

## **“Watch your language”: The role of teachers’ language use in promoting classroom interaction**

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### ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the relationship among interaction, language use and learning opportunities in English as a foreign language classroom (EFL). It uses Conversation Analysis (CA) to reflect the nature of interaction inside two EFL classrooms with special focus on the role that teachers’ use of language plays in promoting or hindering interaction. The teachers’ use of the third move of the IRF/E (Initiative-Response-Feedback/Evaluation) sequence is closely examined. It concludes with emphasizing the importance of using the teachers’ feedback creatively in order to create interactional space in a step towards increasing learning opportunities.

Key word: Classroom interaction, teachers’ language, Conversation analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

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A considerable amount of empirical studies regarding the various aspects of classroom interaction has been carried out in the last few decades. Research in the field of SLA has paid a great deal of attention to the features of the second language classroom. The emphasis has been placed mainly on classroom interaction and its nature. Equal attention has also been given to factors that affect the extent to which classroom interaction can be promoted in order to create better opportunities for learning however, teachers’ use of language is still underpracticed.

This paper is an evaluation of the inextricable link between interaction, language use and learning, in English as a foreign language classroom (EFL). It shows how Conversation Analysis (CA) is used to shed light on some of the phenomenon related to the “interactional architecture” (Seedhouse, 2004) of EFL. A special focus, however, is placed on the role that teachers’ use of language play in promoting or hindering interaction. Examining the teacher’s use of the third move of the IRF (Initiative-Response-Feedback) sequence to engage learners and to create a more interactional space in the classroom is the core of this paper.

The argument is that teachers can optimize students' interaction by paying close attention to their own use of language in a way that gives more interactional space for the students. CA is chosen over any other method of analysis for its ability to give an in-depth insight into the nature of what is happening inside the classroom within a social framework.

The work grows basically from Vygotsky's idea (1978) of the social nature of learning and the importance of "verbal meaning" in generating conscious awareness of what is learned. The assumption is that the teachers' use of the language affects the available opportunities for learning in general and language learning in particular, which emphasize the need for promoting an enhanced awareness of that role (Walsh, 2003).

The data is collected from two small language classrooms. The learners are monolingual adults learning English as a foreign language, yet there are differences in ages. The classes were video-taped over a period of one lesson. The learners' L2 proficiency level is mixed. Though the focus of the teachers of both classes was on grammar, their tasks vary. While one used a form-and-accuracy focused task, the other one guided the learners to perform a function and encourages conversation using a meaning-and-fluency focused task. The conversation, however, in both classes was instructional because it is designed with a view to facilitating language learning, as the interviews with the teachers reflected. Nevertheless, the most marked issue in the study was the way in which one of the teachers used questions to introduce issues for negotiation in order to elicit a richer contribution from the students.

The data was transcribed and analyzed interpretively using Conversation Analysis. The IRF exchanges were followed to locate the action sequences. The third move of every exchange was also located to determine what feedback the teacher gave in that exchange and the responses she generated. After that, those action sequences were examined in terms of the organization of turn-taking, focusing on any disturbances in the working of the system or successes in creating more interactional space.

Adjacency pairs and preference organization were looked for more widely at any action undertaken in response to other actions. In this case they were seen in the form of the teachers' prompt selection of the students, then the students' production of the targeted string. The action in sequence was also examined in terms of the organization of repair. The way the participants packaged their actions in terms of the actual linguistic forms, which they selected from alternatives available, were also examined. The roles, identities and relationships that emerge in the details of the interaction were uncovered, especially in those positions where they showed some significance in relation to the used linguistics forms or turn selection.

The discourse was analyzed following the procedures that the participants used to display to each other their own turns. That was done by allocating the evidence in the discourse that reflect the way in which the pedagogy and interaction were related to each other.

The paper presents evidence from EFL classroom that educators can optimize students' interaction if they improve the teachers' use of language in a way that gives more interactional space for the students. It also argues in the favor of CA as a good scientific investigation tool that gives insight into classroom interaction. If carefully integrated with other methods of analysis, CA should be used as a step towards developing the teaching process in EFL classroom in a step towards solving the problem of the students' low level of proficiency. The paper also shows how the use of CA contribute to our understanding of how students are socialized to use English in the process of learning, and to discover what counts as language learning and its relation to students' opportunities to use English. It also helps teachers to use more meaningful questions. The findings of this paper confirm those of Walsh, 2002; Hall and Walsh, 2002; Boyd and Maloof, 2000; Consolo, 2000; Hall, 1998).

Finally, the paper suggests several pedagogical implementations for EFL. For instance, at the classroom level, since the IRF sequence is a common pattern of exchange in most classroom, it's difficult to expect to completely eradicate it. However, it is expected and intended that by highlighting all of those positions where potential opportunities for learning were missed as a result of the teachers' use of language, the following can be achieved;

- 1- By paying attention to the kind of feedback moves in the IRF, teachers will be encouraged to use more meaningful questions that stimulate students to "tap into higher-order thinking processes" (Chin 2006).
- 2- By arousing teacher awareness of those opportunities and by drawing their attention to it, better interactive environment can be promoted in any EFL classroom ( Walsh, 2003).
- 3- By taking into consideration the idea that every classroom is a unique context that is shaped by the participants, it's important for teachers to know how to be able to look at their own classrooms as researchers and how to evaluate their own use of language in creating more opportunities for learning.
- 4- The paper emphasizes that where pedagogic goals and language use work together, it is more likely that the teacher will create opportunities for learning (Walsh, 2002).
- 5- The paper also points at the importance of training teachers how to record and analyze their classroom interactions in order to learn how to make an objective critique of their own strategies from a pedagogical point of view. They can also reflect on their mode of interaction to adopt better strategies that promote more critical thinking among their students, especially at scientific institutes.

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