



Functions of teacher authority in classroom interaction: Investigating contexts for language learning

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ABSTRACT

Classroom interaction is fundamental to any pedagogical practice. Through interaction, teachers accomplish the tasks of teaching and managing classroom activities. Whatever approach a new or experienced teacher takes to teaching, classroom communication mediates between teaching and learning. The teacher–student relationship is inherently asymmetrical, where the teacher has the power to establish different contexts for language use and learning in a classroom and to control student behaviour. The aim of the study is to investigate the typical discursive structures of classroom interaction to determine the different contexts for language learning. Qualitative data were collected from five schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The data were analysed using theoretical and analytical models from conversation and discourse analysis. The findings revealed that teachers use their authority and power to set up contexts where learners participate in different forms of interaction, which have different implications for language learning. In some contexts, the teacher controls interaction strictly; in others, the students have more power over their interaction. Teachers must be cognisant of their choices to make informed pedagogical decisions in their language classrooms.

Keywords: classroom interaction, teacher authority, contexts for language learning, IRE/IRF, conversation analysis, English language teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Classroom interaction is necessary for learning to take place. It is particularly important for language learning because it provides learners with the opportunity to experience and to develop the target language. “The study of classroom interaction can help teachers gain awareness of the discourse strategies that can be used to promote participation and enhance communication” (Vicencio & Huerta, 2022). The aim of the study is to analyse classroom interaction to identify the discourse patterns that the teachers utilise to enhance language learning and communication. While many studies explore classroom interaction (Narvacan & Metila 2022; Erling & Paar, 2022; Huq & Amir, 2015), they do not link their findings explicitly to the theoretical foundations of language learning. This research aims to address this gap.

The teacher–student relationship is essentially unequal. The evidence of this asymmetrical relationship can be found in the structure of classroom interaction. For this purpose, we may look at the typical categories of classroom interaction that yield its distinctive character. Built within these categories are the social roles and statuses of teachers and learners (Stubbs, 1983).

Traditionally, a teacher holds a position of authority over their learners and controls turn-taking procedures in a classroom (Estaji & Shojakhanlou, 2022). The teacher has the authority to determine the rules for communication. For instance, they have the right to ask questions, to terminate learner talk, to provide feedback, to give instructions, to reprimand, and generally to keep the learners in their place (Ellis, 1990). Sometimes, teachers may ask a question to the entire

class instead of nominating someone to respond. In this case, more than one student may answer. The students may bid for their turn. However, the teacher still controls who may contribute and may select someone from among the non-bidding learners (Gardner, 2019).

Teachers enjoy this authority as a function of their social role; they know things the students do not know. In other words, they are responsible for imparting knowledge to students and for assessing their performance against specific standards (Mehan, 1985).

The structure of typical classroom discourse is so familiar that “any school child playing teacher will produce most of the behaviours used by most teachers ... standing in front of a group of relatively passive onlookers, doing most of the talking, asking questions to which they already know the answer, and evaluating...” (Edwards & Westgate, 1994).

Teachers may sometimes choose to place the learners in groups, allowing them (the learners) to control the topic or direction of their talk. However, even then, teachers maintain their right to regain control over the structure of classroom processes. We can, therefore, surmise that the most outstanding organisational feature of classroom discourse is what is commonly referred to as the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) or IRE (Initiation–Response–Evaluation) structure (Ellis, 1999; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; van Lier, 1995).

An analysis of classroom interaction reveals that, based on the IRF/IRE sequence, we have turn-taking, as well as questioning and answering patterns that act as a function of teacher authority in a classroom (Ellis, 1990). These variables are important in determining the type of contexts that a teacher establishes in their classroom and are, in turn, linked to learners’ use of language for learning and their language acquisition. Changes in these structures result in various contexts of language learning, and corresponding roles for the learners. Classroom participation and interaction of learners are indicators of the extent of their learning (Petitjean, 2014; Walsh, 2014).

In form-focused teaching, the teacher controls interactional patterns firmly via the IRF/IRE sequence. The teacher has the right to allocate turns and to determine the turn length. They can control the lesson content and learner contributions. They do so by nominating learners and engaging in initiative-minimising initiations or questions as a response to which the learners are required to produce known-information answers. Learner responses are generally single utterances; upon completion the speaker turns back to the teacher who evaluates the accuracy of the learner response.

Dispreferred learner responses are met with preformulation (for example, clues and informatives) and reformulation (re-elicitations, rephrasing) strategies to obtain the correct answers. The teacher’s feedback enables the learners to confirm or invalidate the accuracy of their knowledge (Estaji & Shojakhanlou, 2022; Greyling, 1995; Johnson, 1995).

In other words, accuracy-based teaching has a metacommunicative focus, where the teacher plays a dominant role in creating a context for learners to learn about language rather than using it. Teacher questions and feedback are only meant to test the learners’ existing knowledge and do not encourage conversation-like interaction where learners can participate on equal terms (Mehan, 1985; White & Lightbown, 1984).

Brumfit (1984) identifies the following features associated with accuracy-based teaching: Any activity in which the learners do not use language in the same way they use their natural or mother tongue is an accuracy activity. There is explicit teaching of forms and expectation of convergent imitation. Controlled production of display language for the purpose of evaluation is the predominant focus of a lesson. There is marked attention on ‘usage’ and not on the ‘use’ of language. However, he makes his view clear on the place of accuracy work in a second-language classroom: “The distinction is not between what is good and bad in language teaching; there is a definite role for accuracy work in language teaching... but its over-use will impede language development” (Brumfit, 1984).

The teacher in fluency-based lessons is willing to give up the typical IRF/IRE pattern to allow the students to participate in various communication-gap activities. Teachers set up a learning space for the learners in which they control their interaction as equals-at-talk. Thus, the discourse they produce reflects the characteristics of normal conversation where they can initiate talk and select one another to speak in the performance of purposeful activities. The focus is on

the construction of meaning and the production of authentic, spontaneous texts. Learners can use the target language as if it were their mother tongue. The accuracy or inaccuracy of the language produced is irrelevant. However, concern for natural language use can be combined with the concern for accuracy at advanced levels.

In keeping with the demands of natural language use, learners attempt to produce coherent and appropriate language in a wide range of contexts. These contexts replicate natural acquisition-like interaction, like the way children are thought to learn language. The focus is not solely linguistic; there is an interplay of a range of signalling systems. During these fluency-based activities, the teacher takes the role of a participant-at-talk, if required. This means that these activities imply a structure where the learners assume more responsibility and control of their tasks (yet the lesson's structure remains the teacher's domain of authority), unlike teacher-dominated lessons where learners remain subordinate to the teacher for the entire duration. Correction either has no or a minor place in such message-oriented communication tasks. Feedback provided by the teacher is content based, which focuses essentially on the effectiveness of communication and not on the accuracy of grammatical forms (Brumfit, 1984; Johnson, 1995; Stern, 1992).

METHOD

The aim of the study is to explore the discourse patterns established by language teachers in classroom talk. For this purpose, the study utilises qualitative research methodology. Data were collected from English language classrooms in five Eastern Cape schools in South Africa: three primary schools and two high schools. The data were collected after institutional ethics clearance was obtained. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Data comprise audio recordings of English language lessons. Out of five lessons, three lessons were selected for their representation of different contexts for language learning. These lessons included examples of teacher-dominated- and teacher-facilitated classroom talk.

The first lesson included 31 learners from Grade 5, who were aged between 10 and 12. The second lesson included 35 learners from Grade 8, who were between the ages of 13 and 15. The 29 learners in the third lesson were from Grade 6, aged between 11 and 13. Many of them were English second-language speakers. The audio-recorded data were transcribed and coded for further analysis.

To examine how teachers use their position of authority to establish various contexts for language learning in their classrooms, we used frameworks that explain these contexts to understand the interactional processes occurring in them. These contexts allow learners diverse opportunities for language use. Therefore, our analysis attempts to reveal the nature of these opportunities in relation to their implications for the receivers (the learners), so that teachers can make informed choices in their classrooms. We use Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) IRF model to analyse accuracy-based data and Sacks et al.'s (1974) model of conversation analysis to analyse fluency-based data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Lesson 1: Focus on structure

The topic of the lesson: Grammar - Verbs

This lesson is about teaching and revising verbs. The focus is metacommunicative. The teacher has a table of tenses with her, which she uses for the lesson (she has handed it out to the class). The lesson takes the form of an audiolingual drill, where the teacher controls the topic and content of the lesson strictly. She allocates turns and asks questions to determine learners' knowledge about verbs (Turns 3–11).

Extract 1

- 3) T: No, five verbs, your first (loud, as the students are making noise) and most F, I
important verb is the ...
- 4) L: Finite verb. R

- 5) T: Finite verb; that's the verb I'll teach you in the lesson and it's your first verb. F/I
What's your next verb?
- 6) L: Auxiliary R
- 7) T: Auxiliary verb. The next one is? F/I
- 8) L: Preset participle R
- 9) T: Present participle. F
T: The fourth one ... is? I
- 10) L: Past participle. R
- 11) T: Past participle and then the fifth one is...? F/I

The teacher in the lesson initiates (Turn 3), the learners respond (Turn 4), and the teacher provides feedback (Turn 5). After providing feedback, she re-initiates (Turn 5), and the pattern follows recurrently. The learners produce single-utterance responses, (Turns 4, 6, 8 and 10), do not initiate utterances, and select only the teacher as the next speaker. She asks known-information questions to assess learners' knowledge of the subject, and they are expected to focus on isolated language structures (Turns 3–11).

Extract 2

- 26) T: What's another name for the conditional? F/I
- 27) L: Future past. R
- 28) T: Also known as the future plus past. F
Present, Past, Future, Conditional (future in the past)
T: Okay. Now, from this, what must you remember? I
T: You must remember these three names. Those are your four basic tenses
That's down.
Then class, you're going to remember simple. R
In this column, you're going to remember the word 'simple' and that ties up
with that and you get simple present.
T: In this column, you get the same word right down all the way. Let me write
down all the way.
The word 'simple' runs down all the way.
And simple ties up with present. Here it ties up with present. Here it ties up with
past. Here it ties up with future. Here it ties up with conditional (does not wait
for student response).
We've got our first column here. In our next column our new word is going to be? I
- 29) L: Perfect R
- 30) T: Present perfect. These are your tenses. F
By the way, you're going to work with them here.
You've got past plus your new word perfect. Now you've got future plus your
new word, which is 'perfect'. And the last one you've got conditional tying with
the new word 'perfect'.
Now as we, as we go across, our new words are 'simple' in column 'A', 'perfect'
in column B, and then we go to our next column and your next column...
T: What is your next column? I

Extract 3

- 54) T: Future tense, is I? I
- 55) L: shot... (not clear) R
- 56) T: shall or will shoot? F
shall or will shoot (with emphasis)
Simple conditional is? I
- 57) L: No response
- 58) T: Class remember, conditional is the future in the past and which part of the verb
will it take
– auxiliary verb? I

Extract 4

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 74) T: Was shooting. | F |
| The future continuous will be I ... | I |
| 75) L: Will or ... | R |
| 76) T: Will or shall be shooting | F |
| And next one I... | I |

Lesson II: Verbal scaffolding

Topic of the lesson: discussion of marriage and marriage ceremonies

Extract 5

- 1) T: ...You can take good note of what you hear; when you see the posters, you can question the person about it. Do not fear, you may question the person...the one does not really answer the question the second one can always answer the question. You can argue with them. You will have five minutes for each poster. Okay, now this is what your mind map is going to have.

Number one, place the topic of marriage in the centre. Secondly, organise information using the following sub-topics. Sub-topics are going to be the things that...about the main topic.

Subtopic are 1) Types of marriage customs and rituals associated with weddings; 2) Superstitions in marriage; and 3) Marriage ceremonies.

T: Now those are covered in your posters, right? And then you've got to include at least three examples of each sub-topic. Now, we will talk more about this tomorrow when you must do those mind maps, but today you are just going to have feedback on the texts that you studied in your expert groups.

Now can I have two people from each expert group to pick up their posters, please?

Extract 6

- | | |
|--|--------|
| 7) T: Who's done that poster? Who'll come and explain that poster? | I |
| 8) L: (Learners respond.
They start explaining the topic and the information about the topic that they have on their posters).
L 1: ...NUNS... | |
| Some nuns wear traditional habit. It means the traditional habit is the black and white thing that they wear but now some of them can wear their own clothes, but it's not traditional to wear, but you don't have to. | R |
| 9) T: Tell me where they wear; do they wear the same clothes all over the world? Or is it different in different countries? | I |
| 10) L 2: I think that some can maybe it depends on their culture or maybe the countries. | I |
| 11) T: Yes, that's the point. That's not an important question but you're saying that they are changing in a lot of countries, they don't have to wear the uniform or habit anymore
T: Questions? | F
I |
| 12) L 3: It depends on each order. | R |
| 13) T: Yeah, each order, good! Like you have nuns or Benedictine nuns and so on, orders of nuns and they all have their own rules, so carry on. | F/I |
| 14) L 2: Okay Many religions are changing their because society is also changing, the religions are changing now, as first like may be a hundred years ago now being in a different lifestyle with more techni... | R |
| 15) T: Technological advances. | F |
| 16) L: Yeah, and our lifestyle is also changing, and we are getting more equipped, yeah...
The second question was reasons why priests should not marry. | R |
| 17) T: Okay, that was your question, should priests marry? | F/I |

- 18) L1: First reason is they should get married because of their religion. They should because, but they don't have to get married but if they want to they can because it's their choice, it's their decision whether they choose whichever religion and the second one is that they give up their life to God because they are taking that religion, their job is now is to worship God and to help others to also worship God. R
- 19) L1: ... everyone is to love someone and have a life partner and spend their life with and then it's their decision to marry or not that they should not be forced not to marry, they should marry on their own and they have a life of their own, the church doesn't rule... R
- 20) T: ... if a priest or somebody a minister of a church is married, he has experience. He can advise his people when they come to him with marriage problems and family problems, he has experience. F
T: Can we have a vote on that, how many of you believe that priests still should not get married. I
- 21) L: (laughter) R

Extract 7

- 30) T: What was your question then, the second activity? I
- 31) L: What it means, tying the knot? Life together, long-lasting love together, depending on each other, everlasting love, happiness, unity of two people in front of God, believing and trusting each other, a religious ceremony or act, sharing love... R
- 32) T: Good! Thank you very much. F
May I ask all members of the group, which do you think is the most important part of the whole marriage ceremony? ... All those things? The uniting? Is it the lasting love, the lasting commitment, depending on each other, which do you think? I
- 33) L: (Learners overlap teacher's talk). I think it is the lasting part... R
- 34) T: You think it's the lasting part of it. Anybody else, what do you think is the most important, trusting each... depending on each other, that it is a religious ceremony, do you think that is important? F
How many of you will not mind if your wedding is not religious? I

Lesson III: Fluency-focused interaction

Topic: Essay on pollution

The rationale for selecting this lesson lies in its representativeness of fluency-based, authentic language use in an educational setting. The learners in the classroom are engaged in creative writing. They are working together to produce an essay after discussing the topic. The learners possess sufficient information about the topic, as it is a familiar topic, which they are sharing to create their essay. The teacher has set up a context of group work and the learners are expected to collaborate to complete the task. See Extract 8.

Extract 8

- 1) L1: So, who wants to be the writer for our essay?
L2: What about you, Sibulele (name has been changed)?
- 3) L3: Yeah, Sibulele you can be the writer.
- 4) L4: I don't mind. How do I start?
- 5) L1: Start with the introduction first.
- 6) L2: Yeah, what's pollution? We need to start with a definition.
- 7) L1: Pollution is damage to the environment we live in. Human activity can cause pollution.
- 8) L3: Pollution is when you, when there is a lot of waste material littering a place. When humans act irresponsibly. Smoke from factories and cars can cause pollution. Pollution can also make you sick.

- 9) L2: And pollution can be different types. Water pollution, air pollution, land pollution. This can be the body of our essay.
- 10) L4: How many paragraphs should that be?
- 11) L2: We could write two.
- 12) L1: in the paragraph about air pollution, we can talk acid rain as well.
- 13) L4: Yes, acid rain can also cause pollution.
- 14) L3: What is acid rain?
- 15) L4: Acid rain is when there is acid gases that humans produce. They mix in the rain and it's harmful to the plants and rivers.
- 16) L3: That makes sense.
- 17) L1: There is water pollution as well from factories. Animals in the sea, they die because of sea pollution. Sometimes animals die cause of plastic things. They get caught in them.
- 18) L4: If one country dumps its waste, it will flow to other countries. It's not enough if one country does not pollute. We share oceans. We should work together

Discussion

Lesson 1 is categorised by the presence of the typical IRF sequence with no variation (Johnson, 1995; Mehan, 1985). All they are required to do is “produce automatic responses” to the teacher’s questions (Nunan, 1991). Learners’ opportunities for participation are linked to their opportunities for learning (Petitjean, 2014). Limited participation on the part of the learners inhibits their ability to think about teacher questions and to formulate informed answers (Eriling & Paar, 2022). On the other hand, active engagement in extended discourse allows learners to co-construct knowledge through interaction. Such interaction provides learners with comprehensible input which is important for language learning (Gass, 1997; Krashen, 1988).

The teacher in this lesson is engrossed in teaching and does not seem to be concerned about the participation of all learners in the classroom (Malamah-Thomas, 1987). She does not attempt to distribute the questions among the learners. Only a few seem to respond to her questions (Nunan, 1991). The average time she waits after asking a question is about 1.5 seconds (White & Lightbown, 1984). Sometimes, she does not even wait for a response and answers her own questions (Turns 28 and 30). Upon the occurrence of dispreferred responses, she attempts to repair the process to obtain the correct answer, or she provides the answer herself (Seedhouse, 2004) (Turns 54–58 and 74–76).

Communication in this classroom is not between equals-at-talk; the teacher controls the structure and content of the communication process (Johnson, 1995). She asks known-information questions to assess learners’ knowledge of the subject, and they are expected to focus on isolated language structures (Turns 3–11). The analysis reveals that the lesson is an example of accuracy-based teaching (Brumfit, 1984; Greyling, 1995).

According to Krashen (1982), “language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules and does not require tedious drill”. It develops gradually with comprehensible input “in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear” (Krashen, 1982).

In relation to our study, the teacher in this lesson has set up a context in which she controls the interaction strictly through the IRF exchanges and minimises learner initiative in producing language for learning. Although she attempts to provide input about language, there is hardly any negotiation of meaning.

To conclude, the above context does not provide sufficient input (Krashen, 1982) or output (Swain, 1995) opportunities for learners. Excessive use of IRF sequence results in monotonous and restricted communication (Koyuncu et al., 2024; Narvacan & Metila, 2022).

In lesson II, verbal scaffolding, learners participate in the co-operative learning method, specifically a jigsaw activity (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Richards, 2006). In this approach, learners are divided into their home groups. Then, members from each group are selected to form expert groups. These expert groups give information about specific topics. The learners must understand this information well because they are then sent back to their original home groups, where they must share this information with other members of their groups. In this way,

interdependence is built into the activity where each member is responsible for the entire group's performance.

The learners in this lesson have prepared their presentations as posters to communicate the information to their group members. Later, all of them will create mind maps and write essays based on the content of these presentations. The teacher provides instructions at the beginning of the lesson. According to these instructions, the learners are free to ask the expert members questions or to argue with them, i.e., they can self-initiate, allocate turns, and provide feedback within the structure of the lesson (Turn 1 and Turns 12, 18 and 19).

After handing out the instructions, the teacher asks them to start their presentation. She accompanies them to help if any problems arise. (It is important to note here that, during the learners' performance, it became difficult to follow what they were saying as all the groups interacted simultaneously. The teacher called all groups to gather in a circle (sitting on the floor) while the expert members of each group explained their topic). See Extracts 5, 6 and 7.

Instead of giving the authority to self-initiate or to control the content entirely over to the learners, the teacher in this lesson shares this authority with them in the role of a more capable adult (Richards, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). As is evident in the data, she asks questions relevant to the topic and guides the learners in exploring the topic further (Turns 9, 11, 13, 15, 20, 26, 32 and 34). In other words, she is providing scaffolds to the learners to work a little beyond their present ability to move towards more independence in the construction of meaning (Johnson, 1995; van Lier, 1988; van Lier, 1996). This activity is an example of Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development. To enable the learners to reach their potential level of development, the teacher is engaged in interactional collaboration with them. They are negotiating meaning and using the language instead of focusing on its form.

The lesson follows the initiation–response–feedback model of classroom discourse (cf. Mehan, 1985), although with variability (Johnson, 1995). The teacher in this lesson initiates (Turns 7 and 9), and the learners provide extended responses when they produce planned and unplanned discourse (Turns 8, 10, 14, 18 and 19) (van Lier, 1988). The learners can also express their opinions, such as in Turn 12. The teacher provides evaluative and content feedback (Seedhouse, 2009; Greyling, 1995), thus participating in the construction of knowledge (Turns, 11, 13 and 15). She engages in information-seeking questions (in contrast to the known-information questions asked in accuracy-based lessons) and acknowledges any responses produced by the learners (Turns: 20, 32–34). In their study, Narvacan and Metila (2022) found that “topic initiation, clarification, confirmation checks, extended wait-time, scaffolding and teacher echo” were beneficial for learning.

In relation to our study, we observe that the teacher has established a context, which allows learners to initiate topics and to use language to convey their meaning and to listen to others in the joint construction of discourse (Turns: 12, 18 and 19) (van Lier, 1996). The teacher and the learners are engaged in negotiation of meaning. In his study, Loschky (1994) contends that negotiated interaction promotes comprehension. Gardner (2019) and Allwright (1984) confirm that active participation of learners in classroom interaction is favourable for learning.

The lesson illustrates scaffolded fluency learning and provides an opportunity for both comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) and output (Ellis, 1990; Gass et al., 1998).

Socialisation

Another significant aspect of the lesson is that the teacher, in developing the learners' sociolinguistic knowledge, happens to guide them towards her own opinion on the subject (Johnson, 1995). In turns 19-20, a learner explains, ‘Should priests marry or not marry?’ The teacher clarifies why they should marry.

The data extract from lesson III shows that the learners are engaged in an activity that does not involve the teacher as a participant. She has established a learning space for these learners where they are free to interact with one another to achieve a certain goal, i.e., the joint production of an essay. Even though the learners are working with a pre-specified topic, they all have the choice and opportunity to contribute to the interaction (Turns 1–18).

As in ordinary conversation, and as explained by Sacks et al. (1974), no participant has the exclusive right or authority to allocate turns or to determine the content or length of such turns. Turns 3 and 14 demonstrate that they can select the next speaker or self-select (Turns 5–8) at the transition-relevant places (Sacks et al., 197; Sahlström, 2014). This interaction is among equals-at-talk, with no participant holding authority over the other. They are free to contribute to the discussion without fear of being evaluated on their contributions. This contrasts with learner responses occurring in the IRF exchange, where a teacher's evaluative feedback immediately follows such responses. As in ordinary conversation, they are free to articulate their turns. They are engaged in initiative-maximising interaction. They can receive input and produce output through their interaction (Gass, 1997; Krashen, 1982; 1988). This means they can learn from their peers who have equal or higher levels of proficiency, as explained by Vygotsky (1978) and by van Lier (1996).

They ask information-seeking questions and do not evaluate the responses but rather acknowledge them in relation to the purpose of communication (Seedhouse, 2004).

They can engage in extended discourse (Turns 8, 17–18) rather than single-word utterances. Their focus is on conveying meaning instead of on the accuracy of their utterances. Thus, their interaction is more symmetrical and like real-life conversation than the teacher-controlled traditional IRE/IRF-based interaction. According to Erling and Paar (2022), facilitating productive classroom talk allows learners to “use their entire linguistic repertoire and co-create responses, i.e., to think, talk and plan their responses together” which promotes language learning at different levels.

IRF model of discourse analysis (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) – IRE model (Mehan, 1985)

Sequential organisation of classroom discourse

Classroom discourse is typically organised into a three-part sequence known as the IRF/IRE exchange (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). According to this structure, a teacher characteristically initiates questions (I) or elicits known-information answers from learners to check their knowledge. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) contend that “a teacher rarely asks a question because he wants to know the answer; he asks a question because he wants to know whether a pupil knows the answer”. Learners are required to respond (R) to the teacher's initiation, after which the teacher provides evaluation (E) or feedback (F) to the learner's response.

Cazden (1988) rightfully calls it the “default pattern” of classroom discourse. This pattern comes naturally to teachers and allows them to affirm their authoritative positions by taking two (Initiation, Feedback) out of three turns. However, this default structure can be modified in many ways; for instance, when a learner does not provide the preferred response, the teacher repeats, rephrases, or redirects the question to another learner. These extended sequences usually continue until the teacher receives a correct response or provides the answer themselves (Mehan, 1985). This variation occurs when a lesson focuses on obtaining an accurate response from learners. In other words, exchanges of this type highlight the priority of form over the construction of meaning. As Gardner (2019) pointed out, variations occur in the IRE sequence, and learners show some agency in modifying the IRE exchange. Sometimes, learners self-select when seeking clarification or help from the teacher. Waring (2011) observes that, at times, a learner may extend their response to more than the teacher had expected. They are not bound by rigid IRE structures, even when they appear to be.

Types of questions

Another aspect of the authority of teachers, evident in classroom discourse, is the questions they ask their students. Linked to the restrictive IRF/IRE pattern, teachers tend to ask “display” questions – those to which they already know the answers (Erling & Paar, 2022). However, questions may range from those meant to test knowledge or to recall information to those that enable learners to find solutions to problems, create their responses and evaluate the effectiveness of how people use language. In this regard, van Lier (1988) argues that we need to concentrate on what the different questions demand of students in response and the different commitments they

place on them. Higher cognitive questions require the learner to manipulate previously learnt information mentally to create or support an answer with logically reasoned evidence. Lower cognitive questions require verbatim recall or identification of information previously presented by a teacher. While known-answer questions have a place in classroom discourse to scaffold understanding, authentic questions are central to teaching because they encourage critical thinking (Levine et al. 2022).

Wait time

A further feature of classroom discourse, which falls under the authority of teachers, is the time they wait between asking a question and nominating a learner for a response. This aspect is important as it is correlated with the time, they give their learners to think about a question before they attempt to answer it (White & Lightbown, 1984). Rowe (1986), in her study on wait time, found that, in the classrooms where teachers extended their wait time from three to five seconds after asking a question, participation by the students and the complexity of their responses increased. There was even an increase in the average length of student responses, appropriate responses, and (student) confidence (Rowe, 1986).

Classroom organisation

The asymmetrical relationship between teachers and learners may also be reinforced by their relative positions in a classroom. Traditional classrooms are easily recognisable because of their characteristic layout of rows of desks, with the teacher standing at the front. Such a setting reflects the authoritative role of the teacher, who occasionally walks between these rows to assert their position further. However, classrooms today may be organised differently, according to the requirements of various pedagogic activities. This means a classroom may have a more flexible and relaxed feel when students participate in various projects, such as role-play, scenarios, pair or group work, drama-in-education, debates, educational games, and the like. During such activities, a teacher does not take centre stage but instead moves to the background to monitor the smooth running of these tasks (Wright, 1987).

Model of conversation analysis (CA) (Sacks et al., 1974)

Sequential organisation of everyday conversation

Sacks et al. (1974) argue that ‘turn-taking seems a basic form of organization for conversation “basic”, in that it would be invariant to parties, such that whatever variations the parties brought to bear in the conversation would be accommodated without change in the system, and such that it could be selectively and locally affected by social aspects of context’. Although we can find three-part sequences in ordinary discourse, the function of the third part is generally not to evaluate but to acknowledge a previous response (Mehan, 1985).

Sacks et al. (1974) contend that, in ordinary conversation, speakers have the same rights to self-select or to select another party to speak next. Relative distribution of turns and turn content are not pre-specified. Turn length, turn order, and turn content vary. Speaker change recurs or, at least, occurs. Upon possible completion of one speaker’s turn, a transition-relevance place occurs when another speaker can self-select to speak. The previous speaker can also select a particular individual to speak next during their turn.

We can argue that, in ordinary conversation, participants have more freedom to control their interaction (initiative is maximised) according to the local-management system of turn-taking (Sacks et al., 1974). Participants are motivated to listen intently, especially if willing to take the next turn. In other words, their interaction is more symmetrical than classroom discourse, which a teacher controls.

Different contexts for interaction

As gleaned from the discussed aspects of teacher authority, teachers in second-language classrooms can establish a continuum of contexts, i.e., from traditional accuracy-based contexts to variable fluency-based contexts in their classrooms. As Johnson (1995) puts it:

“Classroom communication may range from highly ritualized, formulaic speech events in which who talks, when, and about what are predetermined, to highly spontaneous and adaptive speech events in which neither the order nor content of talk are predetermined.”

In an authoritative setting, teachers control the IRF sequence strictly. They allocate turns, take two out of three turns, ask closed-ended, known-information questions, expect single-utterance responses, and do not wait for more than two seconds after asking a question in a rigid classroom setting. Or, in a very flexible environment, they relinquish the IRF pattern for the learners where they can allocate turns, ask open-ended, information-seeking questions, produce creative and extended responses, and have sufficient brainstorming time for an answer. In such a context, a teacher tolerates errors for the benefit of negotiation and is willing to vary the classroom setting according to the nature of learner activity (group/pair work and the like).

Learners' use of language and language acquisition

To understand this relationship between learners' use of language for learning and second-language acquisition, Johnson (1995) refers to several theories. Two of these are reception-based and production-based theories. Reception-based or input theories argue that interaction contributes to second-language acquisition by means of learners' reception and comprehension of the second language (Krashen, 1982). In contrast, production-based or output theories (Swain, 1995) attribute this process to the learners' attempts at producing the language.

The reception-based input theories, such as those put forth by Krashen (1988) and (Gass, 1997), argue that the acquisition will follow if language input is made comprehensible to the learner. In other words, teachers assist learners in participating in meaningful and message-oriented interactions before they are competent enough to interact on their own. Gass et al. (1998), in this regard, contend that since we do not have evidence of successful language learning/learners in the absence of comprehensible input, we must acknowledge the role of comprehension in promoting acquisition. Comprehensible or incomprehensible input occurs when participants are engaged in the negotiation of meaning (Pica, 1994), where they strive for two-way comprehensibility. Thus, these interactional negotiations of the participants “can serve to focus their (learners') attention on potentially troublesome parts of their discourse, providing them with information that can open the door to IL modification” (Gass et al., 1998).

The concept of comprehensible/incomprehensible input is like Vygotsky's (1978) notion of ZPD (zone of proximal development). The ZPD is defined as the “distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978). The idea behind such assistance is that what a child can achieve with adult guidance today, they will be able to achieve by themselves tomorrow. However, van Lier (1996) is of the view that, in relation to language education, interaction with participants of equal ability might be more beneficial than interaction with more capable speakers, especially in the case of adult learners since it calls for the creation of different contingencies and discourse-management strategies. This means that language teachers need to employ several activities where the learners can interact with the teacher and peers who have equal or higher levels of proficiency. Moreover, they should be able to work independently to draw on their inner resources.

The production-based output theories (Swain & Lapkin, 1998) contend that, in addition to the necessary comprehensible input, learners should have opportunities to use language in the performance of interactional activities. They contend that “dialogue provides both the occasion for language learning and the evidence for it; language is both process and product” (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). They cite research to substantiate their claim that learners can extend their and their peers' knowledge of a second language through collaborative dialogue. They argue that language facilitates task performance and mediates learning like any tool.

Based on these two theories (input and output theories), one can surmise that language acquisition is thought to take place when learners are provided with comprehensible input, as well as the occasion to use their communication skills in the production of discourse where they can

control the flow of their communication, replicating real-life interaction (van Lier, 1996). This means that traditional, form-focused, or conscious learning must be combined with cycles of meaning-focused (collaborative) activities to facilitate second-language acquisition (Ellis, 1990). This further implies that, besides engaging in the characteristic IRF/IRE sequence (through which they control classroom discourse), the teachers must be willing to give up part of their authority to let the learners command their own interaction. During such interaction, the learners oversee turn-taking, as well as of turn content, and neither of these is predetermined (cf. Ellis, 1999; Johnson, 1995; van Lier, 1988; White & Lightbown, 1984).

Analysis of classroom discourse can assist teachers in determining: 1) The frequency of their talk in each lesson and the purpose of such talk. 2) The frequency of the learners' talks and the nature of such talk. 3) The type of questions that they ask, and the distribution of these questions. 4) The wait time that they allow after asking questions. 5) The response they require of their learners and the nature of such response. 6) The kind of feedback they provide, and the purpose of such feedback. 7) The contexts of communication they establish in the classroom, their purpose, and whether these contexts inhibit or enhance opportunities for learners to use language for classroom learning.

The answers to these questions are further linked to teachers' frames of reference or to their views about the nature of teaching and learning. Teachers decide what, why, and how of their classroom processes, based on their theories of practice (van Lier, 1996). Therefore, they need to investigate how communication patterns in their classrooms may have an impact on what their students gain from their teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the impact of classroom discourse on language learning opportunities. The analysis revealed that teachers' use of the IRF (Initiation–Response–Follow-up) model varied across lessons, shaping different patterns of communication. In lessons where the IRF structure was strictly applied, teacher talk dominated the interaction. These lessons were typically form-focused, aiming to build linguistic accuracy. Learners had limited chances to initiate talk or engage in spontaneous language use, resulting in asymmetrical classroom dynamics. Conversely, in lessons where teachers allowed more flexibility within the IRF framework, learners participated more actively. They negotiated meaning and produced discourse closer to everyday communication, reflecting more symmetrical interaction. These conditions supported fluency and encouraged learner autonomy.

The study shows that both accuracy and fluency work are essential in language teaching. A balanced integration of both, depending on the lesson's objectives, can enhance language acquisition. Teachers can begin with structured activities and gradually move toward more open-ended communication, allowing learners to use language meaningfully. Understanding the dynamics of classroom talk enables teachers to monitor and adjust their interactional strategies. As Johnson (1995) suggests, this awareness helps teachers create learning environments that support both instructional goals and student engagement. Reflecting on classroom discourse is thus a powerful tool for professional development.

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