

## Classroom Interactional Competence: A Reflective Practice to Classroom Interaction

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### **Abstract:**

Language learning in a classroom context is firmly tied to the various communicative practices by which learners interact with each other and their teacher. In this sense, classroom interaction explores the relationship between language, interaction and learning. Tied to this relationship is the need to explore the relationship between classroom interaction and teaching. The aim of the present study is to analyse the major features of classroom interactional competence in order to better describe and explain how classroom interaction is used. To this end, this study targeted one first year LMD oral classroom at Saida University.

To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher used a research design based on quantitative research method. The oral class was audio-taped and analysed in terms of turns, and also was subjected to a categorisation and coding procedure for the purpose of delineating quantitatively the interactional features (interactures). The interactional features were adapted following Walsh' (2011) Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) model, some interactional modifications involved in the negotiated meaning based on Pica and Daugherty 1985 a, and students' meaning negotiation with no teacher intervention adapted by the researcher. The quantitative analysis of data indicated that classroom interactional competence was mostly featured with more opportunities for negotiation of meaning that were supported with the students' attempt to negotiate meaning with no teacher intervention, comprehension check, and confirmation check.

In addition, it was revealed that the various communicative practices in classroom created more opportunities to have better learning space through extended learner turns. Besides, the results indicated the existence of a more balanced teacher and students' talks amount, which were associated with more questions asked by the teacher.

### **Keywords:**

Classroom Interactional Competence ; Classroom Interaction; Negotiation of Meaning, Student Talk;Teacher Talk.

## 1. Introduction

The different communicative practices by which learners interact with each other and their teacher are a determinant factor for a language to be learned in a classroom context. To this effect, there is a need to explore the relationship between classroom interaction, teaching and learning. In this sense, teachers can do much to enhance learning by studying their own interactions with students and by studying the various communicative practices by which learners interact with each other and their teacher.

In order to facilitate the task for students to engage in a meaningful communicative interaction, teachers are required to help students to participate in constructing an interactional atmosphere inside classroom. The success of classroom interaction depends mostly on a type of interaction that is more engaged and more focused on participation and negotiation of meaning. Classroom interactional competence (CIC) requires the use of interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning by both the teacher and learners(1).

The aim of interactional competence is to put interaction firmly at the centre of teaching and learning. Learning and opportunities for learning increase when both teachers and learners improve their CIC(2). Interactional competence is described as what a person does together with others and not what a person knows (3). Classroom interaction also depends on how communication is constructed between the teacher and learners and how interaction is negotiated (4). In addition, interaction in which learners struggle to make output comprehensible is of extreme importance for language development (5).

Generally speaking, interaction is a key factor in teaching and learning that is shaped by complex series of interrelated contexts. In this regard, the purpose of the present study is to have an insight into the different communicative patterns created in the classroom interaction between the teacher and the students. Therefore, there is a need to enrich interactional competence in EFL classroom context that is jointly constructed between the teacher and learners with the hope to achieve new understandings and develop the various ways in which we teach. Accordingly, the researcher addresses the following question:

What interactional features can most facilitate learning opportunities in the classroom setting?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 – Interaction Hypothesis

Long's Interaction Hypothesis (IH) argues that interaction and communication in addition to comprehensible input are necessary for developing language proficiency (6). Comprehensible input "is most effective when it is modified through the negotiation of meaning" (p.47) (7). Therefore, interaction reflects the language used in classroom, which serves in turn to provide opportunities for learning.

The major aim of Interaction Hypothesis also revolves around paying attention to form as well as meaning. Central to Interaction Hypothesis concept is "negotiating meaning", for interaction refers to "communication among individuals, particularly when they are "negotiating meaning" or working to prevent a breakdown in communication" (p.2) (8). In the same vein, Long considers interaction to be responsible in rendering learners actively engaged in order to acquire new language, for they need not to be only recipients of the next level "i+1".

On the contrary, Krashen considers comprehensible input responsible to acquisition of L2 as learners are given access to the next level "i+1" because it leads them to understand and express meaning. Krashen, in his input hypothesis, concedes that "We move from  $i$ , our current level, to  $i+1$ , the next level along the natural order, by understanding input containing  $i+1$ " (p.2) (9). According to Krashen, input must be exposed in a comprehensible manner, i.e., 'comprehensible input' in order for a second language learning to occur. This implies the idea that language is best acquired when input is comprehended or understood at a level that can be slightly beyond the current level of competence.

### 2.2- Negotiation of Meaning

Central to Long's Interaction Hypothesis is the role of negotiation in social interaction. The aim of negotiation under a framework of intersubjectivity is to create a shared social world between interlocutors (10). The major aim of negotiation of meaning is to remediate communication breakdown and interactional trouble. This implies an interactional work and adjustments done by interactants to achieve mutual understanding. Negotiation of meaning implies modification and restructuring of interaction when learners face difficulties in message comprehensibility(11).

Interactive tasks foster negotiation of meaning and help learners to develop a second language acquisition. In this sense, the more heavily interaction is modified, the better input the learner will be (12). Negotiation also “facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (p.2) (13). This helps make input more comprehensible to the learner.

Negotiation of meaning is endowed by the positive effect on comprehension especially through interactional modifications of input. This positive effect exceeds the simple effect of linguistically simplifying input as studied by Pica, Young, and Doughty (1987) (14). In addition, negotiation of meaning, has been conceptualised under the description of discourse strategies comprising clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and repetition (15). In the same line of thought, three major processing that result in input modification were enumerated by Alright (1991) : 1 comprehension check (checking if the message is understood by the receiver; 2 confirmation check (if the receiver has correctly understood the message; 3 clarification check (request for further information) (16). Based on Pica and Daughty 1985, these three major processing are part of interactional modifications involved in the negotiated meaning (17).

### **2.3- Features of Classroom Discourse**

There are four features of second language classroom discourse: control of patterns of communication, elicitation techniques, repair strategies, and modifying speech to learners (18). These four features of L2 classroom discourse have been selected largely by Walsh because they typify much of the interaction that takes place in classrooms.

First, control of patterns of communication is defined by the teacher's role to manage both the topic of conversation and turn-taking and give cues to their students and thereby direct most of their responses and control the amount of 'space' learners' they have in the interaction (19). Control the patterns communication is also determined by the type of questions asked by the teacher and feedback for every contribution made by the student (20).

Elicitation techniques, as second dominant features of classroom discourse, are qualified by the great amount of techniques applied by the teacher while eliciting learner production and organising classroom structure (21). Teachers use elicitation techniques as strategies to incite learners to respond (22). However, teachers are required to exert more efforts in conversation and various classroom activities. And to ask more questions in correspondence to few questions asked by learners(23). There are mainly two types of questions that dominate classroom discourse: display and referential questions. The function of display questions is to get learners 'display' what they know about something. Teachers in this type of questions already know the answer in contrast to referential or genuine questions where teachers do not know the answer (24).

Third, modifying speech to learners implies conscious and deliberate modification strategies in order for learning to happen. This demands a number of reasons: The first, is that what is said by a teacher should be understood by learners as a condition for their learning. A second reason is that teachers model language by using appropriate pronunciation, intonation, sentence and word stress, and so on in order to give learners an opportunity to hear the sounds of the target language. As a third reason, teachers need to ensure that the class is following, that everyone understands and that learners don't 'get lost' in the rapid flow of the discourse (25).

Finally, repair is simply a form of error correction. The importance of error correction is supported by Van Lier who maintains that 'apart from questioning, the activity that most characterises language classrooms is correction of errors' (p. 276). Walsh (2011) maintains that the strategies selected while correcting errors must be related to the pedagogic goals of the moment which serve to promote opportunities for learning; for instance, a highly controlled practice activity requires more error correction than one where the focus is oral fluency(27).

#### **2.4- Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC)**

Classroom interactional competence (CIC) is the "teachers and learners ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning" (p. 132) (28). Tied to the concept of CIC is 'space for learning', that is interactional space created by interactants which coincides with the specific pedagogical goal of the moment (29).

The existence of some important features in which CIC manifests itself is highly required. These features are summarised as follow(30):

- Convergence of language use and pedagogical goals
- The need for interactional space

- The process of shaping learner contributions by scaffolding, paraphrasing etc.
- The use of extended wait time, pauses of several seconds
- The use of requests for clarification
- Minimal response tokens
- Evidence of content feedback

Classroom interactional competence is emerged out from Interactional competence. The latter is basically expressed by the joint understanding between interactants and how that communication is managed. Rather than fluency, interactional competence is concerned with what McCarthy terms confluence (31): the act of making spoken language fluent together with another speaker (32). Confluence is rather fundamental to effective communication than fluency because speakers focus on collective meaning-making and engage in a constant process of trying to make sense of each other, negotiate meanings, assist and query, support, clarify and so on (33). Interactional competence is what a person *does* together with others and not what a person *knows*. (p, 430) (34).

Interactional competence is concerned with the ways in which interactants construct meanings together, that is a joint enterprise rather than looking at features of individual performance (35). The ability of teachers and learners to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning is what constitutes classroom interactional competence (CIC)(36).

### **3. Methods and Procedures**

#### **3.1- Population and Sample of the Study**

The population of the present study consisted of first year EFL students at Saida University. The study was conducted in 2019. The researcher selected one group. The group subject of the study was exposed to dialogic interactions around words and word meanings. The students were divided into six small groups work interaction. The students in each small group work were asked to discuss the meaning of two words out of twelve words taken from Nation's 4000 Essential English Words (fifth level) (37).

### 3.2- Instruments of the Study

The main instrument of the study is Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT). The researcher used SETT as a tool in order to recognize the extent to which the discourse is communicative. SETT is originally designed by Walsh (38) as a framework to help teachers gain a closer understanding of interactional processes in the classroom as a means of improving their teaching. Self Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) is made up of a set of interactional features (*interactures*) (39).

Feature of Teacher Talk	Description
A. Scaffolding	1. Reformulation (rephrasing a learner's contribution) 2. Extension (extending a learner's contribution) 3. Modelling (providing an example for learner(s))
B. Direct repair	Correcting an error quickly and directly.
C. Content feedback	Giving feedback to the message rather than the words used.
D. Extended wait-time	Allowing sufficient time (several seconds) for students to respond or formulate a response.
E. Referential questions	Genuine questions to which the teacher does not know the answer.
F. Seeking clarification	1. Teacher asks a student to clarify something the student has said. 2. Student asks teacher to clarify something the teacher has said.
G. Extended learner turn	Learner turn of more than one utterance.
H. Teacher echo	1. Teacher repeats teacher's previous utterance. 2. Teacher repeats a learner's contribution.
I. Teacher interruptions	Interrupting a learner's contribution.
J. Extended teacher turn	Teacher turn of more than one utterance.
K. Turn completion	Completing a learner's contribution for the learner.
L. Display questions	Asking questions to which the teacher knows the answer.
M. Form-focused feedback	Giving feedback on the words used, not the message.

Table 1. SETT: Self Evaluation of Teacher Talk. (Based on Walsh, 2006 , source, Shane, 2015(40)).

**Note:** Confirmation checks (Confirming understanding of a student's or teacher's contribution) is an extra interactional feature which is part of the SETT framework.

### 3.3- Data Collection Procedures

The researcher collected data depending on text and word selection. The text was chosen after giving the students a list of topics based on the fifth level from Nation's 6 level books (41). The researcher selected a topic that is chosen by the majority of the students. As for word selection, the researcher asked the students to select only twelve words out of twenty that are unfamiliar for them. Thus, the set of target words was considered to be unknown for the majority of students.

### 3.3- Data Analysis

The researcher recorded the session, then analyzed and interpreted the collected data quantitatively. The quantitative analysis of interaction permitted the researcher to categorise each interactional turn or move under one of the types of interactional features (*interactures*) using coding procedure. The collected data were categorised according to Walsh's model, some interactional modifications involved in the negotiated meaning based on Pica and Daugherty (1985 a, source, Ellis, 1991) (42), and other patterns adapted by the researcher which are the students' meaning negotiation with no teacher intervention and students interruptions. Then, based on word count that are systematically used in Microsoft Word, the researcher counted and calculated the frequency of each interactional feature. The words were calculated using every single word without taking into account blank space, or extra data such as researcher's comments and nonverbal sounds.

## 4. Results

The data were treated quantitatively in terms of codes and frequency counts. The recorded interaction between the teacher and the students, based on group work tasks with a focus on interactional features (*interactures*), were treated and analysed in terms of turns and also were subjected to a categorisation and coding procedure. The quantitative analysis of the recorded interaction depicts the teacher and students' talk and questions as follows:

Designation		Percentage
Teacher Talk		54 %
Teacher Turns		53 %
Teacher questions	21Referential questions	24.75%
	20Seekingclarification questions	23.52%
	33Display questions	38.82%
		74 questions 87.05 %
Students Talk		46%
Students Turns		47%
Students questions		11 questions 12.94 %

**Table 2. Quantitative data relative to teacher and students' talk and questions.**

Table 2. shows that the amount of teacher talk and students' talk is relatively balanced (53 % vs. 47%). The table also reveals that the majority of questions are asked by the teacher (*74 questions asked by the teacher 87, 05 % vs. 11 questions asked by the students 12, 94 %*). The table also shows that most of the questions asked by the teacher are display questions (33 display questions vs. 21 referential questions and 20 seeking clarification questions).

FEATURES OF TEACHER TALK	DESCRIPTION	243turns
<b>Scaffolding</b>	1.Reformulation (rephrasing a learner's contribution)	02 Turns 0.82 %
	2. Extension (extending a learner's contribution)	11Turns 4.52%
	3. Modelling (providing an example for learner(s))	0 Turns 0%
		13Turns 5.34%
<b>Direct repair</b>	Correcting an error quickly and directly.	0 Turns 0.00%
<b>Content feedback</b>	Giving feedback to the message rather than the words used.	35 Turns14.40%
<b>Extended wait-time</b>	Allowing sufficient time (several seconds) for students to respond or formulate a response.	12 Turns 4.93%
<b>Referential questions</b>	Genuine questions to which the teacher does not know the answer.	21Turns 8.64%
<b>Seeking clarification</b>	1. Teacher asks a student to clarify something the student has said.	20Turns 8.23%
	2.Student asks teacher to clarify something the teacher has said.	1 Turn 0.04%
<b>Confirmation and Comprehension check</b>		24Turns 9.87%
<b>Students' meaning negotiation with no teacher intervention.</b>		27 Turns11.11%
<b>Extended learner turn</b>	Learner turn of more than one utterance.	25Turns10.28%

<b>Teacher echo Self-repetitions:</b>	(1) repairing The speaker repeats/ paraphrases some part of one of her previous utterances to help establish or develop the topic of conversation.  1. Teacher repeats teacher's previous utterance.	4Turns 1.64%
	(2) reacting The speaker repeats/ paraphrases some part of the other speaker's utterance in order to help establish or develop the topic of conversation.  2. Teacher repeats a learner's contribution.	9Turns 3.70%
<b>Teacher interruptions</b>	Interrupting a learner's contribution.	Turns 0%
<b>Student interruptions</b>		2 Turns 0.08%
<b>Extended teacher turn</b>	Teacher turn of more than one utterance.	20Turns 23%
<b>Turn completion</b>	Completing a learner's contribution for the learner.	2Turns 0.08%
<b>Display questions</b>	Asking questions to which the teacher knows the answer.	33Turns 13.58
<b>Form-focused feedback</b>	Giving feedback on the words used, not the message.	1Turns 0.04%

Table 3. Descriptive quantitative data relative to features of teacher talk

**N.B Confirmation and Comprehension check:** (if the receiver has correctly understood the message) Confirming understanding of a student's or teacher's contribution and any expression designed to establish whether the speaker's own preceding utterance has been understood by the addressee.

**Table 3.** shows that there is clear evidence that the group talk is overloaded with display questions (33 turns with a percentage of 13.58). In addition, more referential questions are a sign of genuine communication which is apparent (21Turns 8.64%). Also, interaction is supported with a type of talk that is quite balanced between the teacher and the students (54% vs 46%). Classroom interaction also is shaped with the students' attempt to negotiate meaning with no teacher intervention. This is clearly evidenced with the quantity of interaction made by students (27 turns 11.11 %).

Negotiation is also characterised by two different interaction features: 1 comprehension check (checking if the message is understood by the receiver) ; 2 confirmation check ( if the receiver has correctly understood the message) (24Turns 9.87%). This type of interaction is used to check and confirm if the receiver (a student's or teacher) has correctly understood the message. In addition it is used to check if the speaker's own preceding utterance has been understood by the addressee. It is used to reinforce the negotiation of meaning between the teacher and the students.

Another distinguishing interactional feature observed in the table is the extended learner turns with 31 turns that generate 24.34% of the talk invested in the interaction. This indicates that students are really able to produce more quantity of interaction that is qualified with the opportunity to have better learning space. This indicates that students talk time (STT) increases when interaction is characterised by extended learner turns of more than one utterance.

## 5. Discussion of the Results

The results of the study showed that the amount of teacher talk is quite equilibrated with the amount of students' talk. This result is supported with Nunan's claim that excessive teacher talk is not advised if more opportunities are expected for increasing better learning results (43) . In the same line of thought, The result is also supported by Harmer (44) "a good teacher maximizes STT and minimizes TTT."

The positive results of the study are also supported with Shamsipour and Allami findings(45). The latter's findings indicate that extended learners turns help create better chances for learning a foreign language. This would significantly increase good opportunities for students to interact and increase the amount of their talk.

It is also important to discuss the results of the present study in light of the high amount of questions that were asked by the teacher. The referential questions that were frequently asked by the teacher are a sign of genuine communication. This type of questions incites students to generate more quantity of interaction. In this sense, Shamsipour and Allami findings found clear support for the significant role of referential questions (46). Their findings indicate that referential questions help students to create more opportunities for learning a foreign language.

The results of the study in relation to students' negotiation of meaning with no teacher intervention, comprehension check, and confirmation check can also be significantly understood through Walsh's (CIC) classroom interactional competence(47). In this spirit, Walsh echoed the ample evidence of successful classroom interaction that is partly supported by the learners' abilities to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning(48). These results also can be explained by what Vygotsky (1978) called 'zones of proximal development'(49) and Long (1983a) suggestion that a target language is best acquired through learners' negotiation of meanings and the various teachers' speech characteristics (50).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The positive results of the present study lead us to consider the importance of interaction that is jointly constructed between the teacher and learners. It can be concluded that a richer classroom interactional competence is mostly featured with a type of negotiation of meaning that is supported with the students' attempt to negotiate meaning with no teacher intervention, comprehension check, and confirmation check. Besides, classroom interaction is remarkably qualified by a quite balanced amount of talk between the teacher and the students. The teacher talk can be best achieved through a type of questions that is remarkably associated with more display questions, more referential questions and a type of questions for seeking clarification.

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