

Breaking with the IRF and EPA: Facilitating student-initiated talk

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Teachers interested in fostering more student autonomy in their ESL classrooms often find it difficult to break away from the preferred institutional discourse models, particularly the *initiation-response-feedback* (IRF) pattern and *Explicit positive assessment* (EPA). Moving away from teacher-controlled exchanges can prove problematic for students *and* teachers not accustomed to more student-centered learning approaches. In this study, the author examines data from one of his own ESL classes where he attempted to encourage breaks from the IRF/EPA discourse patterns. Most surprising was the extent to which students themselves broke with traditional teacher/student discourse roles and worked together to co-construct a socio-cognitive learning environment.

ESLクラスにおいて、より主体的学びを学生に促進しようとする、教師はIRF (I:声かけ-R:返答-F:フィードバック) とEPA (明示的に前向きな評価) という選好されがちな授業会話モデルの枠を破るのに苦労することがよくある。教員主導型の授業内会話を止めることで、学生も教員も学生中心の学習アプローチに不慣れであるということ、証明することができるであろう。本研究では、筆者が担当するESLクラスで、IRFとEPAの発話パターンをあえて止めたクラスから得られたデータを検証する。特筆すべきは、どの程度まで学生が自ら学生/教師の伝統的発話の役割を超え、社会認知的学習環境を教師と協働で作り上げるかである。

CREATING A classroom environment where students feel comfortable enough to initiate talk, rather than simply react to teacher prompts in the form of the oft-maligned *initiation-response-feedback* (IRF) pattern, is probably one of the least understood skills a teacher can possess. This skill is not teachable, and yet, ironically, it is perhaps one of the most important. It seems to have as much or more to do with the personality of a teacher and the ability to form camaraderie with his or her students than it does with the actual ability to teach. While much of the second-language learning community is convinced that autonomous, student-centered classroom environments are the most productive for learning, there is very little guidance when it comes to actually creating them. As any beginning teacher can attest, the IRF is a handy tool to employ when confronted with students unfamiliar with student-centered, collaborative pedagogical approaches, and thus unwilling to “play along.” The IRF is safe and comforting because, in many ways, it is what is expected in classroom discourse by both teachers *and* students. It can therefore be disconcerting for them to attempt to move beyond the three-part sequence in favor of more autonomous communicative exchanges.



For the objectives of this study, I followed Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) description of the IRF (or sometimes the IRE, where E stands for *evaluation*) which consists of the teacher's *initiation*, a student's *response*, and the teacher's *feedback*. The teacher tends to ask questions he or she typically already knows the answers to and, as the authority figure, has the power to select themselves (self-select) and select individual students (other-select) during the exchanges. The IRF is seen largely as a means for teachers to reward students for saying what teachers want to hear, and students come to rely on the third part of the triadic sequence (the *feedback* or *evaluation*) for validation that they have performed as expected.

Explicit positive assessment (EPA), according to Waring (2008, 2009), is another rhetorical device teachers employ to reward students for providing correct answers to teacher prompts. Typical EPA's would include utterances such as "good," "excellent," and "perfect." These positive assessments can appear in the third part of the IRF, or following lengthier exchanges. Whenever they appear in a string of talk, they are meant to close a teacher/student exchange and signal that the teacher is ready to move on.

The purpose for conducting this study was to investigate how effective I was in creating a classroom environment where meaning could be negotiated autonomously, rather than through the standard teacher-fronted IRF and EPA structures so prevalent in EFL/ESL classroom settings. Optimally, students would negotiate meaning as much as possible themselves, and I, the teacher, would intervene only to facilitate the process. Reviewing the data, however, I can say that I was only partially successful in this endeavor. In this paper I will provide examples of where I resorted to familiar classroom discourse models, and also where I feel I was successful in facilitating collaborative learning by facilitating movement away from the IRF/EPA structures. Particularly interesting were instances where the stu-

dents initiated breaks from these structures themselves, which was surprising considering their preferred status in education-based institutional discourse.

Student autonomy and institutional discourse

It is widely believed among sociocultural theorists that at some point in the learning process, the learners' dependence on scaffolded, teacher-driven instruction (interdependence) should ultimately give way to self-sufficiency (independence) and ownership of the learning. Bruner refers to this deconstruction of the scaffold model as "handover" (cited in van Lier, 2001). Hennessey (2005) describes "fading" as the ultimate goal of the teacher: "Fading then involves a gradual abbreviation and withdrawal of help, and learner participation increases as independent thinking and skills are developed" (p. 267). The teacher's role should move away from the traditional "expert," associated with recitation and transmission models of teaching, and become one of "advising, structuring, guiding and assessing" learning (p. 268).

The push towards more autonomous, student-centered learning is a byproduct of the backlash against traditional classroom pedagogy, epitomized by overuse of the IRF script, and particularly in second language learning, of grammar translation and audio-lingual methods that limit self-directed output (see Barnes, 1992; Cazden, 1988; Ellis, 1990; Hall & Walsh, 2002; Zueingler & Bent, 1991). In these latter methods, emphasis is placed on a student's ability to copy or imitate the expert (teacher) at the expense of more complex cognitive, self-directed operations.

The concept of "agency," as described by Lantolf and Thorne (2006), denotes a student's freedom to perform a task or activity, while still being bound by "social groupings, material and symbolic resources, situational contingencies, and individual or group's capabilities, and so on" (p. 238). Therefore, while



students may be autonomous when performing tasks, they are still in some way restricted by the institutional context in how much actual autonomy they are afforded. According to Little (1997), "...in formal educational contexts as elsewhere learning can proceed only via interaction, so that the freedoms by which we recognize learner autonomy are always constrained by the learner's dependence on the support and cooperation with others" (p. 204).

Many cite Vygotskian theory as the rationale for collaborative learning, and in particular the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). It is in the ZPD where knowledge is developed, and this is inherently a social endeavor: The ZPD is "...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

The institutional nature of formal learning environments presupposes, and even reinforces, certain power-structure relationships. Teachers are granted "expert" status over students by nature of their position in the social hierarchy. The teacher is the "knower", and referee in classroom discussions, dictating who will speak and for how long (Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Thornborrow, 2002). Traditionally, turns are allocated and ended through the use of IRE/IRF sequences (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) initiated by the instructor. However, Waring (2009), asserts that strict adherence to IRF and EPA devices can actually stifle learning because they provide very little opportunity (or incentive) for students to explore alternative answers. When teachers orchestrate socio-cognitive learning environments, research suggests that content retention is enhanced (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Hennessy et al., 2005), but only in situations where the power to direct the content in the classroom is more evenly balanced between students and teachers.

Method

Context and participants

The participants in this study attended an intensive language institute in a liberal arts college in New York State. Students met for 18 hours a week for 15 weeks, and classes were divided into three subject areas of six hours each per week. Student ages ranged from 19 to 28, and there were 16 students present during the recording process. Native languages were broken down as follows: Chinese: 4; Korean: 8; Spanish: 2; Bulgarian: 1. There was one student who was fluent in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese having lived extensively in all three countries.

The subject of discussion during which the data was recorded dealt with the idea of "being green," and in particular how people might reduce their "carbon footprints." Students had just watched a video depicting clean, renewable energy sources including bio diesel cars (referred to as "grease cars"). Later the conversation develops from a question prompt in the accompanying text about whether or not New Yorkers were overly concerned with recycling, as evidenced by the requirement of the city to separate garbage into several categories for recycling.

Data collected

The subject area from which this data was taken was the "listening/ speaking" segment, which resulted in six hours of recorded video. The video camera was placed so that identifying which students made a particular utterance was easy to do. It also allowed for the capture of students' non-verbal communication, such as gesturing and emotive facial expressions. The video was reviewed for salient examples of teacher and student initiated discourse, and those segments were transcribed following standard CA transcribing methodology (Appendix 1). Under examination here are two segments (Appendices 2 and 3) recorded during one three-hour class period.



Findings

Reinforcing the IRF/EPA

Initially in the interaction, there were clear instances of IRF segments as illustrated in Data Segment One (see Appendix 2 for fuller transcript of this data segment). For example when reviewing a series of questions that the students had been discussing in groups, I began with a general initiation to the full class:

Data segment one [Typical IRF sequence]

- 01 T: Ok. Let's look at the second one. What can people do to reduce their
02 carbon footprints. Who can answer.
03 (3.0)
04 S1: Ahh.
05 T: → What steps can people take to reduce their carbon footprints.
06 (3.0)
07 S2: →Use bicycle or use public transportation.
08 T: Bi[cyc]
09 S2: [or w]alking
10 (1.8)
11 T: → Very good. Anybody else?

Student 1 attempts to self-select before I rephrase the question after which Student 2 offers her answer regarding how people could reduce their carbon footprints. In response, I provide a closing third in the form of an EPA, saying "very good," after which I elicit other students to respond, "anybody else?" These types of exchanges were quite prevalent in the data, particularly in the comprehension-check segment following the video

the class had watched. However, these open-ended questions, where I did not know the answer, initiated other kinds of talk that I was not expecting, in particular, output that was constructed collaboratively, rather than by the student selected to answer my question.

One example of this collaboration came immediately following the above sequence. Student 3 self-selects and begins to explain how wearing more clothes can result in reduced energy consumption:

Data segment one [First IRF resistance]

- 11 T: Very good. Anybody else?
12 (1.8)
13 S3: →Use long- long cloth.
14 (1.0)
15 T: Use long (1.0)
16 S3: Cloth.
17 (1.0) ((gestures long sleeves))
18 I mean=
19 T: =Long sleeve cl- shirts clothes.
20 S3: Yeah.
21 T: → Use more clothes. Why more clothes.
22 S3: →Because (.) my friend is going to say
23 ((laughter)) (1.8)

Through gestures, and following my repeated prompts for clarification, the student was successful in conveying his intended meaning (wearing more clothes), despite his limited vocabulary. However, while I understood the connection he was trying to make, I wanted the student to elaborate for the benefit of the



class, so I feigned ignorance and initiated a repair sequence IRF at line 21 (“why more clothes”). At this point the student withdraws from the preferred three-part sequence and nominates his discussion partner to answer my question. The laughter from the rest of the class is evidence that this was a breach of the preferred form in classroom discourse, and is the first clear example in the data of students resisting the standard teacher centered discourse model and collaborating in the construction of meaning. While this can be construed as “collaborative,” the nominated student was clearly not expecting it, as evidenced by the lengthy gaps preceding his response (see Appendix 2).

The sequences that followed in Data Segment One (as well as most of the data collected) were more standardized in terms of IRF/EPA construction, wherein I posed a question and facilitated a student’s response, which ultimately culminated in a closing third positive evaluation- most commonly a repeat or recast of a student response followed by “anybody else?”

Students taking control of the discourse

Data Segment Two contained a lengthy string of talk which perhaps best exemplifies the class’ attempts at collaborative construction of meaning (see Appendix 3 for fuller transcript of this data segment). The string contains over 100 turns, and of the 16 students present, 11 contribute to the string in some way. Though my contributions to the segment were most frequent, these utterances were mainly for clarification and facilitation: By withholding the EPA, and continually eliciting more information by feigning ignorance, the students continued the string well beyond what would have been possible in a typical three-part sequence. The string begins with my appeal for a student to self-select and respond to the question about whether their country was “overly concerned with recycling.” Several students respond in both the affirmative and negative. I decided to pursue Student 2, who answered in the affirmative:

Data segment two [Recycling food]

07 S2: Yes.
 08 T: Ok. Tell me- tell me why yes.
 09 (3.0)
 10 (): ()
 11 T: Who said yes?
 12 (0.1)
 13 T:→ Nicky? Ok. >>tell me why.<<
 14 S2: →In my country (0.1) A:h.(0.5) Food.
 15 (0.8)
 16 T: → FOOD?

Student 2 appears to say that in her country, Korea, they recycle food. This response was for me, as well as many students in the class, a bit of a surprise and so I initiate a repair sequence at line 16. This only leads to further confusion, as the student attempts to clarify that eggshells and orange peels cannot be thrown away with other food. My role here was to facilitate her own repair by asking clarification questions, but it became increasingly clear to the other students, and in particular the other Korean students who understood the meaning that she was attempting to convey, that she was having difficulty. At lines 28, 33, 41 and 42 other Korean students begin to self-select in order to help Student 2:

Data segment two [Students offering help]

24 T: Food [so-
 25 S2: [Yeah.]
 26 T: So-like bre:ad.
 27 S2: Ah no.



28 S3: →Every food.
 29 T: Eh- so I don't know- do you put the food
 together or you separate the
 30 food?
 31 S2: Separate.
 32 S3: Fruits.
 33 S4: →Sepu- not separate food- ah. Already used
 (.) eaten food and just (.)
 34 garbage prepare own- ((gestures separating
 [hands]))
 35 T: [A:::h] So for example wasted
 36 food-
 extra food- you didn't eat the food.
 You put it (0.5) and then paper
 37 garbage.
 38 (0.1)
 39 You separate the eggshells?
 40 S2: [Some,]
 41 S5: →[some] Some food is separate.
 42 S6: →Umm. ((nods head in the affirmative))

While Student 2 maintains her role as the main respondent, as evidenced by her number of turns, other students break from the preferred institutional organizational sequence wherein only the student called upon by the teacher should hold the floor. This breach was deemed necessary because it appeared that I and several other students were not grasping the meaning Student 2 was attempting to convey, and there were other “knowers” in the classroom who felt they could facilitate our understanding.

Despite the contributions from several other students, there remained much confusion over what exactly the Korean recy-

cling system requires, seeming as though eggshells and orange peels are removed from food waste to be recycled separately. This seemingly overzealous requirement prompted Student 7, a Bulgarian, to ask the Korean students rhetorically, “You’re crazy?” in line 57 (see Appendix 3), and my statement that “That’s very very confusing” at line 58 (see Appendix 3).

Several students make unprompted comments (self-select), and one asks Student 2, a direct question, “Where are you from?” (line 67, Appendix 3). This leads to comments indicating that such a system seems draconian due to the fact that people can be fined for not complying. At line 83 I pose an open question to the class as a whole: “Does that sound overly concerned?” My goal was to bring the discussion full circle by having the class consider the original question that started this sequence. In response to this open-ended IRF, Student 9, who had remained silent through the preceding exchanges, speaks up at line 85 and clarifies everything:

Data segment two [Meaning made clear]

83 T: → Does that sound overly concerned?
 84 S1: Ye::s.
 85 S9: →I think because the food is for pig or
 animal.
 86 ALL: O:::h
 87 S2: →Yeah, yeah.
 89 S10: ()
 90 ALL: ((Laughter))
 91 T: So pigs can't eat-
 92 S10: Ah, I didn't understand=
 93 T: =Eggshells a:nd- so the other food they give
 to pigs.



- 94 S1: Ye:s.
 95 S6: Yeah.
 96 T: ↑Tha:t makes sense.

At this revelation, all the students in the class come to understand what Student 2 and several other students were attempting to explain for over 100 turns, namely, that in Korea food is recycled to feed to animals. The placement of Student 9's turn came in place of where a teacher's closing third part would normally appear, indicating that her comment was not intended to orient to me, but to address the other students. Ironically, Student 9 is not even from Korea, but rather from Taiwan, where they have a similar recycling system. At line 105, all the students involved in the sequence to this point provided the second part response to a question I posed only to Student Two (the student whose response initiated the string in the first place), "So pigs eat your garbage." Finally, Student 10, who is from Colombia, seemed particularly relieved to understand, vocalizing the sentiment of the class as well as providing the closing EPA for the entire 100+ line sequence ("Great") which should normally have come from the teacher:

Data segment two [Student's EPA]

- 104 T: → So pigs eat your garbage.
 105 ALL→ Yes.
 106 S10: →Gre::at.

Discussion

According to Vygotskian theorists, learning opportunities are enhanced in the Zone of Proximal Development, or the exact place where learning through cooperation and negotiation with more capable peers is possible. In the segments of talk

transcribed above, students and the teacher identified the ZPD, and worked together to cooperatively orchestrate comprehensible output; however, in order to affectively do so, students consistently broke with hierarchical classroom protocol. In Data Segment One, Student 3 took it upon himself to select the next speaker, and in so doing forced Student 4 to participate in the discussion, despite his comparatively limited capacity to do so. For my part, I allowed, and therefore encouraged this ad-hoc turn sequence by orientating to Student 4, and guiding him through an explanation of what he and Student 3 had discussed privately in their discussion group.

In Data Segment Two, 11 students interjected themselves into what was essentially an exchange between Student 2 and me. However, had none of these "breaches" occurred, the language production of the segment would have been stifled and static and opportunities for participation and learning diminished. A strict adherence to IRF/EPA sequence orientation certainly has operational benefits, particularly when dealing with time constraints or checking comprehension of individual lexical items where there is but a single possible answer. However, in full-class discussions, where a teacher can only predict possible answers, such as those presented here, closed turn-taking constructions might be impractical, particularly if there are students more comfortable with self-initiated turn-taking. The difficulty arises when teachers might desire more student-directed involvement, but have little experience in encouraging and fostering such an environment (or controlling it for that matter).

Conclusion

The collaborative exchanges presented here were facilitated not only by my continual prompts for further explanation, but equally by active student involvement in achieving comprehensible output. Despite my attempts to focus on one respondent at a time, students took it upon themselves to reorganize the



teacher-centered paradigm and self-select, select-next and other-initiate, other-repair turns. In this way, students were able to autonomously engage the lesson content and co-create meaning. I could have easily discourage this behavior by asking students to “hold on” while I let Student 2, for example, self-repair until her meaning was clear (Data Segment 2, Appendix 3). To be perfectly honest, I knew what she was getting at from the outset, but had I immediately repaired her unclear utterance by, for example, recasting it as “Oh, you recycle *food* because it is given to farm animals, right?”, the segment, as well as the other students’ opportunity to create and discover meaning, would have been closed-down. By refraining from this, I was able to create an environment where other students felt an imperative need to take unsolicited turns and co-create the meaning necessary for everyone to understand, including their teacher.

A teacher’s feigning ignorance in order to encourage participation is nothing new, but I was unprepared for the extent to which students would go to co-create comprehensible output. The types of turn-taking that ensued could only have been possible in a learning environment that encouraged such “dispreferred” participation. A teacher has to walk a fine line here, lest the turn taking become unmanageable, and there are clearly times when such ad-hoc participation is not desirable. However, there is an undeniable satisfaction for the teacher (and the students) when the teacher and the class as a whole can work to engage the lesson content and related language in order to achieve understanding together.

Bio data

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Appendix I

CA transcription symbols

.	(period) Falling intonation.
?	(question mark) Rising intonation.
,	(comma) Continuing intonation.
-	(hyphen) Marks an abrupt cut-off.
::	(colon(s)) Prolonging of sound.
wo:rd	(colon after underlined letter) Falling intonation on word.
wo:rd	(underlined colon) Rising intonation on word.
<u>word</u>	(underlining)
<u>word</u>	The more underlying, the greater the stress.
WORD	(all caps) Loud speech.
°word°	(degree symbols) Quiet speech.
↑word	(upward arrow) raised pitch.
↓word	(downward arrow) lowered pitch
>>word<<	(more than and less than) Quicker speech.
<<word>>	(less than & more than) Slowed speech.
<	(less than) Talk is jump-started—starting with a rush.
hh	(series of h's) Aspiration or laughter.
.hh	(h's preceded by dot) Inhalation.

[]	(brackets)
[]	simultaneous or overlapping speech.
=	(equal sign) Latch or contiguous utterances of the same speaker.
(2.4)	(number in parentheses) Length of a silence in 10ths of a second
(.)	(period in parentheses) Micro-pause, 0.2 second or less.
()	(empty parentheses) Non-transcribable segment of talk.
((gazing toward the ceiling))	(double parentheses) Description of non-speech activity.
(try 1)/(try 2)	(two parentheses separated by a slash) Alternative hearings.
\$word\$	(dollar signs) Smiley voice.
#word#	(number signs) Squeaky voice.

Appendices 2 & 3

For full transcriptions of Data Segments Two and Three, please see <<http://tinyurl.com/3g3ok3d>>.

