

The Structure of L2 Classroom Interaction

One of the most important features of all classroom discourse is that it follows a fairly typical and predictable structure, comprising three parts: a teacher **I**nitiation, a student **R**esponse, and a teacher **F**eedback, commonly known as **IRF**, or **IRE**: Initiation, Response, Feedback/Evaluation. IRE is preferred by some writers and practitioners to reflect the fact that, most of the time, teachers' feedback is an evaluation of a student's contribution. Teachers are constantly assessing the correctness of an utterance and giving feedback to learners.

This three-part structure was first put forward by Sinclair and Coulthard in 1975 and is known as the IRF exchange structure. The work of Sinclair and Coulthard had a huge impact on our understandings of the ways in which teachers and learners communicate, and it led to many advances in the field. IRF is also known as a *recitation script* or *tryadic structure*. (*Tryadic* simply refers to the fact that each exchange is made up of three moves: typically a question, a response, and then follow-up.)

Look at Extract 7.

Extract 7

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|---|-----|---|----------|
| 1 | T: | So , can you read question two, Junya. | I |
| 2 | L1: | (Reading from book) Where was Sabina when this happened? | R |
| 3 | T: | Right, yes, where was Sabina. | F |
| 4 | | In Unit 10, where was she? | I |
| 5 | L1: | Er, go out ... | R |
| 6 | T: | She went out, yes. | F |

In Extract 7, we can see how the teacher opens the exchange and marks a new phase of activity with the discourse marker “so,” which is typical of all teacher-learner interaction and occurs very frequently in classrooms all around the world. This opening remark, or initiation (I), leads to the question in line 1, which prompts the student response [R] in line 2. In line 3, we see how the teacher offers feedback (F) to what the learner has said (“Right, yes”). Feedback is an important feature of the three-part exchange because it allows learners to see whether their response has been accepted or not. Frequently, feedback entails some kind of evaluation, such as *good, right, ok*.

In line 3, the cycle begins again, with the next initiation (“where was Sabina when this happened?”), which is then clarified in line 4 (“in unit 10, where was she?”). In line 5, we see the learner’s grammatically incorrect response (“she go out”), followed in line 6 by the teacher’s feedback and correction. This second IRF sequence follows very logically from the first and was probably followed by a third. Based on this very brief extract, we can make a number of observations about IRF, the most commonly occurring exchange structure in any classroom:

- It enables us to understand the special nature of classroom interaction.
- It enables us to understand why teachers talk so much more than learners: For every utterance made by a learner (R), teachers typically make two (I, F).
- It allows us to see how, if overused, classroom interaction can become very mechanical, even monotonous. Teachers need to be aware of this.
- While the IRF sequence is both commonly found and appropriate at certain times, there are other types of exchange that are more desirable and useful to learning. We’ll come back to this point later.

Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) original work took place in L1 primary classes. Based on recordings of teachers and pupils interacting in class, they produced a hierarchical model for understanding classroom discourse. They found that there were three basic kinds of exchange:

1. question-and-answer sequences
2. pupils responding to teachers' directions
3. pupils listening to the teacher giving information

While it is true to say that conversations outside the classroom frequently have a three-part structure, speakers do not usually evaluate one another's performances. Just imagine how your friends or family members would feel if you were to evaluate their remarks all the time! Extract 8 is an example of a typical real-world exchange.

Extract 8

- | | | | |
|---|----|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | A: | What's the last day of the month? | I |
| 2 | B: | Friday. | R |
| 3 | A: | Friday. We'll invoice you on Friday. | F/I |
| 4 | B: | That would be brilliant. | R |
| 5 | A: | And fax it over to you. | I |
| 6 | B: | Er, well I'll come and get it. | R |
| 7 | A: | Okay. | F |

In Extract 8, a business encounter, the interaction is opened by A in Line 1 with a question (I). B's response in line 2 is then confirmed by A in line 3 (F), followed by a second initiation by A ('we'll invoice you on Friday'). Note how this second initiation is not a question, but still requires some kind of a response, which B gives in line 4. Note, too, how, in everyday communication, the feedback move is optional. B's response in line 4 is followed by another initiation by A in line 5. (Although, it is also true to say that feedback does not always occur in classrooms, it is far more prevalent than in everyday exchanges outside the classroom. That is, most responses by learners receive some kind of feedback from the teacher). Going back to Extract 8, we see how the exchange concludes with a third tryadic exchange in lines 5–7, comprising an initiation by A (5), a response by B (6), and feedback by A (7).

In everyday settings, then, even the most simple, ordinary encounter such as a question and response often has three parts to it, and not two as people often think. It is also interesting to note that in the world outside the classroom, responses and follow-ups are not usually reactions to test-questions (speaker A is not testing speaker B on what

day it is, unlike the teacher, above, who was testing the learners' understanding), but show that the speakers have understood one another, and are satisfied with the way the interaction is progressing (*Friday/ that would be brilliant/ okay*).

For language teachers, understanding the structure of classroom interaction is very important because we teach discourse *through* discourse with our learners. This is another way of saying that in many parts of the world, the main exposure to the foreign language being taught is in the classroom itself, via the teacher. A number of studies have compared the discourse of the classroom with “real” communication (e.g., Nunan, 1987). But as van Lier (1988) says, “the classroom is part of the real world, just as much as the airport, the interviewing room, the chemical laboratory, the beach and so on” (p. 267).

From this brief introduction to the exchange structure of classrooms, we can make a number of important observations:

- All classroom discourse is goal-oriented. The responsibility for establishing goals and setting the agenda lies largely with the teacher. Pedagogic goals and the language used to achieve them are very closely related, even intertwined.
- The prime responsibility for what is said in the classroom lies with the teacher. Teachers control the discourse through the special power and authority they have, but also through their control of the discourse. They control who may speak and when, for how long, and on what topic. They control turn-taking through the use of IRF; not only do they initiate a response, they offer an evaluation—further evidence of control.
- Learners take their cues from the teacher and rarely initiate a response. Their role, one which they are socialised into from a very early age, is to answer questions, respond to prompts, and so on.
- The IRF sequence enables us to understand interaction in the classroom, and comprehend its special nature. An awareness of IRF enables us to consider how we might vary interaction more and introduce alternative types of sequence.

- An understanding of the IRF sequence enables us to model spoken language in the world outside the classroom, suggesting ways of constructing dialogues for teaching, role-plays for practicing conversation, and so on.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

Think about your own teaching or classrooms where you have been a student.

- To what extent is interaction controlled by the use of IRF?
- How might you vary the interaction by using alternative types of interaction?