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**Construction or Obstruction:
teacher talk and learner involvement in the EFL classroom**

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Abstract

To what extent do teachers of EFL hinder or facilitate learner contributions by their use of language? How can teachers enhance the quantity and quality of learner output by more careful language use? In what ways do teachers deny learning opportunities by 'filling in the gaps' or 'smoothing over' learner contributions? Adopting the position that maximising learner involvement is conducive to second language acquisition, this paper examines the ways in which teachers, through their choice of language, construct or obstruct learner participation in face to face classroom communication. From the lesson extracts emerge a number of ways in which teachers can improve their teacher talk to facilitate and optimise learner contributions. The conclusion, that teachers' ability to control their use of language is at least as important as their ability to select appropriate methodologies, has implications for both teacher education and classroom practices.

I Introduction

Communication in the ELT classroom is a highly complex, complicated and elusive phenomenon: a 'problematic medium' (Cazden, 1986: 432). For many years, educators and researchers have been concerned to analyze the communicativeness of the classroom by comparing it to communication in the 'real world'. Teachers have been criticized for their *excessive TTT* (teacher talking time) and trainees on initial and in-service course have been advised of their need to *reduce talking time*. Put simply, the focus has been on the quantity rather than quality of teacher talk, a position which is clearly both simplistic and unrealistic.

More recent research has revealed that the classroom should be viewed as a context in its own right, or rather a series of interrelated contexts, jointly created and defined by the participants: the teacher and learners. (See, for example, Johnson, 1995; Seedhouse, 1996; van Lier, 1988). Under this view, any attempt to analyze teacher-and-learner-talk starts from the assumption that verbal behaviour is goal-oriented and governed by certain rules, as is the case for interactants in, for example, a court-room, a doctor's surgery, a restaurant. Indeed, as in any institutional discourse setting, participants in the EFL classroom are to a large extent restricted in their choice of language by the prevailing features of that context. Some of those features are listed below:-

- (a) teachers largely control the topic of discussion;
- (b) teachers often control both content and procedure;
- (c) teachers usually control who may participate and when;
- (d) students take their cues from teachers;
- (e) role relationships between teachers and learners are unequal;
- (f) teachers are responsible for managing the interaction which occurs;
- (g) teachers talk most of the time;
- (h) teachers modify their talk to learners;
- (i) learners rarely modify their talk to teachers;
- (i) teachers ask questions (to which they know the answers) most of the time.

II Teacher talk and learning opportunity

If we accept that the EFL classroom is a social context in its own right, worthy of study and scrutiny, but not by comparing it to other contexts, any attempt to understand the nature of classroom discourse should focus on quality rather than quantity by recognising the important relationship between language use and pedagogic purpose. The goal-oriented activities in which teachers and learners are engaged are shaped by and for the work-in-progress of the lesson; teachers and learners adjust their use of language according to the task in which they are involved. Some teacher-fronted tasks (for example, grammar explanations) may require high levels of quite complex teacher talk and very little learner participation, while others (for example, eliciting learner responses) will hopefully result in more active learner participation, consisting of longer and more complex turns. The point is that appropriate language use is more likely to occur when teachers are sufficiently aware of their goal at a given moment in a lesson to match their teaching aim, their pedagogic purpose, to their language use. Where language use and pedagogic purpose coincide, learning opportunities are facilitated; conversely, where there is a significant deviation between language use and teaching goal at a given moment in a lesson, opportunities for learning and acquisition are, I would suggest, missed.

There now exists a substantial body of research evidence highlighting the interdependence of interaction, input, output and the need for negotiation for meaning (see, for example, Long, 1983, 1995; Swain, 1985, 1996; Pica, 1994; Willis, 1996; Foster, 1998). While the current position on the precise nature of the link between negotiation for meaning and language acquisition is still murky, its very existence is surely a powerful indicator of the need to pay more attention to the relationship between teacher language and learning opportunity. The

logical extension of the existing body of research evidence is that teachers engaged in teacher-fronted activities should be concerned to:-

- engage learners in the classroom discourse
- encourage interactional adjustments between teacher and learners
- promote opportunities for self-expression
- facilitate and encourage clarification by learners

Negotiation for meaning plays a central role in the process of SLA. Meaning is negotiated through face to face interactions between teachers and students. Foster's (1998) study, highlighting the limited evidence for negotiation for meaning in learner-learner interaction under 'real' classroom conditions, adds further support to the need for greater negotiation of meaning between teacher and learners. The patterns of communication which are established can either constrain or facilitate students' opportunities to participate (and consequently to learn). Teachers have a vital role to play in understanding, establishing and maintaining patterns of communication which will facilitate SLA. In the words of Johnson, 1995:9:-

Teachers control what goes on in classrooms primarily through the ways in which they use language.

The relationship between teacher talk and learning opportunity is perhaps even more fully documented in research focusing on content-based subjects. For example, in a recent study involving science teachers in US high schools, Musumeci (1996) indicates that little or no negotiation was to be found. Indeed, quite the reverse: teachers talk most of the time and initiate most exchanges through display questions; teachers modify their speech in response to non-understanding; students rarely modify their speech; teachers rarely request speech modification from students, preferring instead to 'fill in the gaps' from the 'linguistic hints' provided. As Musumeci (1996: 314) suggests:-

...teachers...speak more, more often, control the topic of conversation, rarely ask questions for which they do not have answers, and appear to understand absolutely everything the students say, sometimes before they even say it!

The work of Musumeci and others (see also Love (1991) has clear relevance to the EFL classroom where the ability by learners to formulate, re-formulate, clarify and seek clarification are important indicators not only that language acquisition has taken (or is taking) place but also that something is being understood and eventually learnt. By 'filling in the gaps', teachers may facilitate a coherent and flowing discourse, but they may be denying their learners

opportunities to get to grips with the subject matter and to identify potential problems in understanding. In the words of Scott Thornbury, 2000:28:

Moreover, language classrooms are **language** classrooms (author's emphasis), and for the teacher to monopolise control of the discourse - through, for example, asking only display questions - while possibly appropriate to the culture of geography or maths classes, would seem to deny language learners access to what they most need - opportunities for real language use.

III Data and methodology

The study set out to answer the following questions:-

- (a) In what ways do teachers, through their choice of language, create opportunities for learning?
- (b) How can teachers, through their use of language, increase opportunities for learner involvement?
- (c) What evidence is there that teachers 'fill in the gaps' or 'gloss over' learner contributions to create a smooth flowing discourse, but reduce opportunities for learning?

Eight experienced teachers of EFL (three or more years of teaching experience) were invited to take part in this study. They were each asked to make two 30-minute audio-recordings of their lessons. They were given complete about which parts of the lesson to record; the only guideline was that their recordings should contain teacher-fronted activity with examples of teacher-learner interaction. A total of approximately eight hours' recordings was then analyzed, using a Conversation Analysis (CA) methodology, which was selected for a number of reasons:-

1. The data are allowed to 'speak for themselves'; conversational interaction can be explained using the kinds of observation techniques used by naturalists in the study of plants and animals (Sacks, 1984). The emphasis is on data which are naturally occurring and on an analysis which is fine-grained; the approach is strictly empirical, relying entirely on naturally occurring data, with no attempt to 'fit' the data to preconceived categories; evidence that such categories exist and are utilized by the participants must be demonstrated by reference to and examples from the data. CA forces the researcher to focus on the interaction patterns emerging from the data, rather than relying on any preconceived notions which language teachers may bring to the data.

2. The patterns of language which occur in a second language classroom are socially constructed by the participants (Prabhu, 1992, Van Lier, 1988, Seedhouse, 1996, Johnson, 1995) in the same way that any naturally occurring conversation is constructed by turn-taking, sequencing of acts, topic shifts, and so on. etc. A CA methodology takes account of the inter-dependency of turns and the social practices at work which enable participants in a conversation to make sense of the interaction and contribute to it.
3. Classroom discourse, like any institutional discourse, has its roots in ordinary conversation whose essential characteristics are interactive choice and the interdependency of contributions (Slade, 1986). That is, CA sets out to explain the rules which operate to ensure that talk is maintained and sustained across the contributions of, possibly, several speakers. The structure of conversations is present in many contexts, including language classrooms, making a CA methodology an appropriate one: "conversation pervades all human contact in which language use is relevant, including the work place". (Van Lier, 1988: 270).
4. The classroom context, under a CA methodology, is regarded as being dynamic; contexts are not fixed entities which operate throughout a lesson, but dynamic and changing processes which vary from one stage of a lesson to another. Within any one lesson, according to the goals of the participants, there will be frequent changes in the 'micro-context', the specific situations which unfold as the lesson progresses, indicated and influenced by the interaction patterns which ensue. The teacher's use of language is not only an indication of the particular context in operation; it is the principal force in bringing about *changes* in context. That is, language, as "the vehicle and object of instruction" (Long, 1983:9), reflects and determines what context is in operation.
5. A CA methodology is able to cope with the goal-oriented nature of institutional discourse, in which the behaviour and discourse of the participants are influenced by the goal (or more likely, goals) towards which they are striving. While the participants may have different objectives, and almost certainly different agendas, the discourse which is jointly

constructed is dependent both on the intended outcomes and related expectations of the participants.

IV Construction: increasing learning potential

From the data collected, it becomes very quickly apparent that some teachers, knowingly or not, consistently create opportunities for learner involvement because their use of language, and pedagogic purpose are at one. For simplicity and economy, the discussion which follows centres around two longer extracts: the first in which the teacher facilitates maximum learner involvement by constructing a context in which learners are maximally involved, the second in which the teacher appears to obstruct or hinder learner involvement. Shorter extracts are used for illustrative purposes only. Note that the intention is not to evaluate the instructional skills of the teachers, merely to comment on the differences in opportunities for learning created by language use.

In the extract which follows, there is clear evidence that the teacher, by controlled use of language and by matching pedagogic and linguistic goals, facilitates and promotes reformulation and clarification, leading to greater involvement and precision of language on the part of the learners.

Extract 1 (For transcription conventions see appendix)

In this extract with 6 pre-intermediate adult learners from Brazil, Japan, Korea and Russia, the teacher's stated aim is to provide oral fluency practice using material from Intermediate Communication Games.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| 480 | L4:the good news is my sister who live in Korea send eh ... |
| 481 SENT= | |
| 482 | L4:=sent sent credit card to me= |
| 483 =ooh very good news ... | |
| 484 | L4: but bad news [is] |
| 485 [the bad] news is ... | |
| 486 | L4: I don't know password ... |
| 487 | LL: /password/password/ (2) |
| 488 | L1: pin number= |
| 489 =pin number ... | |
| 490 | L4: what?= L1: =ah pin number= |
| 491 =pin number pin number= | |
| 492 | LL: =/ahh pin number/pen number/= |
| 493 =pin PIN not pen pin = | LL: =/pin/pin number/p-i-n/= |
| 494 | L1: =I always forgot my pin number |
| 495 | L: =ah pin number= |

496
 497 = I don't know my pin number L5:((2)) she can phone you on
 498 mobile phone=
 499 =she can ... L5: she can say [you]
 500
 501 [she can] ... L5: she can tell your pin number ...
 502
 503 yeah she can [tell you your pin
 number] L5: [she can tell you] this pin
 504 number by phone ...
 L4: but I I can't eh ring her because
 505 eh because eh the time eh=
 506 =the time difference?= L4: =time difference=
 507 L5: =you can count your time for
 508 example look what what's the
 difference time with your country
 how many hours? (3)
 L: eight hours=
 509 L5: =eight hours ok you can phone
 510 early in the morning it will be
 evening in your country=
 L4: =if I go to home if ((5)) if I call
 511 her Korea it's eh [midnight]
 L: [midnight] ...
 512 L5:ok you can phone in the morning
 513 ((3))=
 L4: =yeah at [eight]
 514 L5: [at eight] o'clock at nine o'clock
 515 you can call=
 L6: =in Japan same=
 516
 517 =it's the same eight hours?= L6: =yeah=
 518 L4: =I'm very busy=
 519 L5: =what you are busy it's eh just
 520 reason you [((5))]
 L4:[((4))]=
 521
 522 =for god's sake give him a
 break (laughter)

(Author's data, 2000)

The features of this teacher's language use which facilitate learner involvement and construct potential for learning include:-

(a) *Direct error correction (in turns 481, 484, 489, 493)*

Maximum economy is used when correcting errors and the teacher opts for a very open and direct approach to error correction, as preferred by learners (Seedhouse, 1997). This is far less time-consuming and intrusive than the more 'sensitive' (and therefore time-consuming) routes preferred by many teachers and illustrated in the following extract:-

Extract 2

11 ok does anyone agree with his statement?

13 = agree be careful with the verb to agree there you as well Ensa that it's we! agree it's not to be agree it's to agree! [OK]

16 I agree with you but not I AM agree with you the verb is to agree ok so ((3)) to agree with **(writing on board)** is the preposition that follows it I so it's I agree with you I disagree with you ... ok em Silvie can you em what were you going to say?

17

12. L: (2) erm I am agree with =

14.L:[oh I agree]

15 L: ((3))

L2:I agree with you because em when when we talk about something em for example you saw a ((2)) on TV=

(Author's data, 2000)

While this paper is certainly not suggesting that all error correction should be direct and minimalist, there is a certain logic in keeping error correction to a minimum in oral fluency practice activities in order to reduce interruption and 'maintain the flow'. The teacher in extract 1 succeeds very well in achieving this and the discourse is allowed to proceed with minimum interruption.

(b) Content feedback (in turns 483, 522)

Many of the features of this extract mirror a naturally occurring conversation and the teacher quite appropriately provides personal reactions to comments made by learners: reacting to a comment made (in 483) and making use of humour (in 522). Given that one of the teacher's stated aims is 'to provide oral fluency practice', her use of conversational language is appropriate to her pedagogic purpose; language use and pedagogic purpose coincide. The teacher's use of language strongly resembles utterances found in the 'real world' and reinforces the aim of promoting oral fluency. Appropriate use of conversational language creates an atmosphere which is conducive to learning and is likely to promote learner involvement. Feedback on the message rather than its form is also more conducive to genuine communication and appropriate in the setting outlined here.

[c] *Checking for confirmation (in turn 517)*

There is considerable evidence from previous studies conducted in content-based subjects (see introduction to this article) that teachers who constantly seek clarification, check for confirmation and who do not always accept the first contribution a student offers are more likely to maximize learning potential than those who do not. In extract 1, the sole instance of the teacher checking for confirmation does serve to maintain the flow and keep channels open. Again, according to previous research (Musumeci, 1996, for example) confirmation checks and requests for clarification are to be encouraged not only from teacher to learners, but more importantly, from learners to teacher. This observation is clearly very much in line with the well-established findings concerning the need for meaning to be negotiated in the L2 classroom (C.f. Long, 1983, 1995; Pica et al 1987). In the experience of this researcher, meaning is only being negotiated on a very small scale.

(d) *Extended wait-time (in turns 507-516)*

One of the most striking features of the extract is the turn-taking structure. As the discourse progresses, the teacher takes more and more of a 'back-seat' and 'hands over' to the learners, who successfully manage their own turn-taking with no teacher intervention. Silence, to many teachers, may be threatening, a sign of weakness, perhaps, or an indication that they are simply 'not doing their job'. In fact, it is the converse which is true in classroom contexts like this one where the stated aim is to increase oral fluency. Extended *wait-time*, the time allowed by teachers to answer a question, (see, for example, Nunan, 1991) not only increases the number of learner responses, it frequently results in more complex answers and leads to an increase in learner/learner interaction. (See extract 4) Again, this teacher confirms the importance of maintaining harmony between language use and pedagogic aim; the teacher's use of language, consciously or subconsciously, is very much in tune with her specific aim at this stage of the lesson.

(e) *Scaffolding (in turns 489, 491, 497, 503)*

Communication breakdown is a very common feature of L2 classrooms. Often it occurs because learners do not know a particular word or phrase or do not possess the appropriate communicative strategies. To pre-empt breakdown, it is the role of the teacher to intervene and feed in the missing language. Timing and sensitivity to learner needs are of utmost importance and many teachers intervene too often or too early (see extract 2). Scaffolding involves more than simply error correction. It is a skill similar to the one possessed by many parents when helping their young children struggling to find the right word at a given moment. It requires the ability to listen actively and make economical use of language. The examples in this extract illustrate this important practice very well: latched modelling (in 489 and 491), where the teacher quickly models the language needed at the end of a previous turn; alternative phrasing (in 497); prompting (in 503).

Of a total of 42 turns (30 made by learners, 12 by the teacher), 10 teacher contributions succeed (whether intentionally or not) in engaging learners and in promoting longer, more complex turns. Throughout much of the extract, there is clear evidence that the teacher's language use and pedagogic purpose are at one; that the teacher's stated goal of promoting oral fluency is consistent with her use of language. Her verbal behaviour allows learners to play a full and active role in the discourse, producing more complete, more natural responses. Instead of 'smoothing over' the discourse and 'filling in the gaps' by pre-empting learner responses, the teacher only intervenes as and when necessary, giving language support, correcting errors or adding a personal comment of her own.

As far as the learner contributions are concerned, it is evident from this extract that learners and teacher are actively engaged in constructing a piece of discourse which, in many respects, resembles a conversation; an observation which, again coincides with the teacher's pedagogic goal and reaffirms the need for teachers to be 'in tune' with their aims and use of language as the lesson unfolds. Throughout this piece, learners self-select (508-516), overlap (511/512, 514/515) and latch (where one turn immediately follows another, as in turns 494/495, 507/508, 509/510); these are all features which are common to naturally occurring

conversation and add further weight to the coincidence of language use and pedagogic purpose.

It is not my suggestion that this teacher is in any way 'better' than the one in extract 3, nor that she is necessarily more aware of her use of language. What is striking from extract 1 is that the context of the L2 classroom is a constantly shifting one, that teachers and learners jointly construct the discourse structure of any one context and that teachers need to be well in tune with their teaching purpose and use language accordingly. High and low TTT are, to a large extent, redundant under this view of context. What is more important is the **appropriacy** of language used in relation to the 'context of the moment' and task in hand.

V Obstruction: reducing learning potential

In the discussion which follows, I present a context in which language use and pedagogic purpose do not coincide and attempt to suggest reasons for this occurring.

Extract 3

This is a pre-intermediate group of 7 learners aged 19-26. Their nationalities are Japanese, Korean, Brazilian and Spanish. The main focus of the lesson is oral fluency and the materials used are a tape-recorder and Headway Pre-intermediate. The teacher's stated aims are: 'to improve speaking skills'. This recording is taken from the first 60 minutes of the lesson.

| | |
|---|--|
| 273 what about in Spain if you park your car illegally? | |
| 274 | L4 erm ... there are two possibilities= |
| 275 two [possibilities] | |
| 276 | L4 [one] is er I park my car ((1)) and |
| 277 yes ... if I park ... my car ... illegally again | |
| Rosa | |
| 278 | L4 (laughter) if I park my car [illegally] |
| 279 [illegally] | |
| 280 | L4 police stat policeman er er give me give me |
| 281 GIVES me | |
| 282 | L4 gives me? a little small paper if er I can't pay the money |
| 283 it's called a FINE remember a FINE yes? | |
| 284 | L4 or if if my car |
| 285 is parked | |
| 286 | L4 is parked illegally .. the policeman take my car and ... er ... go to the police station not police station it's a big place where where they have some [cars] they |
| 287 [yes where] they collect the cars= | |
| 288 | L4=collect the cars ... and if I have a lot of erm |

| | |
|--|--|
| 289 stickers ... or fines | |
| 290 | L4 stickers ... or fines |
| 291 yeah | |
| 292 | L4 erm I I don't know ... because ... no... because no (1) erm if I have for example 100 [fines] and I have money in the bank the government take the money [from the bank] no consult |
| 293 [fines good] | |
| 294 [from the bank] | |
| 295 no control? | |
| 296 | L4 no no conSULT... me and (laughter) = |
| 297 = and how do they know you have money in the bank? | |
| 298 | L4 me? |
| 299 yeah how do the police KNOW? | |
| 300 | L4 no but the government yes |
| 301 the government knows? | |
| 302 | L4 yes ... yes and they take [that ((1))] |
| 303 they take the money ... from your account? oh dear ... that's terrible ... and how many FINES do you need ... [to have ... before] | |
| 304 | L4 [me? no no] |
| 305 or is there a number is there a number? | |
| 306 | L4 no ((2)) |
| 307 you don't know what number? did you understand that everybody? | |
| 308 | L no |
| 309 | LL (laughter) |
| 310 just explain very quickly again Rosa ok? (Author's data, 2000) | |

While there are certainly differences between the two classes in extract 1 and extract 3, there are also similarities: both classes are similar in size, composition and level and the teachers' aims are more or less the same, focusing on oral fluency. Yet, there are significant differences in the turn-taking mechanisms, length of learner turns and overall quantity and quality of teacher and learner contributions. Why is this so? Recognising that there are too many variables to make direct comparison difficult - learners and learning styles, teacher and teaching styles, materials, age and nationalities of the learners to mention just a few - there are nonetheless substantial differences in teacher language which contribute or even determine the different discourse patterns. In particular, I would argue, the teacher's use of language in Extract 3 restricts learner involvement and obstructs learning potential.

Some of the features of this teacher's language use which hinder learner involvement and restrict or obstruct learning potential include:-

(a) *Turn completion* (in turns 285, 287, 289, 293, 294)

The many examples of **latching** in this extract, indicated (=) and showing that one turn immediately follows another, indicate that this teacher is filling in the gaps, smoothing over the discourse in an effort to advance the discussion. The teacher's intentions may well be justified: there are other learners waiting to speak, for example, or she needs to move on to the next phase of the lesson. Nonetheless, she may be doing the learner a disservice as there is no negotiation of meaning, no need for clarification, no confirmation checks. There is a sense of the learner being 'fed the lines' instead of being allowed time and space to formulate her responses.

Compare turns 273-295 in Extract 3 with the following extract:-

Extract 4

| | |
|---|---|
| 256 | L3:=ahh nah the one thing that happens when a person dies ((2)) my mother used to work with old people and when they died ...the last thing that went out was the hearing ((4)) about this person = |
| 257 =aha (2) 258 | L3: so I mean even if you are unconscious or on drugs or something I mean it's probably still perhaps can hear what's happened (2) L2:but it gets ((2))= LL:/but it gets/there are ((2))/= |
| 259 260 261 | L3: =I mean you have seen so many operation ((3)) and so you can imagine and when you are hearing the sounds of what happens I think you can get a pretty clear picture of what's really going on there= L:=yeah= L:=and and ... |
| 262 263 264 | L1:but eh and eh I don't know about other people but eh ((6)) I always have feeling somebody watching watch watches me= |
| 265 =yes= 266 267 | L4:=yeah!= L1:=somebody just follow me either a man or a woman I don't know if it's a man I feel really exciting if it's a woman ((4)) I don't know why like I'm trying to do things better like I'm eh ...look like this ...you feel! it ...I don't know= |
| 268 =you think it's a kind of spirit = 269 | L1:=I think it's just yeah somebody who lives inside us and ((3))... visible area ... L4: I would say it's just neurotic problems (laughter) |
| 270 | L1: what what ... |

| | |
|---|---|
| 271 | L4:nothing nothing nothing... |
| 272 | L1:but have you seen city of angels= |
| 273 | L4:=no I haven't = |
| 274 | L1:=with eh Meg Ryan and eh Nicholas Cage |
| 275 | it's a wonderful story and I think it's true actually= |
| 276 =and does this bother you = | L1: =what?= 277 |
| 278 =this feeling that you get does it bother you?= 279 | L1 =it's eh you know when I am alone I'm ok but if I feel that somebody is near I would be nervous= |
| 280 =I would be very nervous ... 281 | L1:I I well [yes I or I] |
| 282 [((2)) drugs] (laughter) 283 | L1: or I would go to bed and I would say ok ok like don't bother me you don't bother me I'm going to sleep= |
| 284 =yeah= Author's data 2000 | |

In extract 4, not only is there clear evidence of fewer interruptions and far more student-student negotiation of meaning, the teacher seems to be acting as an intermediary with the main purpose of keeping the channels open (257, 265). Any interruptions which do occur are designed to clarify meaning or check what the speaker is saying (268, 276, 278). The teacher's stated aim in extract 4 is to 'generate discussion prior to a cloze exercise on poltergeists'; his withdrawal from the discussion and role of intermediary suggest that pedagogic purpose and language use are at one and that there are ample learning opportunities.

Note that *completing student turns* is not the same at all as *scaffolding* where learners are given linguistic support. It is a feature which is commonly found in conversational contexts, where one speaker anticipates what another is about to say and completes their turn, but is perhaps less desirable as a feature of classroom discourse. In the classroom, it limits the frequency and quality of student contributions, and minimises learning opportunities as learners are not put in a position where they have to clarify and reformulate their contribution in order to make meaning clear.

The discussion now returns to an analysis of extract 3.

(b) *Teacher echo* (extract 3, turns 275, 279, 287, 293, 294)

This is a commonly found phenomenon in any classroom and may be used for good reason: to amplify a student's contributions so that other learners can hear, for example. It may, unfortunately, obstruct, or at the very least, disrupt, the flow of the discourse. Of course, from extract 3, it is not clear whether the function of the echo is amplification, clarification or simply error correction. It is, I would suggest, important for the teacher to know when and why they use echo and use it sparingly as it can very quickly become a habit with very little real function. It is worth noting too that echo is one of the prime reasons for excessive teacher-student interaction; in extract 3, for example, only L4 and the teacher are involved; other learners are prevented from interacting because of excessive use of echo. Compare this with extract 4, where there is no teacher echo and plenty of student-student interaction.

This three-part IRF turn-taking structure (Initiation, response, feedback), where a teacher's initiation (I) is followed by a learner's response [R] and subsequently by teacher feedback or follow-up (F) is commonly referred to as the 'standard teaching exchange' (see, for example, Edwards and Westgate, 1994). While it may be necessary and useful in certain contexts, it should not be the predominant discourse pattern in the EFL classroom since it greatly restricts learning opportunities and minimizes learner involvement.

[c] *Teacher interruptions* (extract 3, turns 297, 299)

The latched turn between 296-97 indicates that the teacher has interrupted the learner 'mid-flow' (after 'and') which unwittingly results in breakdown (298) and causes the learner to lose the thread of what she was saying. Had the teacher simply waited and allowed the learner to finish her turn, the learner would have had an opportunity to produce a greater quantity of (possibly) more complex language. The teacher, by delaying her question for a very short time, would have increased opportunities for interactional adjustments and maximised opportunities for learning.

Of the 36 turns in extract 3, 19 belong to the teacher and, on the whole, obstruct or hinder rather than construct or help the ensuing discourse. The teacher's use of language is, for the reasons outlined above, not always consistent with her stated aims. Consequently, there is a

mis-match between language use and pedagogic purpose, resulting in the unintentionally limited involvement of learners. Learning potential would have been increased by a more judicious use of silence, by reducing or eliminating teacher echo and by resisting the temptation to interrupt, unless absolutely necessary. The differences between the two extracts are, I suggest, almost entirely attributable to differences in the verbal behaviour of the two teachers and not as, is often suggested, owing differences in their teaching methodologies.

VI Implications for teacher education and research

1. Teachers need to be made more aware of the importance of appropriate language use in the EFL classroom. By considering more closely the link between pedagogic purpose and language use, teachers could be made aware of the need to use language appropriate to their teaching aim, in the same way that they would normally use classroom techniques appropriate to that aim;
2. Teachers need to be discouraged from always 'filling in the gaps' in the discourse of the EFL classroom. By so doing, they may be creating a smooth-flowing exchange, but reducing opportunities for interactional adjustments and learning potential;
3. Teachers can find out about their language use in the classroom by making audio- and video-recordings of their lessons. Only by working with their own data are teachers likely to be able to modify their classroom verbal behaviour. Listening to recordings or better still, analysing transcripts, can significantly raise awareness and result in more appropriate language use;
4. Teacher education programmes should devote more time and attention to language use in the classroom. At present, many pre- and in-service programmes pay little regard to the importance of good communication and the need for a measured use of language while teaching. Contemporary models of teacher education typically consist of a methodology strand and a language awareness strand; I would strongly advocate a third component which would address issues relating to teacher talk, interaction and learning opportunity;

5. There is a need to understand more fully the qualitative aspects of language use in the L2 classroom with a view to arriving at a set of guidelines which constitute 'good practice' in language use in the classroom. Without wanting to be over-prescriptive and recognising that there are differences in teaching style, much could be done to improve teachers' understanding of the relationship between teacher talk, interaction and learning opportunity. In the same way that a fuller understanding of classroom practices and teaching approaches have given teachers more choice in the techniques they use, so an increased understanding of classroom discourse and teaching purpose can result in a more measured and controlled use of language.

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Appendix Transcription System

The transcription system is adapted from Van Lier (1988) and Johnson (1995). Language has not been corrected and standard conventions of punctuation are not used, the aim being to represent 'warts and all' the exchanges as they occurred in the classroom. Parts of the transcripts are marked *unintelligible*; it should be noted that the lessons were recorded under normal classroom conditions with no specialist equipment. Consequently, background noise, simultaneous speech and other types of interference have, at times, rendered the recordings unintelligible.

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| T: | - | teacher |
| L: | - | learner (not identified) |
| L1: L2: etc, | - | identified learner |
| LL: | - | several learners at once or the whole class |
| /ok/ok/ok/ | - | overlapping or simultaneous utterances by more than one learner |
| [do you understand?] [I see] | - | overlap between teacher and learner |
| = | - | turn continues, or one turn follows another without any pause. |
| ... | - | pause of one second or less marked by three periods. |
| (4 sec) | - | silence; length given in seconds |
| ((4 sec)) | - | a stretch of unintelligible speech with the length given in seconds |
| Paul, Peter, Mary | - | capitals are only used for proper nouns |
| ? | - | rising intonation, not necessarily a question |
| acCUSED | - | indicates that a syllable or word is given extra stress |
| T organises groups | - | editor's comments (in bold type) |

(Word count: 6386)