorded lessons. These recordings also served as the foundation for the SCHOLA 2010 corpus, a component of the Czech National Corpus.

Transcripts from ten lessons were analysed. The recordings come from the second stage of basic schools and the lower grades of eight-year grammar schools, involving pupils aged approximately 11 to 16 years. All data are anonymised (including names of teachers, pupils, and schools), but selected metadata – such as school type, subject, and class level – are available within the SCHOLA 2010 documentation.

The analysed material includes lessons taught by various teachers at different types of schools and across different subjects, which ensures a basic degree of contextual variation. As the corpus consists solely of transcribed verbal interaction, non-verbal means of behaviour regulation (e.g., gestures, gaze, or intonation) are not included in the analysis.

The AKCES 2 corpus was selected for its authenticity, the richness of spontaneous classroom interaction, and its consistent transcription conventions, which make it especially suitable for pragmatic analysis. Although the data were collected in 2010, directive speech acts in school discourse tend to exhibit a high degree of pragmatic stability, which supports the relevance of these findings for current educational contexts.

The aim of this study is to analyse teachers' utterances with directive illocutionary force, specifically requests for action used to manage or influence pupils' behaviour. The analysis focuses on both the form and function of these directive speech acts.

For the analysis of formal properties, the study draws on the theoretical framework of speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1970; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; for the Czech context: Grepl, & Karlík, 1998). The lexical and grammatical realisation of directive speech acts was examined in detail. Recurrent formulae and syntactic structures

were quantified, which enables a frequency-based comparison and identification of dominant patterns.

In addition, all directive speech acts were coded according to their degree of directness. The coding scheme used for the classification of directive utterances is presented in Table 1, along with illustrative examples from the corpus.

The coding scheme was inspired by the framework proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), but it has been extended to include additional categories that were not present in the original model. This was necessary because the forms of requests for action in Czech classroom discourse employ a wider range of grammatical structures than those captured by the original scheme. The use and illocutionary functions of these forms will be discussed in the following sections.

Table 1. Coding categories for request for action

Level of directness	Form type	Example in Czech	English translation
Most direct	Imperative	Podívejte se	Look
	Performative	Poprosila bych...	I would ask to...
	Want statement	Chtěla bych, aby...	I would like...
	Declarative: present tense	Pokračujeme	We continue
	Declarative: future tense	Tak počkáme	So, we will wait
	Infinitive	Počkat	To wait
Conventionally indirect	Modal + infinitive	Můžete se posadit	You can sit down
	Modal +infinitive + question	Můžete to přečíst?	Can you read it?
Indirect	Interest statement	Mě by zajímalo, kdo najde...	I am interested in who will find...
Elliptical structures	Interjections	Pst	Shhh
	Adverbs	Tiše	Quiet
	Address		Name of the pupil
	Noun phrase	Další dotazy?	Further questions?

Results

Table 2 presents the frequencies of different directive strategies used by teachers across ten observed lessons. I–X represent individual lessons; the last column shows total frequencies and relative percentages.

Tab. 2. Number of occurrences of strategies employed

		I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	TO-TAL	TO-TAL %
Most direct	Imperative	16	5	18	14	15	16	24	27	20	36	191	41,7
	Performative	2	2	3	2	1	1	10	9	8	4	42	9,2
	Want statement	3	0	2	6	2	3	0	2	3	0	21	4,6
	Declarative: present tense	1	1	2	1	5	1	0	1	1	8	21	4,6
	Declarative: future tense	9	7	2	6	8	8	3	7	0	15	65	14,2
	Infinitive	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0,4
Conventionally indirect	Modal + infinitive	2	2	6	5	9	12	3	10	1	10	60	13,1
	Modal + infinitive + question	0	2	4	5	1	2	0	0	0	1	15	3,3
Indirect	Interest statement	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0,4
Elliptical structures	Interjections	3	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	2	10	2,2
	Adverbs	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	1	5	1,1
	Address	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	5	1,1
	Noun phrase	4	0	0	3	8	2	1	0	0	1	19	4,1
		41	19	37	43	54	46	44	57	35	82	458	100

The most frequent form, by a significant margin, was the imperative (191 occurrences, 41.7%), which confirms the prevailing use of direct and explicit strategies in Czech classroom discourse. Teachers relied heavily on imperatives to give instructions, regulate behaviour, and maintain classroom order.

Other direct forms, such as performatives (*Poprosila bych...*) and want statements (*Chtěla bych, aby...*), occurred less frequently but still showed a meaningful presence, accounting for 9.2% and 4.6% of the data respectively. Interestingly, declarative sentences, both in the present (*Pokračujeme*) and future tense (*Tak počkáme*), also served a directive function and appeared with notable frequency. Especially the use of future tense declaratives (14.2%) may indicate a strategy of softening directness by projecting the action into the near future, while still maintaining control.

Among conventionally indirect strategies, modal constructions (*Můžete se posadit*) accounted for 13.1% of all utterances, suggesting a moderate tendency toward politeness and mitigation. Questions with modals (*Můžete to přečíst?*) were less frequent (3.3%) but notable for their interrogative surface form masking a directive intent.

Indirect strategies were rare: interest statements formed less than 1% of the corpus. However, a rich set of elliptical and fragmentary structures was present, especially noun phrases (*Další dotazy?*), vocatives (*Petře...*), or interjections (*Pst!*). These forms made up a small but meaningful portion of the data, showing that spontaneous teacher speech often relies on contextually anchored, minimalistic directives.

Discussion

The research brings several interesting findings. First, the answers to the research questions will be presented, followed by a reflection on some significant aspects of classroom communication that were revealed – concerning both the specifics of educational discourse and the broader cultural characteristics of Czech society as part of the Slavic cultural space.

1. Which linguistic means do teachers employ in their directive utterances addressed to basic school pupils?
2. What levels of directness do teachers use in their directive utterances addressed to basic school pupils?

Teachers predominantly employed direct strategies, especially imperatives. However, a wide range of other, less frequent strategies was also identified. In summary, although various linguistic means were used to express directives, the highest frequency was recorded for the most direct and prototypical type – the imperative.

This finding may seem surprising, considering the current emphasis on communicative approaches to education, as reflected in the Framework Educational Programmes (*Rámcové vzdělávací programy*). Moreover, faculties of education in Czechia typically promote more symmetrical and dialogical communication between teachers and pupils, so one might have expected a greater presence of mitigated or indirect strategies.

However, the results may reflect deeper and more stable cultural patterns, rooted not only in institutional practices but in Czech communicative norms and societal structures.

Firstly, Czechia is a country with a relatively high power distance index. According to Hofstede (2001, p. 98), the power distance index refers to “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.” As of 2025, the Czech Republic scores 57, placing it slightly above the global average. In societies with a higher power distance index, hierarchical and asymmetric structures are accepted and often expected.

According to Hofstede, power distance influences teaching and learning processes (Hofstede, 1986). He formulates differences between low and high power distance cultures in education as follows (Hofstede, 2001, s. 107):

Table 3. Educational process in cultures with low and high power distance index

Low PDI	High PDI
Teachers treat students as equals.	Students are dependent on teachers.
Students treat teachers as equals.	Students treat teachers with respect, even outside class.
Student-centred education.	Teacher-centred education.
Students initiate some communication in class.	Teachers initiate all communication in class.
Teachers are experts who transfer impersonal truth.	Teachers are gurus who transfer personal wisdom.
Parents may side with students against teachers.	Parents are supposed to side with teachers to keep students in order.
Quality of learning depends on two-way communication and the excellence of students.	The quality of learning depends on the excellence of teachers.
Lower educational levels maintain more authoritarian relations.	Authoritarian values are independent of educational levels.
The educational system focuses on middle levels.	The educational system focuses on the top level.

Although shifts in communicative style can be observed at higher levels of education in Czechia, certain aspects of asymmetrical communication remain prevalent. As the pupils in this sample were under the age of sixteen, it is possible that at higher levels of education, the proportion of indirect speech acts may be greater.

Secondly, Slavic cultures in general tend to favour more direct communicative strategies, even in asymmetrical interactions. Imperatives and performatives may not be perceived as face-threatening to the same extent as in many Western cultures. This tendency has been documented across multiple Slavic languages and contexts. For example, Ogiermann (2009), using data from a discourse completion task, reports the following pattern:

The preferences for direct vs. conventionally indirect strategies across languages show a distributional pattern which seems to be in accordance with the geographical position of the countries where the data were collected. The use of imperative constructions increases from West to East: with 4% in the English, 5% in the German, 20% in the Polish and 35% in the Russian data (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 209).

This Eastward shift in directive style is supported by Czech data as well. Chejnová (2014, 2015a) analysed requests in emails addressed to university lecturers and also found a tendency toward more direct expression in the Czech context.

Thirdly, directive utterances in the classroom are primarily regulative in nature – their main purpose is to help the teacher organise the structure and flow of the lesson. In this context, efficiency often outweighs concerns for politeness. In other words, teachers may prefer to be clear rather than polite, aligning more closely with Grice's cooperative principle than Leech's politeness principle (Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983). From this perspective, using an imperative may not only be expected but even considered *polite*, as it saves the listener's cognitive effort and reduces uncertainty or stress. Pupils immediately understand what action is required, which facilitates smooth classroom management.

Declarative sentences employing present or future tense forms are typical of Czech classroom discourse. These structures differ subtly in pragmatic force from direct imperatives. While they often serve the same regulatory function, they shift the focus to the current or planned activity and are typically less imposing in tone.

Example 1: 2nd person plural, present tense indicative
vy si píšete do sešitu / you are writing in your notebook

This form literally describes the ongoing action; however, it clearly implies monitoring of desired behaviour, and its directive function is contextually transparent.

Example 2: 1st person plural, present tense indicative
přemýšlíme, po ránu máme svěží mozek / we are thinking, our brains are fresh in the morning

Here, the teacher uses an inclusive plural to reduce social distance and make the directive more collaborative. The utterance frames the task as shared and is gentle in tone.

Example 3: 1st person plural, future tense indicative
Tak počkáme, až se nám přihlásí víc lidí / We will wait until more people raise their hands

This utterance regulates pupils' behaviour non-invasively, using future tense and inclusive framing to soften the asymmetry of the teacher-student relationship.

These forms are rather specific to spoken educational discourse in asymmetrical settings. As such, they may sound slightly paternalistic, yet their level of imposition remains low.

Indirect forms were rare in the data. However, conventionally indirect forms did appear, usually using modal verbs with infinitives. Expressions like *můžete se posadit / you may sit down* and *můžete začít psát / you may start writing* are pragmatically transparent and unlikely to cause misunderstanding. Still, their greater length and syntactic complexity may make them less efficient for quick classroom management.

In contrast, short elliptical forms are often more effective due to their brevity and transparency. When a teacher directly addresses a pupil or a group, the utterance is commonly interpreted as a directive, especially when the expected action is contextually known, such as answering a question or reading aloud. In some cases, addressing may serve a regulatory or even reprimanding function:

Example 4: Addressing in plural
pánové / gentlemen

This utterance is typically used to interrupt misbehaviour. The addressees are aware of its directive force. The formal term of address is used ironically, further emphasising the disapproval.

Interjections (*ššš, pst*) or adverbs (*tiše, ticho / quiet*) are used mostly to regulate noise.

Conclusions

The analysis of authentic classroom communication revealed that teachers use a wide range of linguistic means, often combining them in complex ways. Verbal categories are particularly versatile: teachers shift between grammatical persons – not only using the second person to address pupils directly, but also employing the first person singular in want-statements and the first person plural in inclusive forms. Both singular and plural forms are used, reflecting the dual focus on indivi-

duals and the whole class. In some grammar schools, teachers even use V-forms (honorific plural) when addressing individual pupils.

Tense is another flexible verbal category. The present tense often functions as an attention-getter, anchoring pupils in the current situation, while the future tense presents the desired activity as something inevitable and upcoming. Mood plays a crucial role in modulating the level of imposition: the imperative is the most impositive yet also the least ambiguous structure, whereas modal verbs help mitigate the force of the directive.

Importantly, directive illocutionary force is not expressed solely through verb forms. Teachers also rely on adverbs, interjections, and various forms of address, including elliptical and fragmentary structures, which contribute to the regulatory function of speech in the classroom.

While direct forms were used most frequently – and may appear authoritative on the surface – a deeper analysis shows that such usage aligns with the cultural norms of Slavic languages, which generally favour directness to prevent misunderstanding. Moreover, the classroom is a cooperation-oriented environment, where the Gricean cooperative principle often takes precedence: clarity and efficiency are prioritised so that pupils can immediately understand what is expected of them. In this context, directness is not rudeness – it is a pragmatic strategy that supports learning.

Future research should explore whether these patterns are stable across time and age groups. The present study was based on data from 2010 and focused on pupils aged 11 to 16. Further studies should make use of more recent corpora and include a broader range of age categories, including both younger children in early primary education and older students in upper secondary or tertiary settings. This would make it possible to track potential developmental and generational shifts in classroom directive practices.

By continuing to analyse real-life educational discourse, researchers can contribute not only to theoretical models of pragmatics, but also to practically informed teacher training and a better understand-

ing of classroom dynamics. The way we speak to learners shapes how they learn and how they perceive the roles of authority, cooperation, and language itself.

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