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## The Relationship between Teachers' Interaction Strategies and Student Oral Involvement

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A great deal of research has indicated that learners' active involvement in communication and interaction in their target language is essential during the learning process as modern language pedagogy specifically aims to enable learners to naturally communicate in their target language, thus speaking plays an increasingly important role in language learning. This is in line with Skehan (1989, cited in Zarrinabadi, 2014) who argues that learners' active speech in the target language is fundamental to achieve L2/FL (Foreign Language) proficiency; therefore, the learning process should place more emphasis on how to utilize classroom tasks largely to encourage students to demonstrate their linguistic competence within conversations. A lack of opportunities provided for learners to speak may cause them to remain as 'mute' language users regardless of the extensive linguistic input they have received. Moreover, much of the research into oral activities and teachers' strategies for supporting shy students in school has taken the form of inferences from findings that are based upon correlational data with large samples of students rather than detailed examination of teachers' strategies or evaluation of their effectiveness. For example, see Coplan and Rudasill (2016) for an account of suggested strategies based upon empirical research into students' shyness. It's in the same vein as Robinson and Seimon (2020) who indicated the factors triggering learners' oral ability, which are prone to linguistic difficulties and hardly mentioned factors related to teachers' strategies. At the context at the center for languages where the researcher works, some teachers deliberately or not, create opportunities for learner involvement since their strategies and pedagogic purposes coincide with each other. Sometimes, in an EFL classroom, however, the teacher does not know how to facilitate student involvement by constructing a context in which students are involved. Some teachers appear to impede interaction and obstruct student involvement. Therefore, they cannot maximize learner involvement which is conducive to foreign language acquisition.

In fact, there are some research on Chinese students' oral involvement in ELT(English Language Teaching)/ ESL(English as a Second Language)/ English language classes (Chen, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2001, 2002). It has been found that a common problem classrooms EFL teachers usually face is reticence, especially in those with Asian students. Besides, the previous studies just focused on "Teacher-Student Interaction, peer interaction, teacher talk, or barriers of students' oral involvement". Nguyen (2002) mentions Vietnamese learners prefer being quiet in class and carefully taking notes to participating in classroom interaction; being talkative is not Vietnamese culture. Likewise, Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, and Pilot (2006) assert that in Vietnamese classes "the teacher is considered to be a guru who is supposed to satisfy learners in the search for the truth (in knowledge) and virtues (in life)" (p.5). Whatever the teacher presents will be considered as true

and correct. Thus, being quiet is a way to show students' respect for teachers. Moreover, Nguyen (2018) conducted research that was based on cultural identity, power distance, and collectivists' culture of teaching and learning as conceptual frameworks. They found that factors of reticence occurred in classes of students majoring in English at a University, and in particular, students need to overcome cultural inhibition or shyness about speaking up in class. In conclusion, although a number of prior studies have made a significant contribution to understanding Vietnamese students' reticence, especially withdrawing underlying reasons for this, the ways to aid students in overcoming these factors are still a question. Hence, the present study is carried out in the hope that it can provide not only specific empirical findings for the relationship between teacher interaction strategy and students' oral involvement but also information that will be valuable to an educational learning community.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Teacher interaction strategies**

Interaction strategy often refers to the technique the teacher intentionally uses in interaction with their students. This involves the type of interaction the teacher utilizes to engage with the learner(s), the length of time of that engagement, the type of input she/he provides in that interaction and the intervention or non-intervention she/he provides in particular interaction. Generally, three types of teacher interaction strategies can be identified in an ESL/EFL classroom as follows:

#### **2.1.1 Teacher-fronted interaction**

Lee and Ng (2010) asserted that teacher-fronted interaction strategy is an interaction device, frequently used by the teacher as a controlled and structured manner to interact with learners. This is often when the teacher has to work with big classes and directs questions to the whole class at the same time. When not carefully used, the teacher may adopt non-communicative, display questions and talk nearly all the time in class to initiate the teacher–student exchanges, which results in a teacher-dominated, inflexible, and restricted interaction pattern. In this sense, teacher-fronted interaction is very much similar to the IRF pattern (teacher initiation/student response / teacher follow-up) that is associated with a teacher-centered classroom methodology, pedagogically oriented lessons, and teacher-fronted activities. The following is an example of the teacher-dominated IRF interaction pattern induced by this strategy.

Example 1

Purpose: checking understanding of vocabulary.

Teacher What's it? (teacher initiation—a display question)

Student A projector. (learner response—a short reply)

Teacher Great! a projector. (teacher follow-up—comment)

(Author's data)

### **2.1.2 Facilitator-oriented interaction**

Lee and Ng (2010) indicated that the facilitator-fronted strategy was the best selection for the teachers to facilitate spoken interaction via the personalization of topic matter. Students were also more inclined to use referential questions relevant to other students and themselves, reformulation of personal utterances, elaboration of self-referential content, commentary of a personal nature, and the repetition of subjective points. Teachers using the facilitator-fronted strategy tend to impose longer wait times for student responses, thus allowing reticent students more time to formulate responses. Garton (2002) asserted that EFL teachers using the preferred facilitator-fronted strategy to teach speaking were able to break free of the obvious constraints of the IRF interaction pattern. The example below illustrates this idea.

Example 2

Purpose: teaching past tense.

Teacher How did you spend your Tet holiday? (Initiating move—use of a referential question)

Student mm .... (Pause for more than three seconds) ... not funny ... I sleep and eat every day. (Response move—expressing opinions)

Teacher Oh, no. Your holiday was not boring. You slept the whole day. (Follow-up move—reformulation to show correct expression + showing sympathy)

Teacher Why didn't you hang out? (Initiating move—asking another referential question to create a rapport with the student)

Student I had no money and girlfriend. (The whole class laughs.) (Response move—expressing opinions)

(Author's data)

### **2.1.3 Learner-oriented interaction**

Learner-oriented interaction is an interaction strategy used by the teacher as a hands-off interaction device giving the learners multiple chances to speak in the classroom, which is known as student-student interaction. The total interaction in class seems to be initiated by the learner. This strategy is said to be able to benefit passive or uncommunicative learners as their motivation to take part in may go up since they can support and negotiate the meaning they are engaged in with their partner (Kennedy, 1996, cited in Garrett and Shortall 2002). O'Neill (1991), however, cautions that some students view self-learning as a form of teacher neglect. Thus, in order to make sure that learners can engage comfortably and confidently in a student-

student interaction, a facilitator-oriented strategy can be used to scaffold learners throughout their interaction process. The following example illustrates how a facilitator-oriented strategy complements the learner-oriented strategy to help students with a low-proficiency learner, to participate in the discussion.

### Example 3

Purpose: practicing groupwork skills.

Teacher Work in groups of three, and discuss what's your favorite sport and give reasons for your choice. (Task setting by a teacher)

Student 1 My favorite sport is soccer ... but I cannot play it well.  
(Expressing opinions)

Student 2 How often do you practice it? (Asking for information)

Student 1 Not much... um ... I don't have time. (Giving information)

Student 2 Do you like e-sport? (Asking for more information)

Student 1 Laughing ... Yes, yes...I love it too much.

[Student 3 keeps quiet and does not participate, and so the teacher intervenes]

Teacher (Uses body language to signal she is going to intervene—facilitator-oriented strategy) ... Tuan, What about you? Do you like soccer?

Student 3 (Looks very shy) ... mum ... (shakes his head)

Teacher Alright! ... You mean you don't like soccer? (Says in a slow pace—confirming)

Student 3 (Shakes his head) ... don't like soccer. (Imitates the teacher's speaking)

Student 2 How come?

Student 3 ... (immediately pause and think) ... I like swimming.  
(Expresses opinion)

Teacher Ah... You like swimming more than soccer. Is it right?  
(Confirming and reformulating the expression)

Student 3 Yeah ... yeah ... (looks very happy)

(Author's data)

## **2.2 Learner role in each type of interaction strategy**

### **2.2.1. Learner role in Teacher-fronted interaction**

In the case of teacher-fronted interaction, several researchers who have used in-class observations to study elementary and secondary education classrooms in the western world. In particular, Mehan (1979) & Coulthard (1975) have documented a common instructional pattern applied by most of the teacher, “IRF” pattern, where ‘I’ represents an initiating move, usually a question posed by the teacher; ‘R’ stands for the response, normally a short and simple response from student(s) and ‘F’ stands for follow-up or feedback from the teacher. Due to using this pattern, the learners’ role in teacher-fronted interaction seems to be passive, they do not have any opportunities to initiate a conversation, because the teacher talks most of the time and initiates most of teacher-student exchanges by non-communicative display question resulting in obstructing student involvement as well as restricting learner involvement which is conducive to foreign language acquisition. In spite of the existing drawbacks in IRF pattern, it is certain that teachers frequently apply this mode as it seems to be a powerful pedagogical device for transmitting and conducting knowledge (Cullen, 2002).

### **2.2.2 Learner role in Facilitator-oriented interaction**

According to the study by Lee and Ng (2009), in facilitator-oriented interaction, when interacting with the students, the teachers apply a more “let-go” and “meaning-focused” approach that breaks from the interaction IRF, and creates more opportunities for the learner to participate in giving the speech or greater participation rights. If IRF mode in teacher-fronted interaction is considered as a pattern to cut down the role of learners in the classroom, it is obvious that the approach adopted by the teachers in facilitator-oriented interaction is better. It is facile to find that the teachers use referential questions and prolong the waiting time, the right of turn allocation comes back to the students. Therefore, learners are empowered to take more initiative and responsibility for learning.

### **2.2.3. Learner role in Learner-oriented interaction**

While the learner role in teacher-fronted interaction seems to be restricted due to a majority of the time being focused on teacher-dominated interaction, it is apparent that learner role in learner-oriented interaction is considered as the most concentrated. In this type of interaction, the learners have full opportunity to give a speech in the classroom, the whole interaction in the classroom is mainly learner initiated, the teacher will not intervene apart from when the students face difficulties. The role of the learner in this kind of interaction becomes more active, due to support from the peer in negotiation of meaning they are engaged in, the learner is able to break the passive as well as the shyness in speaking.

Learner-oriented interaction can be considered as learner-centered classrooms, which means students are directly involved and invested in the discovery of their own knowledge. Through collaboration and cooperation with others, students engage in experiential learning that is authentic, holistic,

and challenging. Students are empowered to use prior knowledge to construct new learning.

### **3. METHODS AND RESULTS**

#### **Research questions**

This current study is specifically aimed at investigating not only the teacher interaction strategies used in speaking class but also the extent to which students are involved orally in response to these strategies. This study is expected to find out the relationship between EFL teacher interaction strategies and student oral involvement. Moreover, it is expected that the result of this study will contribute ways to improve the learners' oral involvement in a language class, create increased motivation and make a significant change in the way of teaching English in the EFL context.

The present study attempts to address the following questions:

1. Which teacher interaction strategies are used in speaking tasks?
2. To what extent are students involved orally in response to these strategies?

#### **Research methodology**

##### *Research design*

The present study is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach. The research instruments used in this study consist of audio-recording and observation of English language classes. To collect qualitative data, the researcher used audio-recording and class observation to investigate the interaction strategies teachers used in the classroom based on the theoretical framework of Lee and Ng (2010) which was mentioned in part 2, and the extent to which student oral involvement changed in response to these strategies.

##### *Participants*

For the purposes of the study, the subjects involved in this study were five EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers at a language center, four female teachers, and one male teacher, and their communication classes. Each class included from twenty-five students to thirty students and lasted for eight weeks (one hour and a half/ session). The participants involved in the present study were selected randomly. In terms of the teachers, their ages varied from 26 to 32, and all of them received a MA degree in TESOL. In regard to the students, their English knowledge was assumed to be at the elementary level (which was identified by placement tests) and they had similar needs as learners. The students were non-English majors, between 16 to 21 years old. Neither the teachers nor the students were given any information about the research design. They were simply told that the lessons will be audiotaped and observed by a visitor. Each teacher was observed for four 45-minute lessons.

##### *Data collection procedure*

The procedure of data collection for this study was carried out within five consecutive weeks. The data gained in this paper were qualitative in nature. All of the data collected would be analyzed based on the framework of Lee and Ng (2010) mentioned in Section 2, and the principles of Conversation Analysis (CA). CA is used to collect data of interactions happening naturally when they do not cover in real-time through video-recording or audio-recording technology. In the current study, the researcher initiated making audio-recording of naturally occurring talk. Next, all recorded lessons were transcribed verbatim. Then, the transcriptions were re-read. After that, it is combined with observation and eventually analyzed by the researcher. In the realm of the second question, the researcher did pay much attention to transcribing speaking lessons and observation in order to know the students' responses to interaction strategies the teacher adopted in the classroom.

### **Findings**

#### *4.1. Types and uses of teacher interaction strategies used in class and their impact on student oral involvement*

The five teachers involved in this study adopted several interaction strategies. Nevertheless, the current study investigated three common teacher interaction strategies, namely teacher-fronted interaction, learner-oriented interaction, and facilitator-oriented interaction as identified by Lee and Ng (2010). Data were also analyzed to find out the effects of interactions on student oral involvement.

##### *4.1.1. Teacher-fronted strategy*

This strategy is adopted ubiquitously among teachers. Hence, all of the teachers in this study were no exception; these teachers used this strategy for different purposes and periods. In other words, while some of them used it as a way to connect the lesson, the others used it as a warm-up activity. This kind of strategy involves three general steps: IRF- teacher initiates the questions, students respond to them as a class and teacher gives feedback in the forms of correction, acceptance, or rejection of students' answers. When the students' responses were outside the teacher's intention, the teacher tried to guide the students back to the topic she wanted (see Extract 1 as an example).

#### **Extract 1:**

(The teacher elicited the pictures)

*T1: What type of book is in the first picture?*

*The whole class: Comic.*

*T1: Exactly. What about the second picture?*

*The whole class: love books.*

*T1: Yes, it's romance. And how about the last picture?*

*The whole class: love books.*

*S1: Like “50 SẮC THÁI” (the whole class started laughing and making fun of his ideas)*

*T1: Alright! Thanks so much for your sharing, but you are allowed to watch that movie when you are 18 plus), and now today I will show you something about films.*

In addition to introducing a new topic or attracting students' attention, the teacher also employed it as a way to check students' understanding and remind them of the previously taught subject. The second teacher used a teacher-fronted strategy as a “warm-up” activity.

**Extract 5:**

*T2: Ok, before we start the new lesson, I will give you some vocabulary about sport, let's talk about sport*

*Ok, stand up please. Now, each of you will tell me one kind of sport, give me the correct answer, you can have a seat, but don't copy your friend's answer.*

*S1: Tennis*

*T2: Good*

*S2: Soccer*

*T2: Good*

*S3: Volleyball*

*T2: Good.....*

The students' participation opportunities when the five teachers use teacher-fronted strategies were very limited since most of the teacher-student interactions were teacher-dominated. It is this approach that is known as IRF sequences, which are related to the episodes of teacher-whole-class interaction, therefore the students' role in this strategy seems to be passive, they have no chances to speak. Additionally, the kinds of questions the teachers used also trigger obstruction of student oral involvement because the teacher posed the questions to interact with students in a structured and controlled manner.

In summary, the teachers used a teacher-fronted strategy via varied activities at the first stage of lessons with the aim of initiating new topics and drawing students' attention. More importantly, this strategy completely met teachers' expectations. Even though it partly engaged students orally, the students' role was still blurred. In other words, students played a role as passive learners as teachers initiate most of the teacher-student exchanges.

#### 4.1.2. Facilitator-oriented strategy

From the analysis of lesson transcripts from audio recordings and observation, all five teachers in the study employed the facilitator-oriented strategy in their teaching time. Despite the dominant use of a teacher-fronted strategy, the teachers put great efforts into making good use of the facilitator-oriented strategy whenever possible. The common point of these teachers who applied this strategy is that five of them requested students to elicit the picture.

#### **Extract 2:**

(The teacher elicited the picture)

*T3: Look at the photo, where is he?*

*Is he in a car?*

*Ss: No,*

*T3: Is he in a bus?*

*Ss: No*

*T3: Oh! you don't think so? Where is exactly the man in the picture? (to a student)*

*S1: I don't know. (shyly)*

*T3: No worries! Can you help him? (to another student)*

*S2: in a plane.*

*T3: Yes, he's in a special station like a plane.*

In **Extract 2**, the teacher encouraged the student to find out the answer via posing several yes-no questions, and then the teacher used the correction strategy to correct the students and thus provided the class with a model of correct usage without interrupting the flow of discourse the teacher is developing in the class. In other words, the teacher's purpose is to use reformulation to show correct expression and sympathy.

In addition, while adopting this strategy, the teacher mostly used referential questions to tap students' imagination towards the topic to create meaningful dialogues with students (see Extract 6).

#### **Extract 6:**

*T4: Where is the man? (To student 1)*

*S1: London*

*T4: He's in London, but is he in the coffee shop?*

*The whole class: No, in the office.*

*T4: Great! What else can you see from the picture? (Waiting about 3 seconds)*

The class kept silent

*T4: Why do you think the man is upset? (Waiting about 3 seconds)*

*The whole class: kept silent*

*T4: Because he is stressed, right?*

Nonetheless, through the researcher's observation, it was obvious that no students voluntarily gave the answers. A possible rationale was that the teacher did not offer a waiting time long enough for answers from students, and he/ she continuously posed questions instead. If the teacher gave more time for students to throw out the answers, the results might be different. From the above-analyzed dialogues, although this strategy is expected to help build teachers-students interaction, the teacher needs to make a flexible and appropriate decision about using questioning techniques and time factor to achieve objectives about pedagogy and communication.

#### *4.1.3. Learner-oriented strategy*

All of the teachers recorded in the study adopted a learner-oriented strategy during their teaching time via making a presentation or discussing the topic given. The learner-oriented strategy, which is manifested in groupwork (including pair work) and presentation, has been widely used in EFL classes due to the shift of "teaching discrete aspects of language, such as grammar and vocabulary, to developing students' communicative competence" (Fushino, 2010, p.700). See below for the transcription of how a teacher employed this strategy.

#### **Extract 3:**

*T5: I'll divide class into groups of three, and each group will discuss about the potential happenings of the story. Ok, let's go. (Teacher divided groups randomly)*

*S1: I think the man will say sorry to her. And you?*

*S2&S3: Keep silent.*

*T5: Linh (to student 2) what do you think? What will the man do?*

*S2: Uhm... (look a little bit shy) ..Uhm..*

*S1: And they can get married. (look excited to talk more and get a little bothersome with the others two students...)*

*T5: Great! Maybe (tap the shoulder of student 1). So, Linh and Dang (S3), do you think so?*

*S2 & S3: Yes. (Nodding their heads)*

It was apparent that unlike student 1, who actively participated in this task, students 2 and 3 remained silent. To elicit opinions from students 2 and 3, the teacher used a facilitator-oriented strategy to break the ice. It seemed

that the teacher using this strategy partly got students involved in the discussion, and calmed student 1 down by using a backchannel “tapping his shoulder”. Nevertheless, it did not gain success as they might have expected. For instance, student 2 and student 3 could not express their opinions completely. Through the researcher’s observation, the probable reason for this is the way the teacher chose the group member for each group. It’s better when teachers can permit students to choose their partners or at least the teachers can base on their understandings and observation to adjust members in groups appropriately. Due to the mistakes of the teachers in the process of employing learner-oriented strategy, the students did not take the opportunity to speak. Besides, the passive and reticent students received few benefits from this strategy. Their motivation to participate was low because they hardly had peer support and lacked negotiation of meaning.

#### 4.2. *The frequency of teacher interaction strategies*

The three types of teacher interaction strategies were adopted by all teachers. Nonetheless, the aims and periods the teachers applied them were different. In addition, the frequency of using these strategies of the teachers is various. Table 1 shows the number of times the teachers used interaction strategies in 20 lessons in total.

**Table 1. The frequency of used teacher interaction strategies**

<b>Class</b>	<b>Interaction strategies</b>	<b>Number of occurrences</b>
1,2,3,4,5	Teacher-fronted strategy	105
1,2,3,4,5	Facilitator-oriented strategy	85
1,2,3,4,5	Learner-oriented strategy	30

The above results also reveal that the teacher-fronted strategy was used most frequently. There were two reasons resulting for this. To begin with, all of the teachers deemed that applying this strategy would accomplish the pedagogical goals of the lessons. Moreover, the teachers recorded in this study claimed that using a teacher-fronted strategy could promote students’ active involvement by using games, realia, and audio-visual media.

In terms of the lowest number of occurrences which is learner-oriented strategy. The reason for this is that the learner-directed classroom interaction pattern known as student-student interaction is a typical pattern in a learner-oriented strategy, and this type of strategy is used mostly at the middle-stage and post-stage of lessons and depends on taught skills. While the students had discussions to perform a task, the teachers played the role as facilitators who would intervene when students had difficulties. Furthermore, the facilitator-oriented strategy should be combined with the learner-oriented strategy to help

promote participation and avoid group conflicts in a group. Nonetheless, there are a variety of obstacles occurring. First, most of the students frequently used L1 (i.e. Vietnamese) instead of L2 (i.e. English) in their discussion. Next, they also took advantage of group work to gossip about irrelevant topics whereas teachers hardly move around to handle the issue. This is evidently seen during the researcher's observation. In addition, the classes sizes involved in this study are crowded and the teachers' teaching time is restricted. Therefore, the teachers did not have enough time to give sufficient support for all students – a facilitator-oriented strategy to each group.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

All three of the teacher interaction strategies were found in classrooms, yet the purposes and periods of using these strategies were not similar. Additionally, the frequency of using these strategies had a remarkable disparity. While the number of times the teachers' employing the teacher-fronted strategy was the highest, the lowest belonged to learner-oriented strategy. The extent to which the students are involved orally in response to this strategy in the first kind of strategy, that is teacher-fronted strategy were restricted as most of the teacher-student interactions were teacher-directed . On the contrary, participation chances were open to students in the other strategy, which was learner-centered. More importantly, learner-oriented strategy becomes effective for students' oral involvement only when it is combined with facilitator-oriented strategy. It is suggested that there be an interrelationship between them.

In general, even though this research is in the same vein as the Lee and Ng (2010) which shows teacher strategy can mainly trigger students' willingness to communicate in classrooms as well as lesson objectives and task type; this study also figures out other factors impacting a teacher's decision on the use of interaction strategy(ies) such as activities used, classroom management and the proficiency level of the students. In other words, activities from teacher 1 to teacher 4 is mainly teacher-led class discussion. They personalize the topic by asking referential questions. This leads to participation chances open to all students but not many volunteered to participate. In contrast, the fifth teacher asks students to work in groups to make an oral discussion, which opens participation to all students.

Despite the contributions, the study has some limitations. The first is the specific methodology, that is, it should combine quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to statistically generalize the results. Another limitation is that the research was also limited by using audio recordings. It was difficult to document special situations or use non-verbal communication of the teachers and the learners. The results of this study show that teachers deal with obstacles when using facilitator-oriented strategy and learner-oriented strategy—professional skills, flexible teaching schedule, and

time allowance—all of which have implications for professional development and curriculum planning.

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