

**ORAL INTERACTION IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM:  
REVIEWING ROLES AND PROSPECTS FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>**

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**RESUMO**

A estrutura discursiva de aulas de língua estrangeira (LE) caracteriza-se pela configuração típica do discurso assimétrico entre professor e aluno, permeada por fatores sociais e psicológicos, e geralmente influenciada pelo gerenciamento do professor, além de pelos interesses e necessidades dos alunos. Com base nessas pressuposições, a pesquisa tratada neste artigo analisou como aspectos lingüístico-discursivos e sociais influenciam a interação professor-aluno (e também aluno-aluno), indicando relações entre esses fatores e o engajamento discursivo dos alunos nas interações, e implicações para o desenvolvimento da competência oral dos alunos na LE. As bases teóricas da pesquisa remetem a estudos sobre linguagem e interação em sala de aula (Allwright, 1984; Ellis, 1984; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000, entre outros), e às visões de alunos sobre a utilização da língua alvo durante aulas de LE. A investigação foi realizada em cursos de inglês como língua estrangeira (ILE), em uma universidade pública brasileira. Utilizaram-se categorias discursivas, de bases sócio-pedagógicas (Consolo, 1996; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, 1992), para analisarem-se as funções das falas do professor e dos alunos em três classes regulares de Língua Inglesa, todas de turmas de primeiro ano, em dois cursos de Letras, e uma classe de um curso livre de ILE para adultos, na mesma instituição. Os dados contemplam também as expectativas dos alunos quanto à aprendizagem da língua inglesa, principalmente em relação à competência oral.

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper reports on a study on linguistic, pedagogical and sociocultural aspects of classroom interaction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons in a university context.

Applied language studies in similar contexts of foreign language (FL) teaching have considered that the opportunities for learners to have contact with input and engage in verbal interaction in the target language may be largely restricted to the formal occasions of “lessons”, and this assumption was considered in this investigation. In addition, studies on classroom interaction in formal teaching contexts, for example, in regular or language schools, and at universities, have claimed that, by investigating lessons and other factors related to teachers and students, we can raise and possibly

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<sup>1</sup> The data presented in this paper is from the corpus of a two-year research project, *Interação e Aquisição de Língua Estrangeira no Cenário da Sala de Aula* (Interaction and Foreign Language Acquisition in the Classroom Context), funded by the CNPq, a Brazilian institution that supports scientific work nationwide. An earlier version of this report was shown in a poster presentation at the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting (Consolo, 2001).

verify hypotheses about phenomena that influence the process through which languages are learned in such contexts (Kleiman, 1991).

Language lessons can be seen as occasions in which the sociolinguistic environment is structured under its own configuration of cultural and psychological characteristics, as well as course aims and students' needs. During the lessons, the "interactants" use various functions of language to establish communication, and input is expected to be generated by means of classroom interaction. Exposure to adequate language input and negotiation of meaning are believed to be sources for language acquisition, since these conditions provide opportunities for learners to comprehend FL input and to modify their speech in order to achieve better comprehensibility and more efficient language use (Pica, 1988). Based on these assumptions, the study reported here focuses on aspects of communication in EFL classrooms by analysing how a range of linguistic and social factors can influence teacher-student (and student-student) interaction. I develop on theoretical claims and research findings on language acquisition and on teachers and students' expectations about classroom language learning (for example, Allwright, 1984; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Kleiman, *op.cit.*; Rezende, 1999a,b) to verify connections between the students' engagement in classroom discourse, the characteristics of classroom oral communication and possible implications for language development.

Unlike studies on interaction and second/FL acquisition, carried out in the past twenty years, that had not given enough attention to areas such as discourse and sociolinguistic competence (Hall & Verplaetese, 2000), the approach adopted in investigation considers that activities comprising classrooms can be important "sites of development". According to Hall & Verplaetse (*op.cit.*:9),

Because many classroom activities are created through classroom discourse - the oral interaction that occurs between teachers and students and among students - its role is especially consequential to the creation of learning environments and ultimately to the shaping of individual learners' development.

Since further investigation on the role of these aspects in FL learning seems essential, the study reported here aims at answering the following questions:

1. Which discourse categories reveal (higher levels of) student engagement in classroom discourse in EFL?
2. Are students aware of how and when they speak English in FL lessons?

As for the teacher's role in managing classroom interaction and his or her "control" over the patterns of participation in classroom discourse, henceforth CD (Burton, 1981), this study discusses the teacher's use of verbal strategies in pedagogic discourse to motivate the students' oral production and engagement in CD, which will contribute for their language development.

## 1. THE STUDY

This investigation analyses the characteristics of language use within the structure of CD, with focus on teacher talk and student speech, in EFL lessons at a state university in Brazil, based on data from three first-year classes of English Language<sup>2</sup> for undergraduate students doing either a BA on Translation (English and Portuguese; two classes, C1 and C2) or a BA in Language Teaching (EFL and the teaching of Portuguese as L1; one class, C3), and a class of adult students taking EFL for general purposes (C4).<sup>3</sup> The classes were in two consecutive years, C1 in *Year I* and C2, C3 and C4 in *Year II*. C1, C2 and C3 were taught by the same teacher (T1), and C4 was taught by T4.

The corpus comprises lessons observed by research assistants, henceforth RAs (non-participant observation), and recorded on audio and video, as described below; diaries of the observed lessons, written by the RAs; two questionnaires and interviews for the students, to raise their expectations from the English language course and their views about classroom interaction; a language diagnostic test taken by the students at the beginning of the academic year, and the "Oxford Placement Test" (OPT),<sup>4</sup> taken by students in C1, C2 and C3 during one of their lessons.<sup>5</sup> The language tests aimed at verifying the students' levels of competence in English, which, for oral proficiency, varied roughly between elementary and upper-intermediate at the beginning of the academic year. Further discussion of the students' performance in the tests falls, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

In C1, classroom data was collected in the second semester of *Year I*, and in C2, C3 and C4 in the first semester of *Year II*. Out of six lessons observed in C1, five were recorded on video, as from the second lesson. In C2, the first two lessons were observed only. The third lesson was recorded on audio and the other four lessons were recorded on video. The observations were always on the same day of the week and in the same classroom, and the time slot was of 100 minutes in C1, C2 and C3. During the observations, however, lessons lasted, on average, 83 minutes, due to the time wasted for setting up the recording equipment (video cameras and microphones). In C4, out of six lessons, two were observed only, prior to the audio recordings (video recordings were not used in that class).

In C1, although there were twenty-one students enrolled in the course, the average number of students in class was around fifteen. The others declared that they had missed classes because they did not feel at ease about the filming. In C2 and C3, the students' attendance was considered normal – around fourteen in each group, with the exception

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<sup>2</sup> In Portuguese: *Lingua Inglesa I*.

<sup>3</sup> Although the students' profiles and course aims in C4 were considerably different from the other classes, it was included in the study in order to have a different teacher's profile added to the variables investigated.

<sup>4</sup> Allan, D. 1992. *Oxford Placement Test*. Oxford:OUP.

<sup>5</sup> Students in C4 did not take the OPT because it was considered too challenging for them. Besides, the results in the diagnostic test were enough to compare those students to the others in the study.

of one student from C2 who deliberately missed the lessons being recorded.<sup>6</sup> In C4, it varied between fifteen and twenty students.

Lessons were observed and recorded in two separated periods during the semester, labelled as *Phase I* and *Phase II*. A two-week “break” between the two phases was respected so that data collecting would not affect the students excessively, possibly causing unnecessary interference in the *environment* of lessons (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Consolo & Viana, 1997).

Parts of the recorded lessons were chosen for transcription and further analysis, according to the following criteria: type of activity and pedagogic aims; patterns of interaction (whole-class, groups and pairs), given the different purposes of such patterns to fulfil the aims of the lessons, for example, listening comprehension, reading, discussions about certain topics, and the teaching or revision of grammar; and the sound and visual quality of the recordings.

## 2. RESULTS

The examples of classroom data presented below illustrate language functions, categorized at the discourse rank of communicative acts, following the classification proposed by Consolo (1996). For the whole list of acts, see Appendix 1; for a coded lesson segment, see Example 8, in this section.

### 2.1 Examples of Pedagogic Activities: Focus on Teacher Talk and Interaction

Let us analyse the first lesson recorded in C1, which was considered as one of the typical lessons taught by T1. Six different activities were carried out in this lesson, all of which focused on the same topic and teaching point: description of places and the use of sentences that contained *ing forms*. The activities varied considerably, from written exercises to oral practice in pairs and discussions involving the whole class. Generally speaking, the students accomplished the tasks according to the teacher’s expectations, and seemed to be adequate to needs of the class.

As for the management of classroom interaction, discourse categories for teacher talk and student speech, as developed in Consolo (1996), were used to analyse the social and pedagogical functions of classroom language (see Appendix 1). T1 made use of direct and indirect forms of *elicitation* to motivate the students’ engagement in CD. Since elicitation demands oral replies from the interlocutors, they can foster student oral production, as in the following examples:

T1: Do you agree with (*student’s name*)? Could you tell us again what you miss?

T1: What? You don’t agree with her. Why not?

T1: Could you explain that, please?

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<sup>6</sup> She was the weakest student in the group and gave up the course before the end of term.

- T1: What do you think?  
 T1: Do you have any guess?  
 T1: What else? Any comments?  
 T1: (*student's name*) has suggested another word

### Example 1

Other frequent acts in teacher talk were *markers*, used to signal changes in content focus or in activities, and *informatives*:

- T1: *Ok now? Yeah!? So, let's check.* [ markers ]  
 T1: *So, we're not going to use this page...*  
 T1: *Ok, what I want you to do now...*
- T1: *They give more importance to the* [ informatives ]  
*French culture.*  
 T1: *Feature is something you can see.*  
 St: Magazine features?  
 T1: *Famous people.*

### Example 2

T1 also made use of *translation*, as in the following example:

- T1: In Portuguese you say *eu não me importo de fazer...*

### Example 3

Occasions of verbal evaluation of student speech (*evaluates*) were rare. T1 almost never corrected students' speaking by pointing directly at structural mistakes. When language mistakes occurred, T1 usually repeated the statements said by students, to which he made the necessary grammatical and phonological corrections:

- St: If you don't take a traffic jam.  
 T1: If you don't **have any** traffic jam.  
 St: I can't stand this city's bus station.  
 T1: It's better to say *I can't stand the bus station in Rio Preto.*

### Example 4

There was a considerably high amount of student verbal contributions to CD, mostly by means of *clarifications*, *replies* and *informatives*. Students generally *complied* with the teacher's proposals (Allwright, 1984) – as in the *navigation* shown below, and there was not much *negotiation* (Allwright, *op.cit.*) on their part. Students' level of oral comprehension was very good though, and it certainly contributed towards better communication with T1 and with their peers:

- St1: Everybody knows the two languages? [ *navigation* ]



St2: What's the difference between pretty and beautiful?

St3: Where does the bus go?

T1: What adjectives will you use to describe the city?

St: Annoying.

T1: Annoying! Why is it annoying?

St1: Why?

St2: The people who live here.

### Example 5

On the whole, student contribution to CD in C1 and C2 was frequent, within the typical, asymmetrical roles taken by teachers and students. The choice of topics probably favoured oral interaction, as in the segment below (Example 6), in which students spoke about the English course they were doing. T1 is conducting a whole-class discussion in which verb phrases followed by gerund or infinitive forms are expected to be produced, under comments about what students 'enjoy', 'like', 'prefer', 'miss' or 'can't stand' in their EFL lessons. Students had been working in pairs or small groups, and are about to report their opinions back to the teacher and the rest of the class:<sup>7</sup>

- 021 T1: [...] + OK PEOPLE + LET'S COME BACK to a + plenary please + I DON'T MIND giving you more time to talk about learning English 'cause that's very important but we also have + other important things to talk about today so could you tell me your ideas about I MISS + do you miss something about your process of learning English?
- 022 St4: I miss having more + listening classes
- 023 T1: ok + you're going to have more listening comprehension exercises
- 024 St7: I miss some more compositions
- 025 T1: you miss writing more compositions
- 026 St7: WRItting
- 027 T1: do you agree with (STUDENT'S NAME) ?
- 028 St4: (I didn't hear)
- 029 T1: could you tell us again? + what you miss
- 030 St7: I miss + ah + more writing exercises + more compositions + do you agree?
- 031 St4: yes
- 032 T1: yes + ok you'd say =
- (STS LAUGHED)
- 033 T1: = NOT REALLY + erm + I think one composition every semester is fine + one composition (is enough)

<sup>7</sup> Some codes used in lesson segments:

PEOPLE	Emphatic stress
(UNINT)	Unintelligible speech
+	Short pauses
(I didn't hear)	What was probably said
=	Interrupted turn

- 034 St4: yes  
 035 T1: yes + that's not bad + uhm uhm  
 036 St3: (UNINT)  
 037 T1: (UNINT) so (that's not) bad + what else do you miss?  
 038 St8: I miss watching more  
 039 St: (UNINT)  
 040 T1: you miss studying literature  
 041 St8: (I miss) watching more (UNINT) films  
 042 T1: you miss watching more films or watching films + yes + I have to get (you) more videos (I will) + what else do you miss? [...]

### Example 6

Although the patterns of interaction in Example 6 resemble the IRF structure (for example, in turns 021 - 023) and T1 controls the topic around the grammatical 'structure of the day', the turn-taking system develops towards a more conversational style as from turn 024. Students seem to be engaged in topic discussion, stress their opinions (as in turn 026) and even interact with their peers, as in turns 030 and 031. Nevertheless it is T1 who acknowledges what students say, provides additional comments and "acts upon the class" (Malamah-Thomas, 1987:7) to keep the interaction going. The example above is typical of whole-class interaction patterns in lessons taught by T1.

An important aspect is the fact that T1 encouraged reference and connections between the content dealt with in lessons and the reality in and out of the classroom, by using realia available in the room (for example, to teach new vocabulary) and the students' own experiences about what was being studied.

Discussions conducted in pairs gave notably more opportunity for the students to interact than in whole-class patterns, in which apparently only the most proficient students expressed their views. T1 also seemed to rely on these students when eliciting oral participation, as in the case of "Daniel":

T1: So, according to Daniel...

T1: Come on, give me a sentence. Volunteers...Daniel!

### Example 7

T1 spoke English most of the time and very rarely used L1 (Portuguese) in his teaching, thus providing the students with more language input in the FL. His teaching approach falls within the characteristics of communicative language teaching. The topics dealt with in the activities were of the students' interest, and T1 usually encouraged discussion and negotiation of meaning in the target language. Quoting a student's statement, "In a way or another, lessons were dynamic" and motivating, and marked by oral interaction.

The discourse categories, at the levels of moves and acts, were comprehensive enough to cover almost all communicative functions in classroom language (in the lessons and segment coded for analysis), except for one utterance produced by T1, which was categorized as *self-correction* and labelled as {sfc}, as illustrated in the

011	T1:	/greenhouse/ /+ hum?/ /+ so/ /that's why we have the greenhouse effect/ /+ hum?/ /+ we are going to talk a little bit more about the greenhouse effect/	{ack} F {cp-chk} {mrk} {inf} {cp-chk} {mst}
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### Example 8

The samples of classroom oral interaction analysed in the study indicate a tendency for some typical acts in teacher talk such as elicitations and clarifications to determine more student engagement in CD. This is not surprising, since the function of these acts is mainly to elicit verbal responses from the students. It seems, however, that student participation in CD can be motivated by a combination of factors, ranging from the discourse structure to the content of the lessons, together with the establishment of a favourable environment, especially in terms of an atmosphere of confidence, in which students will 'risk' using the FL for classroom communication. The contribution of such atmosphere was indicated by the qualitative data, as presented below.

### 2.2 Students' Views: Focus on Student Speech

The analysis of data collected from the students by means of a questionnaire (applied in C1, C2, C3 and C4) and interviews (with nearly all students) led to a list of categories that reveal the students' views about their roles in oral interaction and FL language use in EFL lessons. Here, the focus is on when and why students engage in oral communication with the teacher and/or with their classmates, in the FL. The list of six categories were obtained by following the steps for qualitative analysis presented in Gillham (2000a,b).

First of all, the relevant words or sentence fragments in the answers<sup>8</sup> given by the students were underlined, so as to select data that helped answer the research questions for the study. Secondly, this information was transferred to a list of "preliminary categories", which were then grouped according to similar topics. Thirdly, each group

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<sup>8</sup> Examples of questions asked in the interviews are "Do you like to speak English in class? Why?", "Do you prefer to speak with the teacher or with your classmates, and why?" and "Which activities do you prefer in your EFL lessons?".



lesson segment below, turn 009. This was the only new category arisen from the data, at the rank of discourse acts.

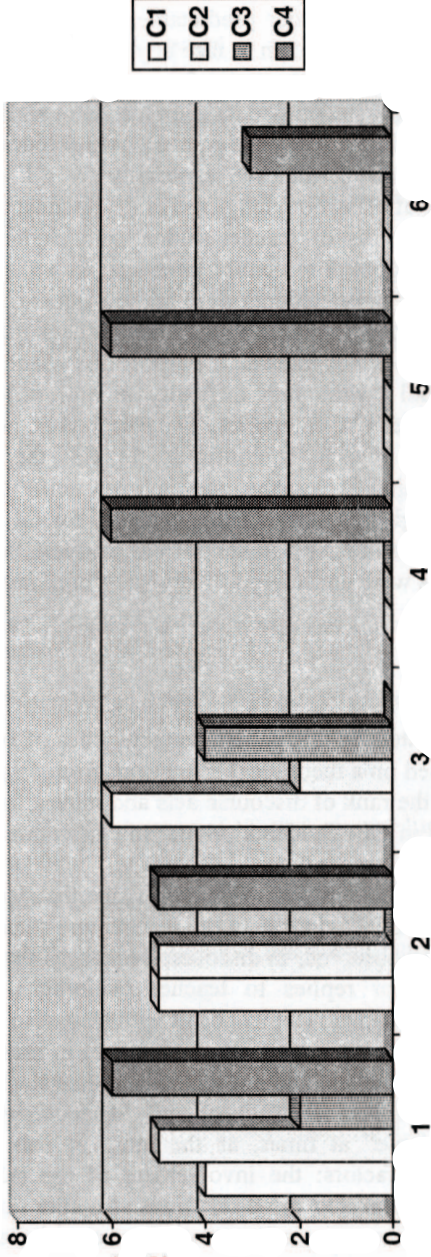
Turn	Speaker	Utterances	Acts	Moves
001	T1:	/[18] daniela/ / + monica/ /+ did you stay under the SUN (over) this weekend?/	{nom} (nom) {eli}	I
002	St10:	/yes (INCOMP)/	{y-rpl}	R
003	T1:	/you came here to swim [RISE]/ /+ (oh/ /+ not bad)/	{eli} {mrk} {com}	I
004	T1:	/erm/ /+ if you look at this paper/ /+ you have a tittle which says global warming + the greenhouse effect / /do you know anything about this + the GREENhouse effect?/	{HES} {dir} {mst} {eli}	I
005	St6:	/ (não é) efeito estufa? /	{eli}-L1	R/Ia
006	T1:	/how do you say that in Portuguese?/	{eli}	I
007	St:	/efeito estufa/	{i-rpl}	R
008	T1:	/ah/	{ack}	F
009	T1:	/how do you say <i>estufa</i> in Portuguese?/ /+ in English?/ /+ how do you say <i>estufa</i> in English?/	{eli} {sfc} {eli}	I
010	STS:	/greenhouse/	{i-rpl}	R

was given a label that best identified its data. Adjustments and reorganization of some groups were required before a definite list of categories was obtained. Finally, this list was used to quantify the data from the answers in the questionnaires and in the interviews, so as to produce a bar chart.

### STUDENTS SPEAK ENGLISH IN CLASS

1. Only to answer the teacher's questions
2. To take part in activities for conversation
3. With great difficulty in oral skills
4. To correct exercises (orally)
5. To read texts aloud
6. To ask questions (to the teacher) for clarification

The occurrences of the six categories, for all classes, are illustrated in the figure below:



The first category corroborates classroom data and the typical student role of answering the teacher's questions, for all classes, especially in C4. In that class, T4 and her students followed a rather predictable, grammar-oriented interactional ritual. The students, however, did not seem to face any barrier to their expected oral performance in class, as indicated by the absence of answers for category 3. Categories 4, 5 and 6, derived only from C4 students' data, support the overall image of their lessons, in which aspects such as reading aloud were equivalent to achievement in oral performance.

Categories 1 and 2 indicate, especially for C1 and C2, the dual and somehow ambiguous value of classroom language in FL lessons: the occurrence of both, more and less structured patterns of teacher-student and student-student interaction. Also, for those classes, category 2 probably connects with the students higher levels of oral competence. In C3, most students were not too fluent or confident to speak English, and their expectations for 'conversation' had not yet been met.

Category 3 does not indicate a purpose for which students speak English in class and thus the label "with great difficulty in oral skills" does not match the pattern followed in the other five categories. The data reveal, however, an important aspect that influences student speech. It confirms, for C3, the students' wish for better oral performance in their EFL lessons, and their low self-rating for oral competence. On the other hand, the high frequency of this category for C1 was rather unexpected, since in that class a large number of students were, at least, at an intermediate level for oral skills, and lessons were considered 'lively' and 'communicative'.

### 3. CONCLUSION

I have presented, in this paper, characteristics of verbal interaction in EFL lessons at university, based on a theoretical framework from discourse analysis and using mainly the categories at the rank of discourse acts and moves, in order to discuss student speech and participation in CD. Students' views on classroom FL use were dealt with as well, and compared to classroom data.

Despite the interactional dynamism in the lessons, typical occurrences of asymmetrical verbal behaviour between teacher and students, concerning turn-taking and topic control, were observed, in discourse sequences that reveal that students participate mostly by means of replies to teacher elicitation. Negotiation of meaning and contributions to the content (topics) dealt with were also observed.

The teacher's control over CD was evident in most of the turn-taking process, by means of typical 'I' moves by the teachers, and their decisions on the topics dealt with in class. The social roles of 'teacher' and 'student' were distinctively different and somehow "negotiable" at times, as the more or less asymmetrical relations varied, depending on two factors: the involvement of the students by the topics and their willingness to contribute to the discussions. Another contributing factor for classroom interaction was the communicative atmosphere established by one teacher in three of the classes investigated, as indicated in the types of classroom activities and the teacher's efforts to encourage student speech.

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## Appendix 1: Discourse Categories in Classroom Discourse

(based on Consolo, 1996)

1.	Marker	{mrk}	14.	Metastatement	{mst}
2.	Starter	{str}	15.	Comment	{com}
3.	Elicitation	{eli}	16.	Clue	{clu}
4.	Comprehension check	{cp-chk}	17.	Model	{mdl}
5.	Confirmation check	{cf-chk}	18.	Bid	{bid}
6.	Clarification	{cla}	19.	Nomination	{nom}
7.	Directive	{dir}	20.	Acknowledge	{ack}
8.1.	Affirmative reply	{y-rpl}	21.	Apology	{apl}
8.2.	Negative reply	{n-rpl}	22.	Thank	{thk}
8.3.	Choice reply	{c-rpl}	23.	Encouragement	{ecg}
8.4.	Repetition reply	{rp-rpl}	24.	Conclusion	{con}
8.5.	Informative reply	{i-rpl}	25.	Terminate	{ter}
8.6.	Offer reply	{o-rpl}	26.	Greeting	{grt}
9.	React	{rea}	27.	Parting	{prt}
10.	Informative	{inf}	28.	Aside	{asi}
11.	Protest	{pro}	29.	Translation	{trl}
12.	Correction	{cor}	30.	Rhetorical question	{rtq}
13.	Evaluate	{evl}	31.	Self-correction	{sfc}