# A Study of EFL Classroom Discourse from the Perspectives of both DA and CA

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## Abstract

In order to get the deeper understanding of EFL classroom discourse, the researcher displays the process of EFL classroom discourse through the analytical instruments of both DA and CA. It is found that there are several discourse structures in the EFL classroom discourse from the perspective of DA, it is more complex than the single IRF structure which also including the IRFR structure,the IR $[I_1R_1 \ldots (I_nR_n)]$ F structure and the $IR_1F_1R_2F_2 \ldots R_nF$nstructure. From the perspective of CA, the research shows that quite a few conversational skills are used in the EFL classroom discourse, such as turn-taking, conversation repair, interruption and repetition. It is concluded that the students generally play a passive rolein EFL classroom discourse, especially in teacher-student interaction. Itshould be the joint effort of teacher and students to increase students' contributionin classroom discourse and interaction.

**Key words:** Discourse analysis; Conversation analysis; IRF model; Turn-taking; ESL classroom

## INTRODUCTION

As a new discipline in modern linguistics, discourse analysis is developing rapidly and becoming an important research field; many scholars like Sacks, Halliday, Van Dijk, Labov have made fruitful research on discourse from various perspectives. Thereafter, the importance of classroom discourse in SLA research wins increasingly wide recognition and more and more researchers started to focus their studies on classroom discourse. Discourse analysis (DA) and conversation analysis (CA) are the most influential theoretical frameworks and analytical instruments. Discourse analysis aims to analyze the total picture of natural communication, examining the structural features in the unit of discourse. In conversation analysis, the emphasis is on the close observation of the specific behaviors of participants in interaction which recur over a wide range of natural communication. The present research aims at displaying interactional features in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom discourse from the perspectives of both DA and CA to provide some pedagogical implications to foreign language learning and teaching.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 Discourse Analysis

Discourse-based analysis came on the research agenda in the late 1970s, and Zellig Harris is the first person who uses the term 'discourse'. At a time when linguistics was largely concerned with the analysis of single sentences, Zellig Harris published a paper with the title 'Discourse Analysis'. Harris was interested in the distribution of linguistic elements in extended texts, and the links between the text and its social situation. Although his paper was a far cry from the discourse analysis we used nowadays, he specifically ruled out the kind of study which discourse analysis fundamentally aims to do (McCarthy, 2002). In 1960s and 1970s, other scholars, i. e., philosophers of language or those dealing with pragmatics enormously influenced the development of discourse analysis as well. Researches on DA and similar

phenomena continued to expand in the 1980s and 1990s, with result that now DA studies figure prominently not only in the pragmatic and discourse analytic research, but also in language acquisition (Schourup, 1999).

An important research on classroom discourse was British discourse analysis, i. e., the Sinclair-Coulthard model developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) at the University of Birmingham in Britain. The model provides a way for the description of teacher-student interaction, based on a hierarchy of discourse units, i. e., lesson-transaction-exchange-move-act, an act is the smallest meaningful element of discourse, and a lesson is the largest unit.

The largest unit of classroom organization is *lesson* which is based on pedagogical evidence. *Transactions* are expressed in terms of *exchanges* and are marked always by *frames*, realized by words such as well, right, now, good, OK, which indicate to the students that one transaction has ended and another is beginning, and with a focus, which tells them what the transaction is going to be about (Zhang *et al.*, 2008).

    For example:
    Frame: OK
    Focus: This period we are going to study …

The exchange has been defined as 'the basic unit of interaction' (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1992), and as a 'significant unit of discourse' (McCarthy, 2002), and much of the interest in spoken discourse has been at this level. Exchanges are divided into boundary exchanges and teaching exchanges: boundary exchanges signaling the beginning of a transaction in the lesson, and teaching exchanges showing the way any particular lesson is progressing. The structure of exchanges is expressed in terms of *moves*. The element of the structure is most clearly defined as that of 'teaching exchange', which typically has three phases, involving an initiation move, a response move, and a feedback move, as in this example (Ellis, 1994):

    T: Ask Anan what his name is?    *(Initiation)*
    S: What's your name?              *(Response)*
    T: Good.                          *(Feedback)*

This exchange became known as 'IRF'. Each move is realized by means of various kinds of *acts*. *Acts* are defined principally by their functions in the discourse, by the way they serve to initiate succeeding discourse activities or respond to earlier discourse activities, for instance, elicitation has its function "to request a linguistic response", direction "to request a non-linguistic response" (Zhang *et al.*, 2008, p. 58).

In the following examples, we show the relationship between exchange, move, and act.

    *Exchange*
    T: So they were all happy that night, weren't they, Anna?
    S: No, they weren't at all.
    T: No, indeed they weren't. Good.

Moves
T: (*initiation*)  So they were all happy that night, weren't they, Anna?
S: (*response*)  No, they weren't at all.
T: (*follow-up*)  No, indeed they weren't. Good.
*Acts*
T: (*elicitation*)  So they were all happy that night, weren't they,
T: (*nomination*)  Anna?
S: (*reply*)       No,
S: (*comment*)    they weren't at all.
T: (*comment*)    No, indeed.
T: (*evaluation*)  Good.

It should be noted that the IRF structure is only likely to arise in classroom discourse which is teacher-controlled. Van Lier (1988) found that although the discourse is often strictly controlled by the teacher, learners do sometimes initiate exchanges, at least in some classrooms. Although IRF exchanges tend to be the dominant structure in classroom discourse, other kinds of discourse model can also be found, which have been proved by some scholars, like Li Yueer (2002).

## 1.2  Conversation Analysis

Conversation Analysis is a rigorous empirical approach to the analysis of oral discourse, with its disciplinary roots in sociology, which employs inductive method to search for recurring sequential features by investigating many cases without appeal to intuitive judgments of what speakers "think" or "mean" (Boxer & Cohen, 2004). For CA researchers, the categories of turns, adjacency pairs, and conversation repair are universal, but the way in which these phenomena are realized varies from conversation to conversation, and becomes an important focus in CA. Thus, the goal of CA is to discover the systematic properties of the sequential organizations in interaction, the ways in which utterances are designed to manage such sequences, and to model the procedures employed by the speakers that are displayed in talk-in-interaction. In order to achieve this goal, CA insists on collecting authentic material by recording spoken interaction via audiotape or videotape, which is then scrupulously transcribed in the unit of turns with a conventional notation developed by Gail Jefferson. CA adheres to the viewpoint that the analysis of conversation interaction must grow out of careful examinations of transcriptions that include small details that might be relevant to the unfolding of talk-in-interaction.

Applied linguists have recognized the contribution of CA over the years with an increasing interest in a merger between CA and SLA. CA has given language teachers important insights into many aspects that are critical to the classroom interaction, like turn-taking, adjacency pair, conversation repair, interruption, conversation openings and closings, and topic organization. A CA outlook on classroom interaction can help language teachers reach

a kind of heightened awareness and understanding of classroom interaction. For example, important findings from conversation analysis can help teachers to unveil the turn-taking system of classroom interaction so that they may in turn help both language teachers and learners to map out invisible rules of behavior of supporting teacher-students interaction; can assist teachers to offer learners a more specific, more situated, and more complex picture of how sequencing works; and also can help language teachers to develop a solid understanding of conversation repair in order to reach out to learners in a variety of ways. Generally speaking, CA has the potential to play a key role in second language teaching and it provides a "one of a kind" look into what makes classroom interaction happen.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Both discourse analysis and conversation analysis have rapidly become the favored methods of analysis, as they provided researchers with the tools they needed to investigate the nature of the learning opportunities made available to learners through interaction (Ellis, 1994). But these two methods have their own research focuses. DA views the classroom interaction in the static state, while CA puts it in a dynamic process. In order to interpret the construction of classroom discourse more thoroughly, both DA and CA will be adopted in the present research.

### 2.1 Subjects

Data is collected from a college EFL classroom. The EFL students are all sophomores who have been studying English class since junior high school and most of them can communicate with native English speakers in simple English. The teacher is a male native English speaker with eight years' teaching experience in college.

### 2.2 Instruments

The present research adopts classroom observation and video-tape as its instruments. The naturally occurring data must be video-taped for the following reasons (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997):

(1) Certain features are not recoverable in any other way;
(2) playing and replaying facilitates transcribing and developing an analysis;
(3) recording makes it possible to check a particular analysis against the materials;
(4) Recording makes it possible to return to an interaction with new analytic interest.

### 2.3 Data Collection

Four EFL and CSL lessons were respectively observed and video-taped by the researcher who sat at the back or side of the class throughout the data collection period. Then the video-taped lessons are transcribed and checked over and over again by the observer so that it might not include misspelled words or any explanations which do not make sense. Even so, some parts of the recordings failed to be transcribed because some are too fast and some are inaudible. Transcription symbols being used in the present study are necessarily selective and indeed are particularly concerned with capturing the key features of talk, namely, sound stretches, silence, cut-offs, emphasis, and the like. For example, attention is drawn to particular aspects of the talk by means of point marker (→).

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Classroom Discourse Structures

Based on the transcription of EFL classroom recordings, the researcher found that the discourse structures are more complex than Sinclair and Coulthard's Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model, that is to say, variations of the IRF structure have also been documented (e. g., Hicks, 1986). However, the result of transcription shows that there still exists the rigid IRF structure.

#### 3.1.1 The IRF Structure
Example 1
01   T: Er, Ok, all:: right. Question.
02   Ask your question about talk, my friend just said.
03   This is why you must listen, this going to make you listen,
04   if you can't hear, you got to do something about↑ it ( )
05   or you say >( )<
06   Do you understand?
07   This is what we call<self help> (T)
08   You know,
09   (0.2)
10   you have to help yourself, if some other people can't help you.
11   Yeah, here's your question. *(Initiation)*
12   S2: What's – wha – wha – wha –
13   What's your, the reason –
14   you tell us about –
15   the story about your parents ( )
16   what is the reason,
17   what's your reason to tell us this story? *(Response)*
18   T: That's a good↑question.
19   Good question, my friend↑. *(Feedback)*

In the exchange between teacher and student, the IRF structure can be clearly identified. Teacher initiates the conversation, then the student responses to the teacher's requirements, finally teacher provides feedback to the student on his performance.

#### 3.1.2 Variations of IRF Structure
(1) The IRFR Structure
Example 2
01   T: Ok, games.

02　(0.3)

03　I'm going to (　), and:

04　I'll give you some sentences with idioms ↑ and ask someone –

05　to try to give the ordinary English meaning.

06　All right?

07　The idioms ↑ are very strong color English,

08　(That's are –) the Chinese too, you know.

09　(0.3)

10　So,

11　(10)

12　Ok,

13　(10)

14　the first idiom is <"to come alive">, <"to come alive">.
((writing the idiom on the blackboard))

15　The idiom is <"to come alive">

16　(　) like this ↓,

17　in a sentence. Oh, I will give you a sentence

18　(0.3)

19　Oh, "Up to now ↑,

20　the guests at the party (has been) eating and meeting small talk.

21　When the rock ↑ band arrive, everyone <came alive> when the bank starts to play (　)."

22　(　) you know (　), you know, the most popular (　), the (　) music

23　So, I'll ask someone to tell me,

24　what does it mean?

25　River,

26　(0.3)

27　what does it mean? *(Initiation)*

28　S5: Exited. *(Response)*

29　T: Ah:: Yeah:, a little bit.

30　Anyone else?

31　What's another word for excited?

32　(0.3)

33　"come alive"

34　So the (　) was excited becau – they were eating and,

35　and doing small talk (　)?

36　Ok, I will give you the Chinese, give you –
((whispering it to River))

37 speak it out in Chinese ↑ (　) *(Feedback)*

38S5: Jing Shen Wei Zhi Yi Zhen. *(Response)*

In this interaction between the teacher and the student, the teacher gives an idiom to let S5 paraphrase it in ordinary English, while the student does not give the appropriate answer, so the teacher provides the answer in Chinese to S5, then the student gives a further response by reading it. Thus the IRFR structure occurs.

(2) The IR [$I_1R_1 \ldots (I_nR_n)$] F Structure

Example 3

01 T: (　) So, hhh::

02　if you are talking to somebody you don't know very well. How do you speak to them?

03　(0.5)

04　Do you - Do Chinese people use words, like "Sir", "Madame"?

05　(0.4) *(Initiation)*

06 S3: Hum. We use "Xiansheng" or "Nvshi". *(Response)*

07　T: What's the translation to? What's the translation to? *(Initiation)*

08　(0.3)

09　S3: Hum. Sir or Madame. *(Response)*

10　T: Ok.

11　How woul –

12　When you say –

13　when you finish your phone call ↑

14　how would you finish it? Translate –

15　it from Chinese into English.

16　How would you finish it? *(Initiation)*

17　S3: Hum::

18　Bye bye. *(Response)*

19　T: Just "Bye Bye".
(writing on the blackboard)

20　Foreign teachers tell me that maybe saying "Byebye" is childish.

21　(Absolutely rubbish) Hah

22　"Bye Bye" is much friendly, much sweeter than::

23　we say "Bye." You know?

24　"Bye!" Hah

25　"Bye bye!" you know?

26　When you say "Byebye", you are acting like a child.

27　You know?

28　Nothing is wrong with "Bye Bye". You know?

29　Ok, thank you! Good English. *(Feedback)*

In the extracted fragment above, the teacher initiates the exchange, and the student answers the teacher's question, but the answer does not meet the teacher's requirement. Then the teacher clarifies his requirement further to guide the student to give the right answer. Then the teacher continues to do his contribution in engaging the student in further discussion by changing focus on another question, and in the end, the teacher makes comment on the student's response. Thus the IR[$I_1R_1\ldots$ ($I_nR_n$)] F structure occurs.

(3)　The $IR_1F_1R_2F_2 \ldots R_nF_n$ Structure

Example 4

01　T: Ok, Let's get start.

02　(0.3)

03　Ah::,Iri.

04　What would you like to talk about?

05　Open topic, remember?

06　Talk abou::t, talk about anything,

07　just for a couple of minutes ↑.

08　(and listen to your English)

09　Everybody listen,

10　(you goona listen this person who is talking),

11　I'd like you to ask questions.

12    All right? *(Initiation)*
13    S1: (nodding)
14    (I'd like to) share my – my story with all of you.
15    (This story is) *(Response)*
      *(interrupting)*
16    T: That's good English ↑
17    I'm very glad to share my story with you, not (   )
18    That's good ↑ English.
19    That's a goo– , that's a good – opening.
20    That's a (preface),
21    you know,
22    prefacing, yes! *(Feedback)*
23    S1: I would like to share the story about my parents. (Response)
24    T: Story about your parents, yes.   *(Feedback)*
25    S1: = No.
26    Hum:: (   ) my father
27    my father (work the tool as a toy – not well) (Response)
28    T: Hum, Ok. All::right. *(Feedback)*

In the beginning of the T-S interaction, the student makes an opening of her topic after the teacher gives his direction. And the teacher immediately makes his positive feedback to confirm the student's language performance in her opening. Then in the following exchange, the teacher and the student develop their conversation until the teacher speaks Ok as a not very strong indication maker to end the interaction. The $IR_1F_1R_2F_2 \ldots R_nF_n$ structure is realized.

## 3.2 Classroom Interactional Skills

### 3.2.1 Turn-taking

Nomination is the main turn-allocation skill that found in EFL classroom through the investigation on the transcription of classroom recordings, and student self-selection rarely happens. In EFL classroom, turn-taking is usually controlled and allocated by the teacher. Next turn is usually allocated by the teacher's selecting a student, and then the selected student has the right and is obliged to take next turn to speak. This phenomenon can be clearly supported by the following two examples.

Example 1
01    T: So::
02    how do you,
03    er, how do you, tell the person,
04    that,
05    that conversation is coming to a end?
06    How do you do that ↑
07    in Chinese situation?
08    Hum:: <I will ask>
09    (0.5)
      →10   Jacen.

Example 2
01    T: …African people can speak sweetest English for a long time.
02    Why?

03    Someone tells me?
04    Why would western African – 05 Hum, African –
06    western Africa ↑ speak English,
07    <so naturally>
08    Have a guess, and tell me.
09    (0.4)
      →10 Rita.
11    Can you guess why?

### 3.2.2 Conversation Repair

The organization of repair is a complex system for doing "maintenance work" that avoids or averts miscommunication. Repair is composed of three main relevant phases: the trouble source or the repairable, the repair initiation and the repair outcome. This gives rise to four types of repair: self-initiated self repair, self-initiated other repair, other-initiated self repair and other-initiated other repair. After analyzing the transcription of EFL classroom recordings, the researcher detects that four types of repair exist in EFL classroom.

(1) Self-initiated Self Repair
      Example 1
01    T: Ok.
→02 How woul –
→03 When you say –
→04 when you finish your phone call↑
05    how would you finish it? Translate –
06    it from Chinese into English.
07    How would you finish it?
08    S3: Hum::
09    Bye bye.

In this example, the teacher stops talking because he realizes that he can not express himself in the present sentence, and he initiates self-repair by reformulating his expression which is illustrated in lines 02-04.

(2) Self-initiated Other Repair
      Example 2
01    S3: The film is called The Blind Side.
→02 T: The Black Side?
→03 S3: The Blind Side.
→04 Blind

In the example above, the teacher in line 02 initiates his wondering to the last interlocutor's utterances and wants to check his understanding. His doubt is solved by the other speaker in the following line. As Li (1996) argued, "Repair is a technique available to solve the problems which arise in the process of interaction."

(3) Other-initiated Self Repair
Example 3
01 S6: Face the door ↑
02 T: Fa::
→03 S6: Facing the door ↓

In this exchange, when the teacher showing his confirmation to the student's answer, the student realizes the grammar error she made in her answer and corrects it in line 03.

(4) Other-initiated Other Repair

Example 4

```
01    S1: but,
02        when they,
03        when they
04        when they
05        (stop) finish their work,
→06   they went home.
→07   T: They "go home".
→08   ( ) always <go home>
09    When they finish their work, they go home. Yes ↓
```

In this example, the student provides the trouble source with incorrect verb tense in line 06. In the following turns, the teacher initiates and carries out the repair by correcting the student's wrong verb tense.

### 3.2.3 Interruption

Interruption is "a device for exercising power and control in conversation" because it involves "violation of speakers' turns at talk" (Zimmerman & West, 1983). It is illustrated by the following example.

```
01    T: If you are –
02        If –
03        if you are the kind to visit (    ) boy,
04        would you –
05        do you think you will come alone or,
06        do you think you will come with:
07        <one or two others>
08        (    )
09    S5: (    )
10        I think I will invite to someone else to come with me↓but,
11        I will thinking (I won't trouble you).
12        And I will ask –
13        ask you↑
14        if I can (visit you with others)
→15   and: and
        (interrupting)
→16   T: What if I say, it's just,
17        hypothetical
18        You know "hypothetical"?
19        You know,
20        (Imaging situation)
21        That's not gonna happen, but let' say:
22        I said "No: I don't want you bring someone else.
        I just want you to come".
```

In this exchange, the teacher gives the student an alternative question, and the student makes her choice. Once the teacher realizes what the student is thinking, he interrupts the student in line 16 and makes a further requirement to the student.

### 3.2.4 Repetition

Based on the analysis of the classroom data, we can find that repetition of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences is strikingly salient in T-S interaction in EFL classroom. As it is showed in the following example:

```
→01   T: That's good English ↑ !
02        I'm very glad to share my story with you, not ( )
→03   That'sgood ↑ English.
→04   That's a goo– , that's a good – opening.
05        That's a (preface),
06        you know,
07        prefacing, yes!
→08   S1: I would like to share the story about my parents.
→09   T: Story about your parents, yes.
10    S1: They always work together,
11        hum:: and, (    ) I –
12        In my family, I have a,
13        (fruit) garden.
14        They always working here.
```

In this example, the teacher repeats "good" for three times to commend on the student's expressions. Then in line 09 the teacher repeats the last part of the student's sentence in line 08 to encourage the student to continue to talk about her story.

## CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this research is to investigate classroom interaction by observing the naturally-occurring EFL classroom discourse. The major findings based on the video–taped recordings are summarized as follows.

(1) The discourse structure in EFL classroom is more complex than single IRF model which also includes the IRFR structure, the IR $[I_1R_1 … (I_nR_n)]$ F structure and the $IR_1F_1R_2F_2 … R_nF_n$ structure.

(2) Students in EFL classroom rarely initiate the conversation, and usually take the turn by nomination. Students seldom seize the right of speaking by overlapping and interruption.

(3) It is found that repairs are frequently adopted by the teacher and students to cope with problems in speaking, hearing and understanding. Just as Jung (1999) discovered that repair serves as a pedagogical tool, enabling both students and teachers to communicate and learn more effectively.

(4) Cases of teacher as interrupter often occur, however, influenced by traditional classroom teaching concepts and learning habits, Chinese students seldom interrupt teachers.

(5) Repetition frequently occurs in EFL classroom, and teachers usually use repetition to emphasize or guide students to complete utterance, and students usually repeat part or all teachers' utterance to show their confirmation or doubts.

Based on the findings, it is found that most of the interaction in the EFL classroom is from the teacher to the students, there is little student initiative and little student-student interaction. Influencing by the traditional learning style and habits, the students in EFL classroom is passive

in learning, thus it will be a huge challenge for the teacher to encourage the students to participate in the classroom interaction.

In view of rare student initiation and poor student participation, the teacher needs to create the classroom interactional environment which can facilitate students' performance in classroom interaction, such as topic selecting and grouping. The students should improve their ability to engage in turn-taking, because it is an important aspect of conversation techniques, enabling one to start and remain involved in a conversation. Learning how to manage turn-taking is the very basis for learning how to communicate in the target language. Our Chinese students frequently remark on the difficulty of how to jump into a conversation and maintain the conversation. Many opportunities of participation and, by extension, learning are lost because of this difficulty.

Limitations are also discussed in the end of research. For example, it is mainly a micro-analysis of the classroom discourse, so the results obtained in the present research leave much to be verified and improved. In addition, the authenticity of transcription analysis may influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher.

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## APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

T: teacher

S1: learner 1

S: unidentified learner

SS: several or all learner simultaneously

[[: simultaneous talk, where utterances start simultaneously

[ ]: overlapping talk, where utterances start and end simultaneously

=: contiguous utterances, no intervals between utterances

(0.0): intervals within and between utterances

-: a cut off, usually a glottal stop

Underlining: a word or sound is emphasized

Hah: laughter tokens

( ): transcription doubt, uncertainty; words within parentheses are uncertain

(( )): non – vocal action, details of scene

x: applause

…: omission within utterances

⋮: omission between turns

→: a feature of interest to the analyst

::: prolong the sound