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Promoting Communication in the Classroom through Teacher Feedback

Lucie Betakova* and Petr Dvorak
University of South Bohemia in Ceske Budejovice, Czech Republic.
*Corresponding author email id: betakova@pf.jcu.cz

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***Abstract* – In this article, we would like to have a look at how good quality feedback of the teacher in the foreign language classroom promotes communication in the classroom, improves the quality of interaction between the teacher and the learners and among the learners themselves. This leads to the development of the communicative competence on the part of the learners and thus plays a vital role in their language acquisition.**

***Keywords* – Feedback, Follow-up, Communication, Classroom Discourse.**

I. Classroom Discourse

Some authors claim that discourse in lessons and discourse in everyday life have many features in common in that they are interactional and have a sequential organization, in which talking shifts from participant to participant (Mehan 1985, Walsh 2006, Walsh 2013). On the other hand, the purpose of classroom interaction in comparison with everyday interaction outside classroom is different. According to Kumpulainen and Wray : 'This difference lies in the fact that classrooms are intentionally oriented towards learning.' (2002: 6)

How students talk and act in classrooms greatly influences what they learn. Full participation in classroom activities requires competence in both the social and interactional aspects of classroom language - in other words, *classroom communicative competence* (Wilkinson 1982, Johnson 1995, Dvorak 2015). Johnson points out:

Classroom communicative competence represents students' knowledge of and competence in the structural, functional, social and interactional norms that govern classroom communication. Without such competence, second language students may learn little from their classroom experiences. (1995: 6)

She goes on: Just as communicative competence is considered to be essential for second language learners to participate in the target language culture, classroom communicative competence is essential for second language students to participate in and learn from their second language classroom experiences. (ibid.)

For second language students, classroom communicative competence means not only successfully participating in classroom activities, but also becoming communicatively competent in the second language. The patterns of communication in classrooms represent a crucial aspect in the learning process. Mackey (2012) claims that interaction provides L2 learners with learning opportunities including noticing differences between their own formulations of the target language and the language used by their both native and non-native speaker conversational partners. A lot of teachers would agree with the idea that classroom communicative competence leads to communicative competence outside classroom. There are many countries, including the Czech Republic, where the classroom represents the only encounter with English, i.e. the target language, and the classroom context has to compensate for natural interaction outside classroom.

It has been described by many authors that classroom interaction has a structure of three interconnected parts:

an initiation act (usually by the teacher), a reply act (by a learner or learners) and an evaluation act (by the teacher). Mehan considers the three part sequence 'fundamental to educational discourse.' (1985: 126)

II. FOLLOW-UP

The sequence is generally known as *IRE (initiation-response-evaluation)* or later IRF where F stands either for *feedback* or *follow-up.* It represents the most basic interactional sequence of classroom lessons.

The presence of the third slot, which evaluates the completion of the immediately preceding initiation - reply pair, is a distinguishing feature of educational discourse. (Mehan 1985: 126)

It can be illustrated by an example from an English class where the teacher concentrates on teaching the language function of telling the time.

T: What time is it?

S: It's five oclock.

T: Very good!

We can see that the third slot, i.e. feedback by the teacher, differentiates the interaction from everyday interaction outside classroom. In normal life the interaction would look like this:

A: What time is it?

B: It's five oclock.

A: Thanks.

Heath (1978) agrees that examination of teacher talk has shown that in the classroom, much discourse has a tripartite structure, with the teacher offering in the third unit some adjective of positive evaluation. It serves the purpose of positive reinforcement, she believes. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) divide feedback by the teacher into two acts. The first act of the evaluation (or feedback or follow-up move) would be taken from the closed set - e.g. '*Yes, Good'*. The second act would either add more praise: E.g. '*This was an excellent answer'* or in case the answer was not accurate, the teacher could say: '*Yes, but we don't say…we say*.

A. *F-move Functions*

A very interesting study of the functions of the F-move is that of Cullen (2002). The teacher's F-move has a primarily evaluative function, Cullen revises: it gives the students feedback about whether the response was acceptable or not. The original term *feedback* used by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) was changed into a more common term *follow-up* on the assumption that the move may also serve other functions.

Cullen explains that in everyday conversation we can find the F-move as a terminate act, an act which acknowledges the preceding utterance and terminates the exchange. These may be simple reactions like: '*Mm. Ah'*. etc.

Another function of the F-move in everyday conversation is, according to Cullen, the endorse act 'where a speaker offers a positive endorsement (e.g. an expression of sympathy) of a preceding utterance (e.g. '*You poor thing'*.)' (2002: 119).

The follow-up move in the classroom, according to Cullen, serves either *evaluative* or *discoursal* role. The F-move with the evaluative function is used to provide feedback to individual students about their performance, and in particular, in the language teaching classroom, to allow learners to 'confirm, disconfirm and modify their interlanguage rules.' (Chaudron 1988, cited by Cullen 2002: 119) The focus is placed on the form of the learner's response. Walsh (2006) points out that repair or error correction is characteristic of the language classroom. He claims that there is absolutely no reason why errors should not be corrected in the second language formal context. This is what learners want, he believes. It is shown in many other studies in different contexts, lately e.g. Tasdemir and Yalcin Arslan (2018). Making linguistic errors and having them corrected directly and overtly is not an embarrassing matter, he claims. Repair, though, should be related to pedagogic goals. Both Czech teachers and learners could identify with this idea. It is necessary, as Walsh shows, for the teacher to limit use only to such methods of correction which will not demotivate the learners. Tsui shares this view with most teachers and learners saying:

Of course errors should be corrected, or else students would think that what they have produced is correct and will carry on using these erroneous forms. (1995: 46)

She goes on with a very important point that correcting errors is crucial not only for the individual student who has made the error but for the whole class (see also Bo et.al. 2018):

Furthermore, the erroneous output may also cause other students to internalize the errors, or to change their correct hypotheses about the target language to accommodate these incorrect forms. This view that errors should be corrected is shared not only by teachers but also by learners. (ibid.)

Experience shows though, that if students are massively corrected, they do not like it, especially if a fluency oriented activity is carried out. The students concentrate on the meaning and having been interrupted by the teacher, they lose track. In such activities a different type of correction is needed. It is in accordance with recent studies showing that teachers do not perceive error correction as the primary purpose of their feedback but, instead, they concentrate on the acquisition of communicative competence (Bo et.al. 2018).

Coming back to Cullen's division of evaluative and discoursal function of feedback, he shows that evaluative follow-ups typically co-occur with display questions asked by the teacher. Display questions are not real questions, they are questions to which the teacher already knows the answer and whose aim is to check the learners' knowledge.

Example: (The F-move in italics)

T: Now what is this other man holding?

S: A pistol.

T: *A pistol. Right.*

The discoursal role has a different purpose: to pick up students' contributions and to 'incorporate them into the flow of classroom discourse.' (Mercer 1995, quoted by Cullen 2002: 120) The emphasis is thus on the content rather than form. Johnson (1995) also mentions that teacher's evaluation may seem more like rephrasing or paraphrasing of students' responses, and acts as a means of sustaining and expanding students' responses. Such expansions are similar to the expansions that mothers provide their very young children. The teacher's use

of expansions may enable the exchange of ideas to continue regardless of the linguistic limitations of the students, she argues.

A similar division is provided by Tsui. She asserts that evaluating and providing information related to student responses is not the only function of the F-move. 'Teacher feedback can also acknowledge the information that students offer or provide personal comments on student's response.' (1995: 43) She refers to it as to an 'affective aspect of teacher feedback.' (ibid.)

Cullen further shows that discoursal follow-up typically occurs simultaneously with questions which have a referential rather than a display function, meaning being real questions.

Example:

T: Anything else? Yes?

S: He is telling him now to be under his control.

T: *Now you are under my command. You have to do whatever I want you to do.*

Cullen Explains:

The teacher is using the follow-up move to focus the attention of the whole class on individual student responses, rephrase them in a more acceptable form, and then elaborate on them in order to extend the dialogue and encourage further contributions. The aim is thus not so much to provide corrective feedback to individual students… but to feed students' contributions into the emerging class discussion. The teacher reformulates the children's contributions and presents them back to the class so that their meanings are more closely aligned with what has already been said. (2002: 122)

As far as learning is concerned, Cullen shows that the F-move with the evaluative function supports learning through the formal correction. The F-move with the discoursal function supports learning through the teacher providing a rich source of message-oriented target language input and derives further initiating moves from them. The focus is on the content, not on the form.

B. *Teacher Strategies in the Follow-up Move*

Cullen deals with four specific strategies which are used by teachers in the follow-up move:

1. Reformulation. The teacher provides the class with a model of correct usage. The teacher's reformulations act as a way of ensuring that the content of an individual student's contribution is available and also audible to the rest of the class. In a sense, the teacher is converting the students' attempts at output into comprehensible input for the whole class.
2. Elaboration. The teacher elaborates on students' responses in some way. The teacher's elaborations provide a linguistically richer source of input for the class, while, at an affective level, they serve to show that the teacher listens to what the students have to say with interest.
3. Comment. The teacher is simply adding a spontaneous comment on their own. It is often a personal, often a humorous response.
4. Repetition. Repetition is used as a way of acknowledging a student response, and confirming it is acceptable

and at the same time ensuring that all the students have heard it. In the following example the teacher repeats the student's contribution to confirm the idea but not the form in which it was expressed. The repetition contrasts the undesirable with the preferred item.

T: …

S: The plane would fall down.

T: *The plane would fall down. It would crash, and all the passengers unfortunately would die. Maybe some would survive, but most likely they would die.*

A similar idea had been presented by Brown and Wragg (1993) who associate feedback with conveying enthusiasm and generating interest.

They show three important ways of conveying interest:

1. To take a pupil's answer and build on it or invite other pupils to build on it.
2. To refer to a previous contribution from a pupil and to link it to the present contribution, thereby showing the connections between the pupil's own contribution and the topic under discussion.
3. To incorporate the pupils' contributions (by name) into your (meaning teacher's) summaries and reviews of what has been learnt in the lesson.)

C. *Other Variations*

Other authors mention other variations of the F-move. For example Cazden (2001) shows the difference between expansion and traditional correction in the third slot:

T: What happened to him?

S: Fall down.

T Expansion: *Yes, he fell down*. The teacher accepts the answer but reformulates it to produce a grammatically correct answer.

On the other hand, in correction, the teacher rejects the whole answer: ***No, he fell down***. (*Fell* stressed).

The expansion appears in situations, in which the teacher concentrates on fluency, on getting the meaning across, and ignores grammatical accuracy. The teacher accepts whatever the student says and provides a correct model himself/herself in the F-move.

Johnson (1995) calls this strategy 'recasting' and defines it as the way in which learners' contributions are reshaped, reformulated or refined by a teacher. Another possibility of the teacher representing an IRE sequence alteration is to ignore an incorrect response and repeat the question. The use of direct repair and corrective feedback are, though, according to Johnson, examples of the ways in which 'teachers can help learners monitor, reflect on and self-correct their learners' contributions.' (1995: 31)

D. *Conclusion from Research*

We can draw a conclusion from research described above that for an effective teacher it is necessary to use both types of F-move – evaluative and discoursal or corrective and communicative, as we have called them for

the purposes of teacher-training. Both of them support learning, the former concentrates on the form, i.e. accuracy, the latter focuses on the message, i.e. fluency, and at the same time provides a valuable source of comprehensible input for the learners.

III. Teacher Follow-Up Analysis

In connection with research mentioned above, we carried out a small scale study of three teachers of English. We wanted to find out what type of feedback they use, whether it is more of evaluative or discoursal type, i.e. corrective or communicative. All three classes were recorded in our local schools.

To be able to refer easily to the three recorded classes they will be attached labels Discourse A, B. and C.

All lessons were taught at lower secondary school level, i.e. students aged 11 and 15, the particular classes we recorded were classes 8, i.e. students aged 14/15 aiming at A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). What was different, though, were the teachers – their nationality and qualifications. Teacher A was a native speaker, Canadian, fully qualified, in his late thirties. Teacher B was a non-native speaker, fully qualified teacher of English, in her late thirties. And teacher C a non-native speaker, unqualified for teaching English, in her mid thirties.

In the beginning some hypotheses had been stated about the amount and quality of feedback the teachers would provide. It had been assumed that the native speaker would concentrate more on fluency than accuracy, would correct less frequently and in a non-threatening way. Discourse C, would represent the other end of the cline, concentrating on accuracy and providing especially evaluation in the F-move. These hypotheses were not proved, though. From the three graphs in Figure 1 and from Table 1 we can see that teacher B evaluates least (19, 4 %), teacher C most (48, 8 %), as expected. Teacher A, on the other hand, explains most in his feedback (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, etc.) – 14, 1 % (A) : 8, 1 % (B) and 7, 3 % (C). Teacher B prefers acknowledgement, which resembles most everyday conversation – 46 % (B): 24, 4 % (A) and 20, 7 % (C). The F-move with the discoursal function is in harmony in all three types of discourse. It is necessary to point out, though, that in C it is conducted only in Czech, i.e. the mother tongue of the learners, which is not at all helpful for the development of the communicative competence of the learners.

Table 1. Follow-up Moves.

	A	%	B	%	C	%
Ev	29	37,1	41	19,4	40	48,8
Ex	11	14,1	17	8,1	6	7,3
A	19	24,4	97	46	17	20,7
D	19	24,4	56	26,5	19	23,2
total	78	100	211	100	82	100

Ev = Evaluation; Ex = Explanation; A = Acknowledgement; D = Discoursal function.

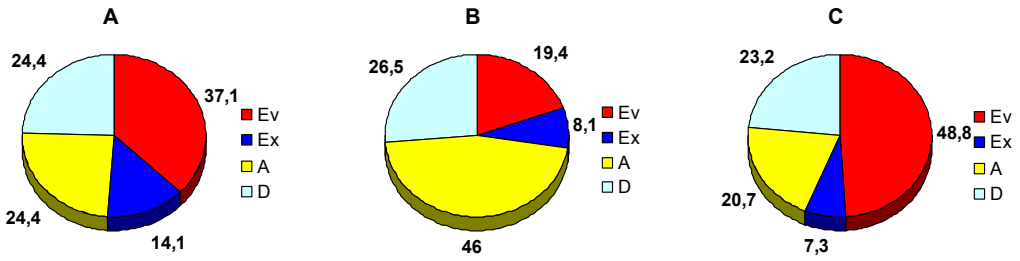

Fig. 1. Types of follow-up moves.

It would be relevant to recapitulate the ways teachers A, B and C correct in their F-move. They:

- Repair without evaluation: S*: Normal*. T: *Normally.*
- Repair with evaluation: S: *Twenty-sixth*. T: *Twenty-sixth of June. Right.*
- Repeat the incorrect answer with rising intonation: S: *To the Frankfurt*. T: *The Frankfurt?*
- Reject the answer: *Sixty? Hmm. It isn´t right.*
- Reject the answer and provide explanation: *Not a workbook. A workbook is what you write things in.*
- Provide clues to the student to be able to self-correct: S: *He told that their songs are rubbish.* T: *Yeah, he told them, posunes* (showing by a gesture that there will be a tense shift*)*, *their songs.*

Explanation in the F-move was used to:

- Correct spelling: *Only one T. Writing only one T.*
- Point out grammar: *Homework without article or her homework. (Explained in the mother tongue)*
- Explain vocabulary: *Regularly. (Translated into the mother tongue)*
- Show context and provide examples: *So when you want to get some money back for something that's wrong and you had bought it before…yeah?*
- Give facts: *In Washington, yeah, all the political bodies are in Washington.*

As far as the F- move with the discoursal function is concerned, we could see various sub-types:

1. The teacher accepts the answer but expands on it, in other words incorporates it into a wider context, or uses a better phrasing:

T: Where is that? East, West?

S: Middle.

T: *Middle. OK. Hmm. It´s in the middle. In the middle of Slovakia.*

2. The teacher adds a kind of evaluative comment but not concerning the form, but content of the student's response, showing thus interest in what the student has said:

T: Where did you go, Anna?

S: Ireland.

T: *To Ireland. Great.*

3. The teacher adds a personal comment concerning the content of the message, especially where the student's response is only minimal. The teacher thus demonstrates an interest in what the student is saying and at the same time expands on the answer and thus provides comprehensible input to the rest of the class:

T: You like your uncle?

S: Yeah.

T: *Yeah, so you'll have fun the next time.*

IV. CONCLUSION

Drawing on data referred to in Figure 1 and Table 1 and on data gained by thorough discourse analysis of the three analysed lessons, it has been found out, in accordance with Cullen's findings, that the F-move with the discoursal function typically emerges from referential questions. There were some exceptions, though. Evaluative function is usually connected with display questions but again, there are exceptions. As was pointed out in the theoretical section, both types of the F-move are important for language learning. Learners expect the teacher to correct their mistakes and thus improve their language accuracy. This is done through evaluation and effective ways of correction. The F-move with the discoursal function also plays a significant role. Commenting on what people say is a very natural part of everyday discourse, since it shows the speaker that the listener is interested in what he or she has said and in the classroom it is a very important source of comprehensible input. We have called this type of feedback 'communicative' for our purposes, as it supports communication in the classroom.

In the end it should be said that all three analyzed lessons represent the traditional way of teaching with typical teacher dominance over the classroom discourse, irrespective of the mother tongue, proficiency or training of the teachers. Concerning pedagogical implications for teacher education or development, this proves that a thorough analysis of classroom discourse, or in other words classroom interaction, can be extremely useful for the teachers themselves and, consequently, for their learners. The result of the analysis shows the teachers their own practices and gives them an opportunity to reflect on them. On the basis of such an analysis, the teachers will be able to understand the mistakes they make in conducting the lesson. They will see that if they want the learners to become effective communicators outside of class and if they want to develop their communicative competence, they will have to practice communication in the classroom. It means speaking in English as much as possible, asking students open and referential questions and providing them with feedback that is not always evaluative. Last but not least it means to deliberately diminish their own dominance and thus give students more opportunities to express their own ideas freely. If this cannot be achieved within the whole class, then pair work and group work should be used as much as possible as they usually represent an effective way of promoting natural interaction in the classroom.

For our further studies of feedback and classroom interaction in EFL in general, it seems to be productive to concentrate not on the whole lessons but rather deal with segments that are dense in interaction, e.g. 10 minute long segments, in which we would be able to study interaction between the teacher and the class and among the learners themselves more intensively.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Lucie Betakova,
Works as the Head of the Department of English Studies at the University of South Bohemia in the Czech Republic. She has published in the areas of classroom discourse, language needs of non-native speaker teachers of English and language testing. email id: betakova@pf.jcu.cz

Petr Dvorak,
Is a teacher educator at the University of South Bohemia in the Czech Republic. He has published in the area of social skills of teachers of English, educational styles of teachers and classroom interaction in ELT. email id: pdvorak@pf.jcu.cz