

# **Is It Inevitable for Teachers to Talk More? Analysing Classroom Interaction Using IRF in CFL Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

Classroom interaction promotes students' language acquisition and plays a vital role in classroom teaching. Yet, an excessive amount of teacher talk in classroom interaction has always been a concern. Inspired by Tsui's (1995) Seventeen-Category System, this study investigated the classroom discourse and triadic dialogue (IRF pattern) of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) classrooms in England. It aims to examine how the teachers employed the IRF pattern to construct or reduce students' language learning and use of target language in CFL classrooms. Three Year 10 lessons were observed in a secondary school in England, with the student's language proficiency at the lower intermediate level. The findings revealed that the language teacher dominated the initiation and types of interactions, and the student's responses were mechanical and repetitive. Thus, the learning opportunities for the students to use the target language were highly restricted. In addition, classroom interaction is dependent on the content and the teacher's choice of language. The study raised concern about revisiting the use of the target language in Chinese Mandarin classrooms as well as increasing the awareness of the teacher in terms of using

various types of questions to increase learning opportunities.

*Keywords:* Chinese as a foreign language, classroom interaction, IRF pattern, target language

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In England, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) is one of the foundation subjects compulsory for every student until Year 9. And Mandarin is one of the languages offered in MFL, which is being taught very much the same way as European languages are taught in England. Yet, findings from alphabetic language research may not provide appropriate and accurate insights into Mandarin teaching and learning. Specific adaptations in Mandarin as a foreign language curriculum and teaching strategies are essential, especially since its learning has shifted from an enrichment course to being part of the formal MFL curriculum (see Lam, 2020 for its historical development). In England, there is consent that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the proposed teaching approach of MFL. CLT emphasises the notion that knowing a language comprises the knowledge of grammatical rules (i.e. linguistic competence) and knowledge of language use rules (i.e. communicative competence) (Hymes, 1971). Therefore, the aim of CLT is to develop communicative competence when language is used as a means of communication and to know how to use forms appropriately in different contexts (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). One of the key tenets of CLT methodology is that learners acquire language through doing and accentuate emphasises learners' participatory experience in meaningful L2 interactions. In CLT lessons, communicative situations are expected to promote the less structured and more creative use of language.

Empirical studies found that an excessive amount of teacher talk in classroom interaction has always been a concern. Not only is it not conducive to students' language output, but also highly controls and limits interactions in lessons. In addition, the examination-oriented culture in England has been driving the interactions in the classrooms, having more instruction and less interaction as students make progress (D'Arcy, 2006). MFL lessons were dominantly teacher-led, and the activities were tightly controlled, entirely focused on linguistic forms and required minimal use or production of the target language by students

(Wingate, 2018). Eckerth (2009) suggested that in CLT classrooms, the design of activities should have ‘interactional authenticity’ instead of reproducing individual words and phrases. Furthermore, teachers should be aware of their dominance in classroom discourse (Tsui, 1995; Hasan, 2006).

While Liu (2008) believed that even though teachers talk most of the time and control most of the turns, considerations have to be given to whether opportunities are provided for students to express themselves and whether their language learning is facilitated. Previous studies of Chinese classroom interaction are rare, if not non-existent, in the international literature. The present study aims to address this gap by analysing Chinese language classroom discourse and triadic dialogues -Initiation. Response and Follow-up (IRF) (Mehan, 1979), between teachers and students at the secondary level in England. Adopting the position that maximising students’ involvement in interaction is beneficial to language learning (Mackey, 2006), this study examines IRF patterns of Chinese teachers and their control in content, choice of language and how these factors promote or reduce students’ use of target language in classroom interactions. The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. How can teachers, by varying the IRF pattern of classroom interaction, increase opportunities for student’s use of target language in CFL classrooms?
2. In what ways do teachers, through their choice of language and control of content and procedure, promote or reduce students’ use of target language in CFL classrooms?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Classroom interaction refers to verbal exchanges between teacher and students or between students and students in classroom settings (Lo & Macaro, 2015). As an important process of classroom teaching, classroom interaction is regarded as an indicator to measure the effectiveness of pedagogical practices (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001). According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), a typical

exchange in the classroom comprises of three parts: teacher Initiation (serves to elicit a response from students), followed by student's Response, and then teacher's Feedback (serves to verify that the student had responded correctly or to 'echo' the student's response), which is known as the IRF triadic exchange structure. This structure is commonly found in all classrooms and is the dominant pattern of classroom interaction (Tsui, 1995). This structure is used to examine the particularities of classroom interactions, understand patterns and features of teacher talk, and avoid the overuse of classroom interactions (Walsh, 2015).

Various frameworks are developed to describe and classify classroom discourse between teachers and students (e.g. Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Tsui, 1995; Malcom, 1986). In this study, the Seventeen-Category System proposed by Tsui (1995) is utilised as the theoretical framework. Tsui's framework adopted Flander's (1970) classification and divided all talks that occur in the classroom into "Teacher Talk" and "Pupil Talk", and further divided into "Initiation" and "Response". The utterances of teacher and students are further categorised according to discourse functions based on Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), modified into 17 categories and integrated with Barnes's (1969) classification of the teacher's question (e.g. Display Question, Genuine Question). The comprehensiveness and robustness of the framework have initiated voluminous studies in the past few decades (Rong, 2000; Lo & Macaro, 2012; Lo & Macaro, 2015). The Seventeen-Category System is a post-coding system that is easy to modify or add new categories and to analyse teacher-student interaction in the classroom (Lo and Macaro, 2015).

Tsui's Seventeen-Category System is shown in Table 1:

**Table 1. Tsui's Seventeen-Category System**

		<b>Act (with Sub-categorization)</b>
Teacher Talk	Initiate	1.Elicit A.Display Qs i. Factual Qs ii. Yes-No Qs iii. Reasoning Qs iv. Explanation Qs B.Genuine Qs i. Opining Qs ii. Information Qs C.Restating Elicit
		2.Direct
		3.Nominate
		4.Inform
		5.Recapitulate
		6.Frame
		7.Starter
		8.Check
	Respond	9.Evaluate A. Encouraging/Positive B. Negative
		10.Accept
		11.Comment
		12.Clue
Pupil Talk	Respond	13.Reply A. Restricted B. Expanded
		14.Apologize
	Initiate	15.Request
		16.Elicit
		17.Interrupt

For many second language teachers, it is still a challenge to maximise the interactive participation of students and pay attention to the effectiveness of their talk (Lap et al., 2017). While students are in a passive position in the interaction, the content of the speech is guided by the teacher, and the speech opportunities

are allocated by the teacher through acts of nomination (Hasan, 2006). Liu (2008) believed that even though teachers talk most of the time and control most of the turns, it is important for teachers to provide opportunities for students to express themselves and thus facilitate their language learning. For instance, the language use of the teachers, turn-taking strategies, and the manipulation of the third part in IRF interactions also contribute to classroom interaction. Si (2018) studied Chinese immersion classrooms in American elementary schools, the study found that the amount of teacher discourse in immersive classrooms is too much while the output of students is insufficient. But the study did not make an in-depth discussion on the causes and effects of this phenomenon, and no doubt that more empirical studies are needed.

In addition, classroom interaction involves a large number of teacher questions, utilised to engage students as well as promote interaction (Lynch, 1991; Adedoyin, 2015). According to the purpose of questioning, questions in classroom settings are divided into two types: display and referential/genuine (Long & Sato, 1983; Tsui, 1995; Walsh, 2013). Research by Ribas (2010) and Al-Zahrani and Al-Bargi (2017) suggested that display questions often prevent students from expressing their ideas and may encourage repetition of facts or pre-formulated language items. Another study found that teacher's display question usually does not lead to or promote further classroom interactions, and they are often strongly correlated with students' imitative answers (Gharbavi and Iranvani, 2014). Although students' creative responses have a strong association with teachers' referential questions, David (2007) argued that display questions can create more classroom interaction among students in school and may help encourage learners, especially for beginners, to be interested and get involved in English classrooms. In addition, Walsh (2013) contended that both reference questions and display questions should be related to teachers' teaching objectives in class. After studying the questioning behavior of three Arab EFL teachers, Qashoa (2013) also argued that both types of questions are useful in English classrooms. Scant research has examined the interactive exchanges in Chinese Mandarin classrooms, and

whether or not the teacher-student IRF structures constructed or reduced students' opportunities to use the target language. The results of this study can provide insights and suggestions for Chinese teaching programmes in other contexts, especially in countries teaching Chinese Mandarin as a foreign language.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the interactions between teacher-students in a non-alphabetic language classroom and to understand the possible reasons of such interactive behaviors. The data of this study is part of a larger study consisting of four schools, which consists of seven teacher interviews and more than 30 hours of lesson observations. Nevertheless, due to the limited space of this article, this study presents three Mandarin Chinese lessons (175 minutes) from one Mandarin teacher. The data was collected in a comprehensive secondary school in London, United Kingdom. The school has a well-established Mandarin Chinese course, offering the language in the formal curriculum for students from Year 7 to Year 11. The Mandarin Chinese teacher is a native speaker of Chinese, with more than five years of teaching experience in the UK. She obtained a Bachelor and Master degree in language education. All the students are native speakers of English who have lower-intermediate proficiency (equivalent to A2 to B1 of the CEFR) in Chinese Mandarin. The teachers used a variety of teaching activities in their classrooms, such as student group work, but the analysis focuses only on the IRF patterns between the teacher and students during the CFL lessons.

The whole class teacher-student verbal interactions of the three audiotaped lessons are transcribed and coded. Then the classroom interaction structure is analysed using the three-part I-R-F structure. All the audio recordings are turned into a verbatim transcript, including words spoken by the teacher and students in class. To ensure the accuracy of the transcribed text and avoid errors or omissions in the written record, the recording data are checked by the second author of the article (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The researchers are aware of reflexivity and its



potential influence on the research processes (Cohen et al., 2011) ; therefore, the study is guided by a well-developed theoretical framework and collected empirical evidence to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. In addition, due to the small sampling size, the findings of the study are not intended to be generalised to a wider context.

The analyses provide a snapshot of teacher-student interactions in CFL classrooms, and the selected extracts are telling cases of how CFL teachers could construct or reduce students' learning opportunities in their IRF interactions (Mitchell, 1984). The extracts are not simply typical cases of how the teacher teaches vocabulary but as a demonstration of what we observed in the teacher's use of language to create or reduce opportunities for student learning, and the implementation of CLT in CLF classrooms.

## **4. FINDINGS**

From the three lessons observed, the study found that the teacher attempted to create opportunities for students to use the target language even though the teacher dominantly controlled the turn-taking of classroom interactions. The analysis focused on general patterns observed in the lessons and how the choice of language and content contribute to the use of the target language.

### ***4.1 Patterns of classroom interaction***

#### **4.1.1 The structures of classroom interaction**

The structures of classroom interaction are evenly distributed between I-R-F and I-R, having 48% and 52%, respectively. The IRF structure covers a teacher initiation (I), a student response (R), and teacher feedback (F), and the other is the IR structure which the response is not subject to feedback. Table 2 shows the frequency of classroom interaction structures.

**Table 2. Frequency of classroom interaction structures**

Type of structures	Frequency (%)
I-R-F	221 (48%)
I-R	239 (52%)
Total	460 (100%)

#### ***4.1.2 Initiation of turns***

The study found that the teacher possessed a dominant position in classroom interaction. More than 90% of the interactions were initiated by the teachers, having the students only start an interaction 31 times among the three lessons (See Table 3). Specifically, lesson 1 focuses on vocabulary teaching, and lesson 2 focuses on listening practice; the number of teacher initiations is 94.9% and 98.8%, respectively. The proportion of student initiations in Lesson 3 is the largest among the three lessons. Considering that the content of lesson 3 focuses on the instruction of students' individual presentation and students asking questions about the tasks, this could be a reason that leads to more students initiated interactions.

**Table 3. The number of interactions initiated by teacher and student**

Initiations	Lesson1	Lesson2	Lesson3	Total
Teacher initiations	206 (94.9%)	166 (98.8%)	57 (76%)	429 (93.7%)
Student initiations	11 (5.1%)	2 (1.2%)	18 (24%)	31 (6.7%)

#### ***4.1.3 Type of acts***

In terms of the type of acts in teacher initiation, the teacher initiated most of the classroom exchanges by the act of Elicit (i.e. asking different types of questions) and Frame (i.e. instructing students to do something). In contrast, in lesson 1, the second most frequent act is Check which takes up 8.55%. It is noteworthy that the teacher did not use various types of initiations in the lesson, with the absence of several types of acts; for instance, Request, Interrupt, Clue and Recapitulate. Table 4 presents the type of acts initiated by the teacher in all the three lessons.

**Table 4. Different types of acts initiated by the teacher**

Type of acts	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3
Elicit	164 (70.1%)	144 (72.7%)	25 (33.8%)
Direct	7 (3%)	3 (1.5%)	4 (5.4%)
Nominate	13 (5.6%)	5 (2.5%)	9 (12.2%)
Inform	17 (7.3%)	0 (0%)	6 (8.1%)
Recapitulate	0 (0%)	2 (1%)	0 (0%)
Frame	10 (4.3%)	14 (7.1%)	11 (14.9%)
Starter	3 (1.3%)	13 (6.6%)	7 (9.5%)
Check	20 (8.6%)	11 (5.6%)	9 (12.2%)
Request	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)
Interrupt	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.7%)
Clue	0 (0%)	6 (3%)	0 (0%)
Total	234 (100%)	198 (100%)	74 (100%)

#### ***4.1.4 Teacher's questions***

As mentioned above, Elicit is the act that the teacher use most frequently in initiation. In Tsui's (1995) Seventeen-Category System, there are three major types of Elicit, namely Display QS, Genuine QS and Restating Elicit. The analysis of Display QS and Genuine QS is shown in Table 5 and Table 6. Most of the question types used by the teacher are Display questions, accounting for more than 95% in each lesson. On the contrary, the proportion of Genuine questions is low; less than 2% is Genuine QS. The Opining question of Genuine QS is used to ask for students' opinions and allows students to express their feelings. Such question type is, however, not even used by the teacher in lesson 1 nor lesson 2. When the teacher used a Display question, students' responses were limited by the question, and they were not encouraged to respond with long utterances. The dominant employment of factual questions implies that the communication between the teacher and students is relatively controlled by the question types, and the mediation of meaning is limited (Si, 2008).

The Factual QS is the more commonly used question type, especially in

lesson 1 and lesson 3, with 75% and 68%, respectively. For Factual QS, the teacher asked students specific questions with only one acceptable answer. For example, “*What’s the pinyin (of a vocabulary)?*”, “*What’s the answer?*” and “*What’s this?*” etc. The responses of the students are specific factual information without any opportunities to use the target language creatively. Additionally, Yes-No questions were also frequently employed by the teacher, for example, “*對 不 對 ? (means yes, or no?)*” and “*Now, is number three correct or wrong?*”, etc. The responses of the students to these questions were limited to two choices. Excerpt 1 presents the exchanges frequently used in lesson 1 and lesson 3 and demonstrates the purpose of the interaction as a pure form of language practice.

**Table 5. Display QS and Genuine QS used by the teacher**

Elicit	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Total
A. Display QS	162	141	24	327 (98.2%)
B. Genuine QS	2	3	1	6 (1.8%)

**Table 6. The types of questions the teacher asked in each lesson**

Type of Elicit	Sub-categorization	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3
A. Display QS	a) Factual QS	123 (75%)	67 (46.5%)	17 (68%)
	b) Yes-No QS	11 (6.7%)	22 (15.3%)	5 (20%)
	c) Reasoning QS	14 (8.5%)	6 (4.2%)	0 (0%)
	d) Explanation QS	14 (8.5%)	46 (31.9%)	2 (8%)
B. Genuine QS	a) Opining QS	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
	b) Information QS	2 (1.2%)	3 (2.1%)	0 (0%)

### Excerpt 1

<i>Exchanges</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
T: 寄信 , how to spell 寄信 ? SS: J-I, X-I-N. T: J-I, X-I-N.	I R F	Elicit Reply Accept
T: 這是什麼? SS: 廣告。	I R	Elicit Reply

<i>T: How to say I am a secondary school student?</i> <i>SS: 我是中學生。 / 我是中學學生。 / 我是中國學生。</i> <i>T: Ok, yeah</i>	I R F	Elicit Reply Accept
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In lesson 2, the Explanation QS is the second most frequently used question type, with 31.94%, four times as many as in Lesson 1 (8.5%) and Lesson 3 (8%). It is because the teacher used a Chinese-English translation to review the vocabulary taught in previous lessons. Most of the questions were used to explain the meaning of the vocabulary, with repeated use of the question type “*What’s the meaning of \_\_\_?*” The following excerpt presents an example:

### Excerpt 2

<i>Exchanges</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: And before we do a listening, we listen to the review exam paper. I am going to say some words. You just listen to me and see if you can understand what I am saying. Ok, only words first. And then, after this revision, very small revision, I am going to do the paper. Ok, listen to me and tell me the English meaning for these words. Umm, 容易。</i> <i>SS: Easy.</i> <i>T: 有壓力。</i>	I R I	Elicit Reply Elicit
<i>SS: Stress/stressful.</i> <i>T: Stressful.</i>	R F	Reply Accept

The Display question, regardless of Factual questions, Yes-No questions, Explanation questions or Reasoning questions, are all oriented towards knowledge-checking and unable to provide enough opportunities for meaningful communication in the language classroom. Furthermore, the length of the student’s response is in proportion to the teacher’s Display questions. When the utterance of the question raised by the teacher is not long, it is difficult to require students to respond with longer sentences.

#### 4.1.5 Teacher’s explanation

The explanation used by the teacher can be divided into two types:

procedural explanation and content explanation. Procedural explanations are mainly found in Lesson 3, particularly when teachers are instructing the individual presentation and assignment. The content explanation is mainly used in lesson 1, which focuses on explaining the meaning of vocabulary. In contrast, lesson 2 focuses on explaining and facilitating the comprehension of the listening text. The following excerpt presents the teacher explaining the differences in sentence patterns in Chinese Mandarin and English. It is because the students were required to give an individual presentation which included a question-and-answer session.

### Excerpt 3

<i>Exchanges</i>	<i>Moves</i>
<p><i>T: .....Now, okay. Now, for answering questions people might find oh it's so hard to answer, I don't know how to start. Chinese actually is a, for the grammar always say Chinese's patterns actually very very easy. When you answer the questions, you just need to change certain elements and then is your answer. In the place, you change you to "我" first, is that right? And then, you change that "哪裏" to "a place". So, the words order still keep the same. For example, you wouldn't say "North London I live in", even in English you wouldn't say that. And this one is the same. "我家在" at the same time you can think about what are you going to say. So you repeat the examiner question "你家在哪裏?" I don't even have to understand what "哪裏" is. At the same time, I say "我家在", at the same time I think what is "哪裏", what is "哪裏", oh, where! "我家在倫敦北部", is that ok? So, use this time, is like, there is a time for you to think. Yeah, you don't have to think about how I am going to start the third, the first three characters. You don't have to think about it at all. Yes?</i></p> <p><i>SS: ((Silence))</i></p>	<p>I R</p>

As seen from the above excerpt, when teaching sentence patterns, the teacher first introduced the substitution rules and explained the similarities between Chinese Mandarin and English. The teacher then deepened students' understanding through an example and demonstrated the process of answering a question in the target language. While the teacher explained the sentence pattern to the students, she also observed the students' reactions and asked, "Is that right?" or "Is that ok?" to check whether the students understood her explanation. However, the teacher conveyed a big chunk of content at once, and the students did not have a chance to respond to the content. After the teacher finished the explanation, the

students responded to the teacher by remaining silent. The students had no verbal participation and appeared to be an example of one-way imparting.

#### 4.1.6 The continuous IR pattern

When the students were unable to answer a question or gave the wrong answer, the teacher often used elicitation to recall the answer (i.e., Restating Elicit) instead of directly giving negative feedback. Thus, a series of IR structures of interactions are found in the study. For example:

##### Excerpt 4

<i>Exchanges</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: What's this?</i> <i>SS: 老師。</i>	I R	Elicit Reply
<i>T: 是老師嗎?</i> <i>SS: Teacher.</i>	I R	Elicit Reply
<i>T: 是老師嗎? Is that 老師?</i> <i>SS: No.</i>	I R	Elicit Reply
<i>T: 這個是老師。這是什麼?</i> <i>SS: Umm.</i>	I R	Elicit Apologize
<i>T: Have you all forgotten?</i> <i>SS: Yeah.</i>	I R	Check Reply
<i>T: Ok, listen to me you are going to "Oh", is 考試。</i> <i>SS: Oh, hahaha (laughing)</i>	I R	Inform Reply

A series of IR structures are used for inducing and stimulating the students to think of the answer to the question, the meaning of 考試 (examination). The excerpt featured that the teacher engaged in promoting more interactions with the students to recall the meaning of the vocabulary, and the student's confidence and participation were enhanced. In addition, read-aloud activity and new word pronunciation practices also initiated a series of IR structures. It showed that Chinese Mandarin classrooms involved mechanical exercise and repetition in acquiring the language. For example, in lesson 1:

### Excerpt 5

<i>Exchanges</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: Next one, you know this one 將來 . We have learnt this one before. Say after me 將來 .</i>	I	Elicit
<i>SS: 將來。</i>	R	Reply
<i>T: 將來。</i>	I	Elicit
<i>SS: 將來。</i>	R	Reply
<i>T: Here we say 休息。</i>	I	Elicit
<i>SS: 休息。</i>	R	Reply
<i>T: Again 休息。</i>	I	Elicit
<i>SS: 休息。</i>	R	Reply

Excerpt 5 presented that the teacher employed the IR structure to practice the pronunciation of the vocabulary. The exchanges between the teacher and students were relatively controlled and repetitive, and the students did not have opportunities to use the language except by repeating the utterances of the teacher.

## 4.2 Promoting students' use of target language

### 4.2.1 Choice of language

The dominant language in the lesson is English (i.e. native language of the students) whereas the use of the target language is relatively limited. Table 7 presents the choice of language of the teacher and students in the CFL classrooms.

**Table 7. Choice of language**

Language	Teacher	Students
English	452 (40.8%)	290 (26.3%)
Mandarin	120 (10.8%)	140 (12.6%)
English and Mandarin	105 (9.5%)	0 (0%)
Total: 1107		

This study found that the teacher and students were inclined to speak in English instead of Chinese Mandarin in lessons. The teacher sometimes used English and Mandarin within a sentence, with a proportion of 9.5%, mainly



because the learning content was originally in Chinese Mandarin and English was used as the instruction language. For example,

### Excerpt 6

<i>Exchange</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: 暑期工 is summer holiday job, 暑期工 summer term job, summer holiday job. So, the presenter asked “李明，你第一次做暑期工是哪一年？” What is that mean? 什麼是哪一年?</i> <i>SS: Umm/when.</i>	I R	Starter Elicit Reply

The teacher attempted to explain the key vocabulary or phrases in the question so that the students would be able to answer the questions. Utterances to dominantly use English instead of the target language were also found in “wh-” questions, classroom instructions, and providing feedback, etc., for example:

### Excerpt 7

<i>Exchange</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: Next one, 想做教師, what is 教師?</i> <i>SS: Teacher/ a teacher / occupation.</i> <i>T: Yes, they will remind this word. Yep, 教師 occupation.</i>	I R F	Elicit Reply Accept
<i>T: Now, next person 馬田, Oh, sorry not 馬田. Oh, yes, 馬田.</i> <i>What's the answer?</i> <i>SS: D.</i> <i>T: Excellent!</i>	I R F	Elicit Reply Evaluate

In fact, expressions like “Next one”, “What is”, “Now, next person”, “What’s the answer”, and “Excellent” are perhaps understandable at the intermediate level Mandarin classrooms. In other words, it is possible for the teacher to use the target language to optimize the exposure of the students. The tendency of the teacher to use English instead of Mandarin has an impact on the students. The study found that even if the teacher initiated an interaction in Mandarin, the student replied in English. Also, there is only one interaction (see Excerpt 8) that the teacher initiated in English and the students responded in Mandarin. Still, it was short and non-informative (i.e. 好的 means okay). The students used Chinese Mandarin only when they were practicing translation between Chinese and English for learning vocabulary and short sentences.

### Excerpt 8

<i>Exchange</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: No talking! No talking, girls!</i> <i>S1: 好的。</i>	I R	Direct Reply

In terms of the use of target language, students are often in a passive state and lack the initiative to express themselves. The interactions in the three Mandarin lessons are relatively prescribed and mechanical. In particular, the initiation of the teachers focused on repetition with limited opportunities to use the target language for communication purposes.

#### 4.2.2 Content and turn-taking

The study found that the turn-taking structure was related to the content of the lesson, and the proportions of the two structures, IRF and IR, are not the same (see Table 8). In Lesson 2, classroom discourse interaction is dominated by IRF structure, which accounts for 56%. However, in Lesson 1 and Lesson 3, the IR structure is the majority, having 53% and 64%, respectively. Especially in Lesson 3, the proportion of IR structure is nearly twice that of IRF structure.

**Table 8. Frequency of classroom interaction structures**

Type of structures	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3
I-R-F	102 (47%)	94 (56%)	25 (33%)
I-R	115 (53%)	74 (44%)	50 (64%)
Total	217 (100%)	168 (100%)	75 (100%)

The reasons for the above differences might be related to the differences in teaching content. Lesson 1 focused on vocabulary learning, and the teachers' elicited the interactions by reading aloud, followed by the students repeating after the teacher (See Excerpt 9). And the teacher consolidated the learning of new words by doing the exchange twice. Thus, there were more Initiation-Response (IR) structures in lesson 1.

### Excerpt 9

<i>Exchanges</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: Next one, successful, succeed. Say after me 成功。</i> <i>SS: 成功。</i>	I R	Elicit Reply
<i>T: 成功。</i> <i>SS: 成功。</i>	I R	Elicit Reply

Lesson 2 was a listening practice class, having most of the interactions focused on guiding students to complete the listening practice. Before the start of the practice, the teacher assessed the students' mastery of the vocabulary taught in the previous lesson. She initiated the interactions by reading the vocabulary in Mandarin; the students replied by explaining the meaning in English, and then the teacher gave feedback to the student. Such IRF exchange dominated most of the interactions in the lesson. For example,

### Excerpt 10

<i>Exchange</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: Ok, this one is hard, 工資。</i> <i>SS: Wage/salary.</i> <i>T: Excellent.</i>	I R F	Elicit Reply Evaluate

Lesson 3 was a tutorial class which mainly instructed students to revise written assignments and prepare for the upcoming individual presentation. In this lesson, the teacher explained relevant information about the presentation, such as question types, content, and grading. She also taught the students how to respond to the questions that might be asked in the presentation. For example,

### Excerpt 11

Exchange	Moves	Acts
<p><i>T: “What do you think?” Also I said when you hear 你覺得, it will be a 怎麼樣 afterward. Anyway, ok. So, I think you can understand 你覺得 or 怎麼樣. Is about I am asking your opinion on this thing. “What do you think about this?” “What’s your opinion about this thing?” “How about this one?” Yeah. And, so, if you say that, a name, and I will use that name here. Okay? Even if you say 我家住在倫敦北部, I might say 你覺得倫敦北部怎麼樣? Do you understand for the question, yeah?</i></p> <p><i>SS: Yeah.</i></p>	I R	Check Reply

The lesson focused on information of assessment rather than learning the language. Therefore, the interactions between the teacher and students were mainly IR structure, as the teacher did not necessarily require providing feedback to the students. Specifically, the student’s responses were mainly an expression of awareness instead of using the language.

#### 4.2.3 Progression of the lesson - the functions of “Check”

According to Tsui’s (1995) Seventeen-Category System, “Check” refers to “help the teacher to know the progress of the lesson and usually occurs when the teacher wants to move from one task or topic to another”. It is noteworthy that in this study, “Check” is sometimes used by the teacher to assess the students’ judgment on the level of difficulty of the content and to check the prior knowledge of the students. The following extracts show the use of the act “Check” in the lesson.

### Excerpt 12

Exchanges	Moves	Acts
<p><i>T: You should know this one, because you know how to say subject 課, for example 中文課, Chinese lesson 對不對?</i></p> <p><i>SS: 對。</i></p>	I R	Check Reply
<p><i>T: 好下一個, you have learned this one 休息。</i></p> <p><i>SS: 休息。</i></p>	I R	Elicit Reply

The act “Check” excerpt 13 is worth mentioning as the teacher asked who answered the question, and the student was identified by repeating the answer. The teacher checked the progress of the lesson as well as managed the classroom.

### Excerpt 13

<i>Exchanges</i>	<i>Moves</i>	<i>Acts</i>
<i>T: Who said ?</i>	I	Check
<i>S2: 廣場。</i>	R	Reply
<i>T: Excellent ! 廣場。</i>	F	Evaluate;Accept
<i>T: Easy? Remember?</i>	I	Check
<i>SS: Yeah.</i>	R	Reply
<i>T: Have you learned this one just now?</i>	I	Check
<i>SS: Yeah.</i>	R	Reply
<i>T: Ok.</i>	F	Accept

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 How can teachers, by varying the IRF pattern of interaction in the classroom, increase opportunities for student’s use of target language in CFL classrooms?

It is evident that the teacher, with a clear pedagogic and linguistic goal for the lessons, attempted to optimise and promote students’ involvement. Nevertheless, the dominance of the teacher’s initiations limited the students’ contributions and use of the target language. First, the results built on existing evidence that teacher’s talk took up the major portion of classroom interactions. The interactions were mainly initiated by the teacher, while students generally speak when spoken to (Si, 2018). However, the number of exchanges in each lesson implied the active participation and involvement of the students. Additionally, the most common way for the teacher to initiate is by asking display questions as a specific request for information, consistent with previous research (AI-Zahrani & AI-Bargi, 2017; Si, 2018). And display questions like factual questions and yes-no questions are frequently used by the teacher in all lessons. In line with the

findings of David (2007), the present study found that display questions favour more classroom interaction and promote the participation of students. In fact, the students' Chinese Mandarin proficiency is at the lower intermediate level, in which they might not yet be proficient in engaging in meaningful and authentic interactions. On the contrary, Genuine questions like opinion and information questions were rarely used. It might argue that the extensive use of display questions makes it difficult for students to express themselves freely (Ribas, 2010; Ai-Zahrani & Ai-bargi, 2017). Nevertheless, repeating pre-existing linguistic forms is necessary for learning Mandarin Chinese. The formulaic language competence will then be directly transformed into automatized and fluent language production. The learners can pay more attention to other aspects of communication, in particular, focusing on the meaning and producing a larger piece of discourse. The controlled exercises are not only necessary for learners to acquire the language but also prepare the learners to better "control" the target language in social interaction contexts. Having said that, the teacher is suggested to employ long display questions as the length of the student's response is proportionate to the questions.

In terms of the category of classroom interaction, this study confirmed the applicability of Tsui's Seventeen-Category System in Chinese as a foreign language classroom. Although almost all the classroom verbal dialogues can be categorised in this system, some modifications are suggested. First, the expansion of the description of Check. Check usually appears when teachers intend to move from one topic or task to another by asking questions like "OK?", "Finished?" or "Ready?". The study found that it is applicable to understanding students' perception of the level of difficulties of the learning content, and the prior knowledge of the students. Second, the study showed that students rarely expressed Apologize with statements or phrases such as "I am sorry about\_\_" or "Sorry, I don't know the answer". Instead, the students often apologised through silence and apologised by asking for confirmation. Such modification or adding new categories to The Seventeen-Category System is the very reason for choosing this framework

for this study.

## **5.2 In what ways do teachers, through their choice of language and control of content, promote or reduce students' use of target language in CFL classrooms?**

The present study found that the classroom structure was dominated by IR in two of the lessons. The result aligned with Well (1993)'s and Hall (1997)'s findings that teachers do not always give feedback or evaluation, and it is related to the content of the lessons. In a reading-focused lesson, the teacher's discourse is mainly reading aloud, followed by the repetition of the students, with few exchanges that evaluate students' responses. Thus, the interaction structure was mostly IR instead of IRF. Moreover, the series of IR structures reflected that in the CSL classroom, the teacher used mechanical repetition to teach new vocabulary and phrases leading to formulaic, then automatised language competence.

As for the use of the target language, this study found that both teachers and students were more inclined to communicate in English than in the target language. The students rarely responded to the teacher or expressed their opinions in Mandarin. Furthermore, most teacher talks were in English, even for brief questions and instructions. The students were in a state of passive response in teacher-led classroom interaction, in which students' responses were limited by the teacher's question type and topic. The extensive use of English by the teachers undoubtedly hindered the student's learning of the target language. In the foreign language context, this further limited the exposure of students to Mandarin Chinese and led to the loss of meaningful communication. Overall, the three CSL classrooms observed in this study showed that the teacher imparts knowledge about the target language and leads students to acquire the language through mechanised exercises. This is similar to the results of Hasan's (2006) research on bilingual classroom discourse.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the structures of classroom interaction in Chinese as a foreign language in a secondary school in the United Kingdom and has contributed to the knowledge of discourse analysis of classroom interaction. The results not only confirmed the applicability of Tsui's (1995) Seventeen-Category System but also expanded and modified the system. Besides, this study also added on to existing classroom interaction research by investigating a non-alphabetic language setting. In particular, it focused on how the IRF patterns constructed or reduced the students' use of the target language and communicative competence.

From a pedagogic perspective, the analyses in this article provide some insights into teacher-fronted IRF interactions. First, it is suggested to raise the awareness of language teachers to create conditions that increase the output of students; and reduce the utilisation of display questions. Second, consciously increasing the exposure of the target language in the lessons and transitioning from mechanical imitation to flexible use of the language, making classroom dialogue more authentic. It is not intended to suggest that Mandarin teachers should avoid using students' L1 and should not feel 'guilty' for using English in the classroom. On the contrary, it is hoped that teachers would have a sense of not taking the easy path as it is more straightforward to use English and achieve the teaching objectives. Instead, the long-term learning outcomes of their students should be the primary consideration.

Despite the findings and contributions of this study, there are several limitations. First, the data reported was collected from the same teacher. Hence, the results and conclusions may not be generalisable to wider Mandarin teachers in non-target language contexts. Second, this research used audio-recording analysis, complemented with observation fieldnotes, however, analysis of non-verbal interaction between the teacher and students in the classroom were not included. As a departure point, this study sheds light on teachers' discourse in Chinese as a foreign language classroom. Future research could focus on the factors that have



an impact on the features of Chinese teacher talk and their teaching strategies. Also, studies could be conducted quantitatively to investigate the correlations of classroom interactions in CFL classrooms with various factors, including motivation, students' performance, language proficiency and student engagement, etc.

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## 基於 IRF 理論的漢語作為第二語言課堂的課堂互動分析

李慧 林善敏 \*

### 摘要

課堂互動促進了學生的語言學習，在教學中發揮了重要作用。然而，教師過多的話語量一直受到學者的關注。本研究以 Tsui (1995) 十七類系統 (Seventeen-Category System) 為理論框架，以及啟動—回應—反饋三段式對話 (IRF 模式)，分析教師與學生的課堂互動。同時，本研究旨在了解教師 IRF 模式的運用，是促進還是窒礙學生在課堂上的語言學習及目標語的使用。研究對象為英國一所中學，共三節對外漢語課堂，學生的漢語水平屬於中下水平。結果顯示，教師主導了課堂互動的啟動和類型，而學生的回應大部分是機械且重複的，限制了他們使用目標語的機會。此外，課堂互動還取決於教學內容和教師的語言選擇。本研究建議教師應重新審視對外漢語課堂中目標語言的使用，以及提高使用不同類型的提問的意識，從而增加學生的學習機會。

**關鍵詞：**對外漢語 課堂互動 啟動—回應—反饋模式 目標語

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