



Teachers' beliefs and the orchestration of classroom interaction

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Abstract

One may say that the way teachers orchestrate classroom talk in the foreign language classroom is one of the many actions and behaviours they carry out in their daily practice. It is simply part of what teachers 'do', among a myriad other things encapsulated within the complex process of teaching. But what are the underlying elements of such behaviours? Why do teachers do things the way they do? This paper attempts to shed some light on this and reports on the existing links between the beliefs of two teachers and the way they orchestrate classroom interaction—more specifically during teacher fronted activities. The findings strongly suggest that the participants' beliefs do permeate their actions and not only influence the decisions they make as they orchestrate interactions with their learners, but subsequently set particular patterns.

1. A historical perspective: Classroom Talk in EFL settings

Interest in the language of the classroom has grown steadily in the last thirty years. According to Ellis, in the particular case of the language classroom, one of the main reasons behind this interest found its origins in the rejection of the teaching method as the main determinant of successful learning (1985: 141). It was possible then that irrespective of the method, learners were being successful or not so successful at learning a second/foreign language independently of the teaching methodology. Perhaps the clue lay in the type of interactions taking place given that the various methods observed similar patterns of classroom communication. In Ellis' words, *'it was hypothesized that classroom interaction was the major variable affecting SLA in formal settings.'* (ibid).

Among the three different forms *Classroom process research* (see Gaies in Ellis 1985:145, for an explanation on the three forms) undertook for the purpose of analysing what took place in the classroom, is the IRF, a three phase-cycle that has served as a cornerstone for the analysis of teacher-learner interaction. In this,



the teacher initiates (I), the learner responds (R) and the teacher supplies feedback (F) as is seen in the example below:

T	Is the clock on the wall?	Initiation
L	Yes, the clock is on the wall.	Response
F	Good. The clock is on the wall.	Feedback / Follow up

This model of interaction has been linked to ‘the transmission mode of education’, in which the teacher seeks both to impart the knowledge her/his learners do not have (or that the teacher assumes learners do not have) in what has been considered a way of reinforcing the social role of the teacher as the ‘arbiter or all classroom behaviour’ (Ellis, 1985:147) and has been found as a predominant pattern in both subject and language classroom settings.

2. The study

2.1 Data collection and analysis

The data for the present study was collected during a two-month period in three phases: In the first phase the participants were asked to make a 30 minute-long audio recording of any one part of any given lesson. No special criteria for their choice were suggested. Transcriptions of the full recording were made.

The second phase took place in two steps. First a transcription of the lesson was sent to each of the teachers, who were asked to read the transcript and comment on the impression this made on them. Their answers from this first exchange were collected and then analysed. In a second exchange, teachers were sent sampled extracts of their transcript and asked to answer to specific questions and a final open question. Teachers’ answers were again collected and analysed.

The last phase comprised an interview with each of these teachers, which was conducted via electronic communication—voice messenger—; these [the interviews] were recorded and later transcribed for their analysis.

From the transcriptions of the three lessons, those parts which dealt with procedural phases of the lesson were discarded (eg. attendance list, collection of



homework, setting of a particular activity, etc.). Extracts chosen for analysis were selected on the basis of their representativeness of direct teaching.

Regarding the data which emerged from the interviews and exchanges with the three teachers, the transcripts in full as well as the notes on contributions resulting from the exchanges were first analysed in order to eliminate opening and closing sections (eg. initial greetings, final thanks).

In the case of the lesson transcripts, a first analysis aided in categorising the types of interaction according to the nature of these; this in accordance with Ellis' classification of interaction based on pedagogic goals (1985), namely core goals—where there is a pedagogic purpose; framework goals—organizational requirements of the lesson—, and social goals—which involve the use of the language for more personal purposes. This allowed for the researcher to focus on those events in which the teacher-learner interaction had a teaching-learning purpose in order to analyse the interaction patterns therein. This is not to say that teaching or learning does not take place during framework or social stages during a lesson, but that such discrimination obeyed the purpose of the present study. Once the core 'events' or phases in the lesson were extracted, these were named and analysed (extracts were named according to the order they came up in the lesson's transcript and given a number and a letter after the teacher's initial). Analysis of the extracts took place in two main phases. On a first one, the IRF pattern was used in order to identify the moves made by teacher and learners. A second and posterior analysis looked at what the teachers did along this pattern—approach used by Edelsky et al (2002), where the IRF pattern was considered as 'text within the text of academic discourse' and then analysed in general terms what the teacher [in their study] was doing. This allowed including the 'default' (as named by them in their study) structure of classroom discourse yet permitting at the same time to integrate observations of the many other things being done by the teacher.

Transcriptions of the interviews were analysed in a different manner. Once opening and closing stages were discarded, the resulting extract was first analysed in order to establish categories, which followed the sub-areas of interest for the



researcher (eg. origins of teachers' beliefs, teachers' beliefs about learning, teaching, classroom interaction, etc.). The first categories were used to analyse one interview, and subcategories were allocated as it seemed appropriate (eg. origins of teacher beliefs: experiences as a learner, experiences as a teacher, etc.). Once this was done, the resulting categories were then applied to analyse the interviews. It must be noted here that categorisation did not go without some overlapping as the analysis developed.

Further analysis of extracts from the lessons as well as the interviews took place in a final phase in order to look for consistencies between the way they orchestrate classroom interaction and their beliefs about this.

3. On teachers' beliefs and the resulting interaction patterns: the case for noticing

The analysis of the data directs the researcher to conclude that there is such a connection between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practice—that is to say, that the way teachers orchestrate classroom interaction and their beliefs regarding the right way to do this is definitively linked. This can be said especially of the way interaction is set by the two teachers who participated in this study when their pedagogical goal was that of helping their learners in noticing grammatical patterns.

On analysing excerpts of direct teaching where the interaction had the noticing—as stated by the teachers themselves—of a grammatical structure as its main goal, two main sub-findings emerge from the interviews and the comparison between the contributions made by the participants and their actual teaching in the excerpts analysed:

1. Teachers allocated turns according to their perception of their learners' need for support and practice of a given structure – perception which seems to be based on their appreciation of learners' output.
2. The language used by teachers, especially said of their prompting as well as reformulation moves, is also linked to their beliefs regarding the conditions which favour language learning.



3.1 A's beliefs and classroom interaction settings

Opposite to the explicit presentation of meaning and form, implicitness requires for the learners to be exposed to the language in a way that they will be able to 'see' either the structure or the meaning come out from the information being presented to them. On implicitness, Babstone (1996) refers to the importance of not only making the information stand out (as in marking a target in different colour or emphasising through voice pitch), but that the task itself must provide the means for the form to become more visible to the learners. **A** for example, uses repetition during the modelling of a structure (*which one*), and uses it not only in initiation moves (when asking learners which colour they prefer) but even in reformulation ones, when she integrates the colour the learner expresses to be his/her favourite along with the structure she intends for them to notice (*Ok, the black one*). The resulting interaction pattern as shown in the previous chapter, is then related to her beliefs of what helps learners notice form and/or meaning, as well as to her choice to use implicitness to promote noticing.

Extract 2#A

- 139 T blue? Blue purse? Ok. Nayeli, do you have a purse?
140 L yes...
141 T Yes? What colour?
142 L1 ah...umm (unclear)
143 T Do you have many many colors?
144 L2 black...white..
145 L3 rainbow (learner)
146 T A rainbow (laughter)
147 L white, pink
148 T Ok...*pi::nk*. If you have to choose a wallet and you have a black one..and you have a brown one ..and you have a beige one ((writes on the board as she speaks))
149 L mmm
150 L2 yes
151 T Yes? Ok, which one do you prefer? The *black one*, the *brown one*, the *beige one*?
152 L3 the beige
153 L4 the beige
154 L5 black
155 L6 the black
156 T Julio, the *black one*?
157 L7 the black
158 T the *black one*?
159 L7 yes
160 L pink! (laughter)
161 T ((laughter)) We don't have pink in here. Which one do you prefer? The black one? Which do you prefer? The black one.. the beige one or the brown one?
162 L2 The black one
163 T Ok. The girls, you have a purse.. You have a *pink one*, you have a red one and you have a black one .Which one do you prefer?
164 L8 black
165 T the black one?
166 L9 the pink
167 T the pink one?



168 L9 Yes
169 T Ok, the *pink one*. umm

Later on during that same lesson, **A** decides to offer overt explanations, thus combining the two dimensions of explicit and implicit noticing. Her decision is based not only on what she believes about noticing *per se*, but on her evaluation of the extent to which the learners have been able to grasp the structure. She assumes that the structure has not been noticed—hence not learnt?—given that they are not producing it as they answer her questions about their favourite colours, which serves as an indicator—for her in this situation—that explicitness is necessary.

Extract 3 #A

352 T Ok when you have a question like this, the answer is like... the *blue one* (writes on the
353 board) or Which one?...The *yellow one* (writes on the board)
354 L mmm
355 T Yes? Which one? You are asking... you have *three things* to choose...you have *three*
356 colours to choose, black . blue, and .. so you have to choose. *Which one?* Which one
357 do you want? So the answer: the black one, the blue one. You put the colour and one in
358 here. Yes? You specify it. Ok?
359 L1 No
360 T No?
361 L1 mmmm
362 T Umm...Ok. Another example. You have two trucks.Ok? You have a Toyota truck
363 and...
364 L2 ay!!
365 T and you have a...Silverado. Yes? Which one do you prefer?
366 L3 ahh!! ((sigh))
367 T Ok, so which one do you prefer? The Toyota one or the Silverado? Ok? Yes?
368 L3 The Silverado
369 L4 Silverado
370 L the (unclear) one
371 T Ok, so I prefer the Silverado one. Ok? Or the ((unclear)) one. Ok?
372 LL Yes
373 L1 ah!
374 T And when you have plural you use *ones*. Ye:s?
375 L1 yes
376 T Ok
377 L1 Ok

3.2 D's beliefs impact on the setting of interaction patterns

In the case of **D**, his strong beliefs about noticing and its relevance for language learning influence the interaction patterns set in the classroom. His exchanges with the learners at different points during the lesson indicate that he makes strategic use of reformulation in order to promote noticing of incorrect vs. correct versions of information elicited from the learners. At other points during the lesson, he structures interaction around his belief that exposure from others' use of



language and not only the teacher's, facilitates noticing of a pattern which is clearly seen in Extract #8D (see below), where he moves from one learner to another and then goes back to a learner who has been facing problems in producing the pattern, thus multiplying the opportunities for that learner to be exposed to the same form.

Extract #8D

- 289 T Ok, so what about 'buy a large dog'? Any one..? Daniel?
290 Daniel err...feel safer
291 T Ok
292 Daniel in your home?
293 T If ..
294 Daniel If I have..if (unclear) ..I have...going..no..
295 T If I have
296 Daniel If I have a large dog I feel safer in my home..in my home?Yes.
297 T Yes, you will feel safer in your home. Ok. Is that correct?
298 LL Yes
299 T Yes? Ok, Sandra, another example of the dog?
300 Sandra If I buy a large dog ...mmm..I have to take it out for walks
301 T I will...?
302 Sandra I will have to take it out for walks (laughter)
303 T Greaaaat! Is that correct?
304 LL Yes
305 T Yes. Ok, Gustavo..what about 'fall in love'?
306 Gustavo Fall in love
307 T Ok. If I...
308 Gustavo If I have...
309 T If I...If I...?
310 Gustavo uh..
311 T If I..?
312 Gustavo mm fall in love ... fall in love... I will feel jealous sometimes
313 T Jealous sometimes? Ok, Good. Is that correct?
314 LL Yes
315 T Yes? Ok.
316 Gustavo Yes. ... fall in love.... fall in love ...I will lose touch with old friends
317 T You will lose touch with old friends. Do you agree with that? Yes?
318 LL Yes
319 T Ok. Do you agree with that? Ok, Silvio...what about the next...go on a diet?
320 Silvio If I go on a diet I will feel ..better about myself
321 T Yes? Do you agree with that?
322 LL Yes
323 T Carmen, another for that?
324 Carmen mmm I go
325 T If I go...
326 Carmen Ah..If I go on a diet I ...umm.. I will feel hungry a lot
327 T Hungry a lot?Ok. Do you agree with that?
328 LL Yes
329 T Martha , another example of the next?
330 Martha Yes. If I have.. If I inherit a lot of money...I will lend (unclear)
331 T Ok. Do you agree with that? Yes?
332 LL Yes
333 T Ok, Daniel the next?
334 Daniel If I inherit a lot of money, I will be able to buy expensive clothe((unclear))?
335 T expensive what?
336 Daniel expensive clotheses?
337 T expensive clothes. Ok. Aand .uh... Gustavo, the next : 'move to another country'?
338 Gustavo I will..
339 T If I..?
340 Gustavo I will..



341 T Gustavo, Gustavo If I..?
342 Gustavo Ah!..If I move to another country... I..will ..mmm..

4. Noticing and A and D's decisions

According to Batstone, it is basically the idea that if learners pay attention to the form and meaning of certain language structures then this will contribute to the internalisation of the rule (Batstone, 1996). Ellis sees it as a process in which learners are able to extract those regularities in form from the available information which surrounds them and then integrate them into their knowledge system (Ellis, 2001).

So what can the teacher do in order to help his/her learners in internalising that which is made available to them? Perhaps the key word here is *available*, in the sense that whatever information the learners have to be exposed to, this must be dealt with in a manner that allows for them to interact with it from different angles in the hope that they will, depending on their abilities and previous knowledge, be able to grasp the form or meaning presented to them. In Ryan's words:

'all that we can do is make them aware of some of these patterns . . . under the assumption that if you have an awareness of them, then ultimately your pattern detector might function a bit more efficiently" (2001, p2)

Two dimensions come into play when making such information available to learners. One of them is explicitness, in which the information is presented to the learners through overt meta-linguistic explanations (Batstone, 1996). The case here is that in order to help learners notice a particular grammatical structure, then the grammatical features must be made indeed explicit. In the case of the current study, we find that one teacher opts for this approach as part of their repertoire when helping their learners. **A** makes such information available to her students when she perceives they have not been able to grasp it during her modelling of a particular pattern. In other words, she combines explicitness with implicitness.

Opposite to the explicit presentation of meaning and form, implicitness requires for the learners to be exposed to the language in a way that they will be able to 'see' either the structure or the meaning come out from the information



being presented to them. On implicitness, Babstone (op cit) refers to the importance of not only making the information stand out (as in marking a target in different colour or emphasising through voice pitch), but that the task itself must provide the means for the form to become more visible to the learners. **A** for example, uses repetition during the modelling of a structure (*which one*), and uses it not only in initiation moves (when asking learners which colour they prefer) but even in reformulation ones, when she integrates the colour the learner expresses to be his/her favourite along with the structure she intends for them to notice (*Ok, the black one*). The resulting interaction pattern is then related to her beliefs of what helps learners notice form and/or meaning, as well as to her choice to use implicitness to promote noticing.

...I try to model the new grammar using fun example some of them unreal that makes a good rapport with students and they give fun examples too...I try to model the grammar many times to the students before I explain it to them, trying to make them notice it just before I explain it. Some of them get it themselves, and the explanation of the grammar is not so complicated for them.

Later on during that same lesson, **A** decides to offer overt explanations, thus combining the two dimensions of explicit and implicit noticing. Her decision is based not only on what she believes about noticing *per se*, but on her evaluation of the extent to which the learners have been able to grasp the structure. She assumes that the structure has not been noticed—hence not learnt?—given that they are not producing it as they answer her questions about their favourite colours, which serves as an indicator—for her in this situation—that explicitness is necessary.

*...my students didn't repeat the grammar I was modelling... (the black **ONE?**)*

In the case of **D**, his strong beliefs about noticing and its relevance for language learning influence the interaction patterns set in the classroom. His exchanges with the learners at different points during the lesson indicate that he makes strategic use of reformulation in order to promote noticing of incorrect vs. correct versions of information elicited from the learners.



At other points during the lesson, he structures interaction around his belief that exposure from others' use of language and not only the teacher's, facilitates noticing of a pattern which is clearly seen in Extract #8D (see section 3.2), where he moves from one learner to another and then goes back to a learner who has been facing problems in producing the pattern, thus multiplying the opportunities for that learner to be exposed to the same form.

...I try to be more like a guide to students to make them discover things... to make them practice and to bring their real world to class and then they can combine this and express themselves in a new language...well I vary the participation so that the student can notice what other students are saying or listen to the patterns that the others are using to say something in a way and using a structure.....I think it is more reliable...the information sticks more ... it stays with the students... because if you present and write on the board... they later they have problems.. learning if you present the pattern and the use... but if you present it in a way they discover it I think it is more significant if they remember how much they were suffering to find the structure and when to use it.

Noticing per se is a complex process, given that it involves the intake both of meaning and of form, but it also takes time, since the learners need to progress from initial recognition onto the point where they can actually internalize an underlying rule and further on use it (Babstone, 1996). On this, Ellis' model (1997:119) helps in understanding such complexity. According to Ellis (*op cit*), that which comes in as input must be first noticed, which may require constant exposure to a pattern and/or meaning, to then go through a process in which the learner compares that which has been noticed to look for connections within the knowledge which h/she already has, thus becoming intake. Later this must be integrated into the learner's knowledge system and until then it is that it may be produced—as output.

In the case of two of the lessons which were analysed, it would seem that the learners were being exposed to a certain pattern for the first time (A's and D's lesson). This would probably explain why the learners might not have been able to produce the structure they were being introduced to, or rather, they were supposed to notice. Still, a number of them were able to produce it once repetition, prompting and reformulation by the teacher took place. This does not mean however, that the



structure in itself became intake. As put by Swain (1985: 248), learners need to process meaning before they can go on to internalise it.

A recurrent situation found in the data (in the case of A and D) is that teachers seem to evaluate their learners' ability for noticing a given pattern based on their ability to produce it and do so accurately. From this it would appear that they believe output is indispensable as an indicator of language acquisition—said here of form or meaning. This however, is beyond the scope of the study here reported, but clearly indicates a path for conducting further research in this area.

5. Conclusions

From the findings it emerges that the features of classroom interaction found here are similar to those reported in many studies before this one, namely that the teacher is in control. On this, Seedhouse (2004) offers an interesting perspective in what he calls *the interactional architecture of the L2 classroom*. In this view, the nature of interaction rationally derives from the core institutional goal, this being that *the teacher will teach the learners the L2* (Op cit: 183). As pointed out by Long (1983:9), the fact that language is 'both the vehicle and object of instruction' in the L2 classroom, dictates that this, said of L2, becomes the object, goal and focus of instruction; the process and product (Seedhouse, op cit). The obvious implications of this are that the use of language by both teachers and learners—this said of the linguistic complexity—will very much depend on the level where the teaching-learning is taking place. The different extracts which have been the focus for analysis in this study are clear evidence of the impact this has on the interaction between teachers and their learners, especially in contexts where the foreign language is authentically the means for learning it as is the case in this study. Furthermore, the beliefs held by teachers in this study concerning the use of only the FL add to explaining why interaction is the way it is as is found in one of the teachers' contributions about what helps learners be successful:

...when you're completely exposed to it, when the teacher doesn't speak Spanish and doesn't admit and answer in Spanish either... as student you challenge yourself to express your ideas in the other language...



Altogether, it seems as if there are inescapable features to classroom interaction. The debate goes on and the research in the field will continue to see prevailing patterns being demonised and luckily (as the last decade has seen) to find alternatives that will enhance the opportunities for learners. The amount of work done in this field so far will continue to empower new research in this area of ELT allowing a better understanding of why things are the way they are, which should eventually transfer onto a more effective teaching practice for the sake of learners.

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Biodata

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