

ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN WHOLE-CLASS ORAL
INTERACTION: FROM CLASSROOM DISCOURSE AND
SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS TO IMPLICATIONS FOR
LANGUAGE LEARNING¹

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Abstract

This article reports on a study on classroom interaction in an EFL context in Brazil. The study, of an ethnographic nature, analyses recorded lessons, interviews and questionnaires answered by the students. The social rules governing classroom interaction usually determine an asymmetrical relationship between the teacher and the students, though it may be possible, according to the data obtained, to create an atmosphere of co-operation in which interaction may occur within less asymmetrical verbal patterns. This atmosphere, determined by linguistic, pedagogical, psychological and social factors, favours student language production. The data suggest connections between the students' views of classroom language learning, their engagement in classroom discourse, and possible implications for (foreign) language development.

Keywords: classroom research; EFL; interaction

Resumo

Este artigo relata um estudo sobre interação em sala de aula em um contexto de inglês como língua estrangeira, no Brasil. O estudo, de natureza etnográfica, analisa aulas gravadas, entrevistas e questionários respondidos pelos alunos.

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 41	p.041-060	jul./dez. 2001
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As regras sociais que permeiam a interação em sala de aula geralmente determinam uma relação assimétrica entre professor e alunos, embora seja possível, com base nos dados obtidos, criar-se uma atmosfera de cooperação, na qual uma interação caracterizada por padrões verbais menos assimétricos possa ocorrer. Tal atmosfera, determinada por fatores lingüísticos, pedagógicos, psicológicos e sociais, favorece a produção verbal dos alunos. Os dados sugerem relações entre as visões dos alunos sobre aprendizagem de línguas, seu engajamento no discurso de sala de aula e possíveis implicações para o desenvolvimento da competência em língua estrangeira.

Palavras-chave: pesquisa de sala de aula; língua inglesa; interação

This article reports on a study on classroom interaction in an EFL context and discusses some findings from (a) data collected in classrooms and (b) the analysis of interviews and questionnaires answered by the students involved in the study. The study, of an ethnographic nature, was conducted at a state university in Brazil.

The discussion presented here develops from a review on theoretical claims about (classroom) interaction and language learning into a description of the research design and an overall picture of the data, to suggest connections between the students' views of classroom language learning, their engagement in classroom discourse, and possible implications for (foreign) language development.

One assumption in the study is that language classrooms can be seen as sociolinguistic environments in which interactants make use of various functions of language to establish a communication system (Cazden, 1988), and input for language acquisition is expected to be generated by means of classroom interaction. Based on the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1985), classroom interaction is believed to entail negotiation of meaning, especially when interlocutors attempt to solve breakdowns in communication. Along this line,

Interaction always entails negotiating intended meanings, i.e., adjusting one's speech to the effect one intends to have on the listener. It entails anticipating the listener's response

and possible misunderstandings, clarifying one's own and the other's intentions and arriving at the closest possible match between intended, perceived, and anticipated meanings. (Kramersch, 1986, p. 367)

While the earlier version of the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1985) postulated that language acquisition was mainly an effect of comprehensible input, one must be aware that, according to its later version (Long, 1996), it is crucial to investigate how interactionally modified input may contribute to acquisition. As Ellis (1999) points out,

Interactionally modified input works for acquisition when (1) it assists learners to notice linguistic forms in the input and (2) the forms that are noticed lie within the learner's 'processing capacity' (p. 8).

According to Ellis' review of the updated version of the Interaction Hypothesis (p.8), two views of interaction are incorporated in the theory: as an interpersonal process, to help learners notice relevant features in the input, and as an intrapersonal activity, which involves different types of processing operations for learners to acquire the negotiated input. The analysis carried out here focuses on characteristics of interpersonal processes, that is, on students' oral interaction, from two perspectives: (1) it aims at reviewing some issues from a background in classroom discourse (henceforth CD) and foreign language (FL) acquisition, and (2) it shows some facts and their implications for language acquisition, as verified in real classrooms.

Consolo (1996, 2000) and Consolo and Rezende (2001), among other authors, reviewed the characteristics of CD that may either facilitate language acquisition in classrooms or impose constraints on the interactants' verbal behaviour, such as the regularities in CD patterns and discourse categories in teacher and student talk. Given these characteristics, this study attempts to discuss how such factors

can influence teacher-student and student-student interaction, as indicated by data collected in lessons and seen mostly through the patterns for oral engagement in CD allowed by whole-class interaction. Also, students' motivation to participate in communicative practices, with their peers and with the teacher, is analysed by means of comparing their answers in the interviews and questionnaires, and their social and linguistic behaviours in class. All of these elements are seen as constituents of a favourable environment for learning the target language.

According to Hall and Verplaetse's (2000) review of studies in the area of classroom interaction and language learning, interactional processes are not strictly individual or equivalent across learners and situations; language learning is a social enterprise, jointly constructed, and intrinsically linked to learners' repeated and regular participation in classroom activities. The authors state that, rather than viewed as discrete grammar points, language should be considered to be fundamentally communicative, organised around the linguistic means used by individuals to engage in activities peculiar to their sociocultural worlds (Hall & Verplaetse, 2000, p.11).

Student participation in classroom interaction is also seen from the perspectives found in Allwright (1984, pp. 160-161), for three types of oral engagement. In the most frequent type, called 'compliance', students' utterances are very much dependent on the teacher's management of classroom communication, for example, when they reply to the teacher's questions. In the second type, known as 'navigation', learners take the initiative to overcome communication breakdowns, as in requests for clarification of what has been said. This may be seen as a simpler type of negotiation of meaning that can help comprehension and language development. The least frequent type is 'negotiation', and when it occurs, the teacher's and the students' roles may become less asymmetrical, and interlocutors attempt to reach decision making by consensus. It is expected that when students engage in real and effective 'negotiation' they may have better opportunities for language development.

Finally, unlike studies on interaction and second/foreign language acquisition carried out in the past twenty years, which have not given enough attention to areas such as discourse and sociolinguistic competence (Hall & Verplaeetese, 2000), the approach adopted here considers that activities carried out in classrooms can be important “sites of development”. According to these authors (p. 9),

because many classroom activities are created through classroom discourse - the oral interaction that occurs between teachers and students and among students - its role is especially consequential to the creation of learning environments and ultimately to the shaping of individual learners’ development.

That is why classrooms stand as contexts to provide us with representative data on the characteristics of ‘learning environments’.

Description of the study

The study was conducted over a period of two academic years (YEAR 1 and YEAR 2). The research design comprised five classes (C1, C2, C3, C4 and Class E - for an “extra” class, in which fewer lessons were observed and none of them was recorded), four teachers (T1, T2, T3 and T4), 57 students² (whose age ranged from 17 to 25 in C1-C3 and from 16 to 49 in C4) and four research assistants (A1, A2, A3 and A4), as illustrated in Fig.1.

C1, C2 and C3 were regular groups of students doing undergraduate studies in English and Portuguese,³ all of them in their first year at university. Their level of competence in spoken English varied between basic and intermediate, as verified in a diagnostic test (covering listening comprehension, grammar and vocabulary) applied at the beginning of the term, and in the results of the Oxford Placement Test,⁴ applied later in the term.⁵ While students in C3 displayed a range of levels in oral competence (considering both listening and speaking

skills, as observed in lessons and measured by achievement tests applied by T1), similar standards within the classes, predominantly around an intermediate level, were observed in the majority of those in C1 and C2.

Class E was a group of students in their last year, about to graduate in the teaching of English and Portuguese, and from whom data was rather limited due to the fact that only a few lessons were observed and none were recorded because it was considered too intimidating by T2, T3 and their students. Moreover, the interviews conducted by A2 were informal and registered in note form only. Class E stands in the design as a kind of 'piloting context' in YEAR 1, when not only the research project, but also the requirements to set up this type of classroom research and to involve the research assistants in studies in Applied Linguistics were being established.⁶ Finally, because the students in Class E had not answered the questionnaires given to students in the other classes (see Fig. 2 below), their past experience in EFL could not be considered.

C4 was a group of students doing EFL in a type of language course offered by the university for the outside community, in which regular university students (from any area of study) can register as well. Lessons are offered once a week only, for around three hours. When data was collected, there was no strict control (for example, by means of entrance or placement tests) of the level of students taking the course. This favoured the characteristics of a mixed-ability class, even though the group had been doing the course for over a year, and with the same teacher (T4).

Fig. 1 illustrates the classes, the teachers and the research assistants involved in the study:

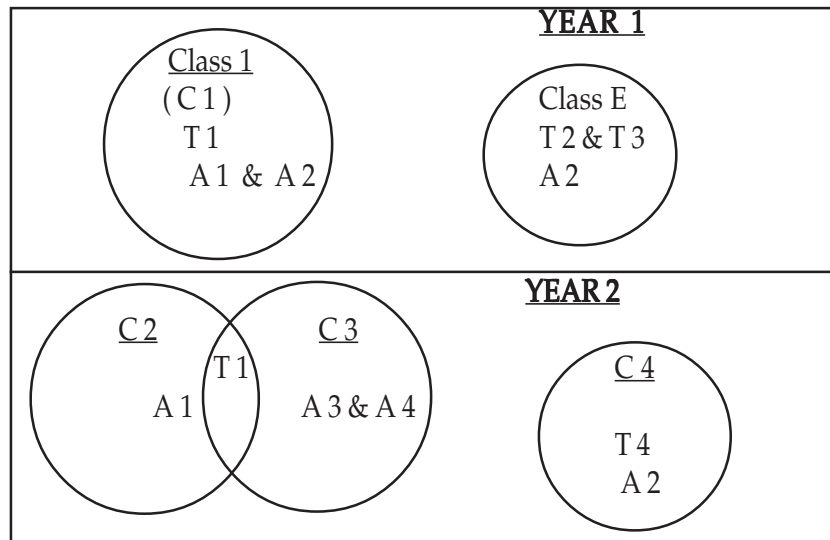


Figure 1: research participants

Students' previous experiences in EFL, as surveyed by means of a questionnaire, were as follows:⁷

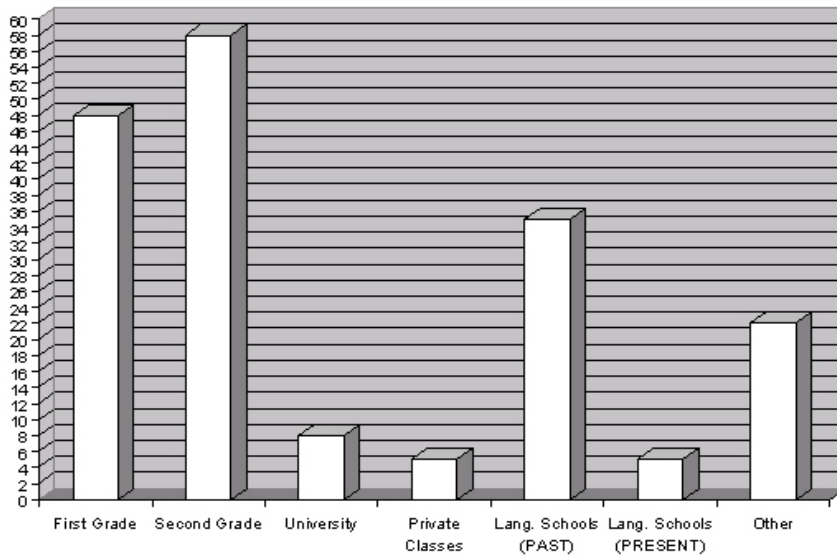


Figure 2: students' experiences in learning English

The chart in Fig. 2 indicates that the students' background in EFL was, as a whole and predominantly, from having attended regular school and, to a lesser extent, from having attended private language schools before entering university. Students in C4 differed with respect to previous experience in learning English, having started the language course at university with considerably less oral competence than the other students.

This picture can be considered quite typical in Brazil, where formal classrooms represent one of the few opportunities for learners to engage in learning a FL and, hopefully, to have some opportunity to profit from oral interaction in that language.⁸ As a consequence, classes at university play an important role in providing conditions for language development.

Data analysis

The data collected in YEAR 1, by means of questionnaires and interviews, indicated that students had interest in developing their oral skills in English and expected to have opportunities to develop speaking skills in class. Such expectations did not seem to have been totally fulfilled though. Furthermore, the influence of the teachers' approach to language teaching, whether more communicatively or grammatically oriented, also seemed to determine the patterns of whole-class interaction and, if ever, opportunities for student engagement.

Based on data from classroom observation conducted in lessons taught by P1 in C1, and by P2 and P3 in Class E, A2 observed some differences in the management of whole-class interaction, as described in the following extract from A2's report:

It has been observed that there are two teachers who are able to establish oral interaction with their students, and a teacher who does not do it [well]. P1 and P3 make use of techniques to call their students' attention to what is being said, which favour classroom interaction. [...] Those teachers [P1 and P3] make the students produce, understand, and they know how

to evaluate the language produced by the students; that is, by means of his role of managing classroom discourse, and despite the slightly, overall asymmetrical relationship, the teachers know how to judge whether students' language is "correct" or "incorrect" in a somehow symmetrical way, allowing the students to decide when to speak without having to wait for the teacher to allocate their turns.⁹

A2 reported that in lessons taught by P2, however, oral interaction in the FL was not a priority, and that, according to the students in Class E, lessons taught by that teacher did not contribute to their learning because they had difficulty in understanding oral English and P2 did not help them to understand the topics being dealt with in class. Those data were registered in A2's diaries as well, as evidence for the students' opinions.

A1's reports¹⁰ on data from C1 and C2 revealed a more optimistic picture concerning the amount of student oral production and contribution to CD. According to A1's report,

There was a considerably high amount of student verbal contributions to CD, mostly by means of *clarifications*, *replies* and *informatives*.¹¹ Students generally *complied* with the teacher's proposals (Allwright, 1984) – as in the examples of student utterances shown below, and there was not much *negotiation* (Allwright, *op.cit.*) on their part. Students' level of oral comprehension was very good though, and it certainly contributed towards better communication with T1 and with their peers [as can be seen in the following examples taken from different exchanges]:

- St1: Everybody knows the two languages? [*navigation*]
- St2: What's the difference between pretty and beautiful? [*clarification*]
- St3: Where does the bus go? [*elicitation*]
- St4: What's *I regret*?¹² [*clarification*]

A1's reports on the communicative methodology followed by T1¹³ corroborates A2's reports on data from C1, and indicate, on the one hand, that students were motivated to speak English and usually felt like doing so in class; on the other hand, T1's encouraging attitude towards student oral participation and oral corrections (including the use of scaffolding) was one of the main collaborative factors to oral interaction in the target language. Samples from C1 and C2 students' opinions about the contributions of T1's lessons to classroom interaction are listed below:

"The teacher's methodology has contributed for me to learn (...) we feel motivated when we have classes."

"The main factor (...) the stimulus from the teacher."

"The teacher is communicative and charismatic."

"I think it depends very much on the teacher. There must be some stimuli, and I believe we have it! The students have to feel like talking, they must be motivated to do it (...)"

"I love it when the teacher talks with the whole class about some topic (...)"

"The teaching strategies used by the teacher are excellent to motivate the students to learn and to participate more in the lessons."

Negotiation of meaning was observed in a number of segments from the data, and sometimes it developed from pair or group-work activities in lessons taught by T1.

The segment in example 1-1 illustrates two students, St1 and St6, discussing an object that was in St1's handbag. T1 had asked them to search and touch an object in their bags, and to describe the object to their partners without showing it to the other person. All the students worked on the task for some time and T1 monitored them. First St6 was able to understand that St1 had a phone card in her handbag (turns 040-043, end of 'negotiation'). Then the students discussed a telephone token

(which was used in public telephones in Brazil until quite recently) and, to confirm what to call the object in English, they ask for help from the teacher (turns 044-054). And, instead of telling the word at once, T1 makes use of scaffolding in order to help the students reach the desired meaning, which encouraged further oral interaction (turns 055-061):

Example 1-1: segment from a lesson in C1

- 040-St6: Oh it's it's hum + it's made to + to + call + it's a phone card?
- 041-St1: Yes
- 042-St6: A phone card?
- 043-St1: Yes
- 044-St6: ã [LAUGH] my object is little + and is made of metal + it's round [LAUGH] we use
- 045-St1: (INCOMP)
- 046-St6: It's made of metal it's + round + and it's (INCOMP) [5] the same as your object [1] used for the same thing
- 047-St1: Ah: + it's a coin a coin + for telephone
- 048-St6: Yes
- 049-St1: Ah [LAUGH] *como é que chama isso?*
{ { what is this called? } }
- 050-St6: *Acho que é coin que chama isso*
{ { I think this is called coin } }
- 051-St1: *Num é coin*
{ { it isn't coin } }
- 052-St6: Coin + telephone coin + teacher
- 053-T1: Yes?
- 054-St6: How do you call this? + what's this (INCOMP)
- 055-T1: What + do you call that? + what's it used for?
- 056-St1: (it's a coin)
- 057-T1: For the telephone + what does it look like?

058-St1: Coin
059-St6: Coin
060-T1: So it's a [RIS]
061-St1 Telephone coin
& St6:

SYMBOLS USED IN THE TRANSCRIPTIONS:

[RIS] = rising intonation

ã = hesitation (as in Portuguese)

TOken (capital letters) = emphatic stress

+ = short pause

italics = Portuguese (L1)

{{ }} = translation from Portuguese

Having observed how language input was generated in the previous segment, let us look now at another segment, from the same lesson, in which the same 'language item' (vocabulary) occurs, giving some evidence of learning from St6's utterance in turn 106. It is also worth pointing out that another student (St8) provided a synonym for labelling the same object:

Example 1-2: segment from a lesson in C1

103-T1: [...] do you know the word for your object? show it to the class (do you) know what it is? what is that?
104-St8: It's a token
105-T1: It's a TOken + ok + a TElephone Token + or it's a [RIS]
106-St6: A telephone coin
107-T1: A telephone coin + ok + a telephone coin + a telephone TOken + t o k e n + do you know the word for your object? [...]

It is important to observe that the teacher helps in the process of recalling the vocabulary item when he elicits its use by the students, in turn 105 (in an *Initiation* move), and St6 remembers the words “telephone coin” (in a *Response* move).

During the observations and recordings in C4, the patterns for oral interaction in lessons taught by T4 did not vary from the whole-class configuration, nearly all teacher-controlled, displaying long turns in teacher talk and very short, simple turns in student speech. From the most typical of the four lessons recorded in C4, the following segment was chosen to discuss student engagement in the context of that particular class.

The teacher was dealing with countable and uncountable nouns, and quantifiers. Since countable and uncountable nouns had been dealt with in an earlier lesson, the ‘topic’ was expected to be a revision of what students remembered about such nouns, adding then further grammatical content on quantifiers:

Example 2: segment from a lesson in C4

- 024-T4: [...] coffees in the the the case of + uncount nouns ok
+ for example if we say (a count noun) we use s ã
count nouns indicate ã the ã (INCOMP) *quero dois
cafés* you may say I want two + coffees + what’s the
meaning? + the meaning is I want two cups of coffee
+ give me two milks + what is it? two [RIS]
- 025-St: Cups
- 026-T4: glasses or cups + ok + two cups or two glasses
of milk + ok + now there is a noun that may be
singular and plural depending on meaning + the
meaning is different so you say (INCOMP) time
meaning *tempo* is uncountable + you cannot
count time + you can count the hours the minutes

- 027-St: (INCOMP)
- 028-T4: the days
- 029-St: (INCOMP) *vezes*
- 030-T4: yes meaning *vezes* you can count five times I told you ten times *dez vezes* this sense this meaning is countable + ok + so this is the difference + we have count nouns and uncount nouns to indicate these nouns + the quantity of these nouns we can use the quantifiers + what is a quantifier? a quantifier is a word that (INCOMP) the quantity of the noun you want to express + ok? + for the count nouns the first quantifier is a number + ok if I want to express the exact number of the noun I have two friends + I have five brothers + ok I have twenty books so let's put here + I have two brothers + we can use the numeral the number + I have five friends + I have fifty books so I express the exact amount of the noun the number using the number can only be use with count nouns only + *cê não pode dizer eu tenho dois dinheiro + a não ser na Bíblia né + que venderam Jesus por (trinta e três) dinheiros + é assim que fala* {{ you can't say I have two money + except for the Bible + in which Jesus was sold for thirty-three + that's how you say it }}
- 031-St: *Denários*
- 032-T4: *Como?*
{{ sorry? }}
- 033-St: *Denários*
- 034-T4: *É exatamente no caso da Bíblia + os (trinta e três) dinheiros significava (trinta e seis) moedas parece+ eu não tava lá mas eu sei pela literatura*

{{ it's exactly the case in the Bible + the (thirty-three) (INCOMP) meant (thirty-three) coins it seems + I wasn't there but I know it from the literature }}

então so the count nouns can be expressed in the in the exact amount using the numbers ok BUT with we may ã want to express an aproximate amount not the number for an aproximate amount so I have two brothers means that I have a few brothers *poucos + amigos* if I have five friends I may say that I have several friends Several friends SEveral friends ok *alguns amigos* ok *diversos amigos* IF I have fifty books I may say that I have + many books ok or a lot of books a lot of books ok + this is ã aproximate ã amount amount *significa + quantidade* + ok [...]

{{ means + quantity }}

The amount of teacher talk in turns 024, 026, 030 and 034 contrasts with the "short contributions" from student speech in turns 025 and 029. However, in turn 031 the student provides the word *Denários*, which was not expected from T4. The student's 'intervention' in the course of a (predictable) sequence, which had been strictly controlled by T4 up to that point, seems to somehow disturb the teacher's action. Nevertheless, and after making a silly comment ("I wasn't there but I know it from the literature"), T4 takes over the agenda and continues 'lecturing' on the main teaching point.

All the utterances in student speech in that lesson were compiled and are listed in Table 1 (in each column, each line corresponds to a single utterance, in a separate turn):

Table 1: language in student utterances in an EFL lesson

Dollars	<i>nenhuma vez</i>	count noun
Car	there are	carrots
Cards	there are (INCOMP) eggs	plural count
Books	<i>depois eu vejo a</i>	<i>Não</i>
Milk	tchau	we bought
[money	much time (INCOMP)	<i>refrigerante</i>
Water	<i>ã plural</i>	no count noun
Sugar	Time	Car
Water	plural plural	radios
Coffees	plural	radios
Cups	I (INCOMP)	she is a
(INCOMP) vezes	Apple	plural
<i>Denários</i>	[plural	no count noun
<i>Denários</i>	[do you have do you have	Milk
<i>só com contável</i>	[<i>na negativa não usa o some</i>	bread
<i>Nossa</i>	plural count noun	plural
<i>Qué não</i>	singular count noun	plural
no count	singular count noun	<i>pode</i>
Here now		many

Students' turns were short, quite often monosyllabic, and usually in reply to T4's elicitations only. It can be inferred that oral interaction in C4 was limited to listening to the teacher and compliance on the part of the students (Allwright, 1984). However, the views from students in C4 about oral interaction in their lessons were positive. On the whole, the data from the students' interviews indicated that they were happy about their oral production in class, even though such "production" occurred

within the limits of a basic level course, and with the teaching methodology followed by T4.

Concluding remarks

The characteristics of classroom oral interaction, involving a teacher and his or her students, fall within a scope of facts and factors, as illustrated in Fig. 3:

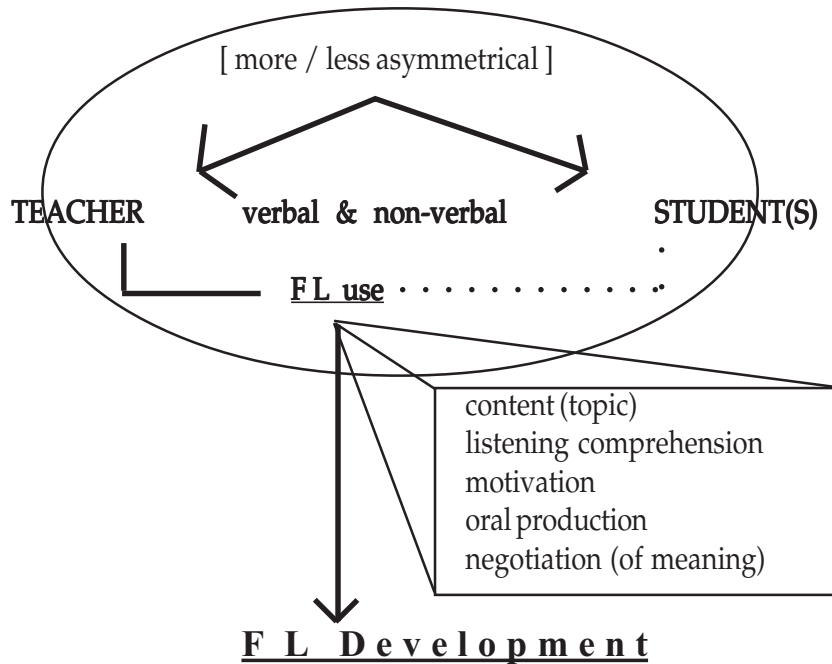


Figure 3: classroom interaction in a FL

The broken line connecting 'FL use' and 'STUDENT(S)' represents the limitations students face in their oral competence, while it is expected that the teacher should be not only 'linguistically competent', but also

able to manage classroom interaction in a way to motivate and favour student participation in the lessons.

The social rules governing classroom interaction will usually determine an asymmetrical relationship between the teacher and the students, though it may be possible to create an atmosphere of cooperation in which interaction may occur within less asymmetrical verbal patterns. This happens when students ask questions or disagree with what the teacher says.

The integration and articulation of the five factors shown in the rectangle – content, listening comprehension skills, motivation, oral production and (opportunities for) negotiation of meaning – may provide the desirable conditions to foster language development.

It can be concluded from the data presented in the previous section that some language development may have occurred as a result of T4's lessons but the quality of student participation in T1's lessons suggest that the environment in C1 (as well as in C2 and C3) provided better conditions for language use and learning.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on data from a project sponsored by the CNPq – *Interação e Aquisição de Língua Estrangeira no Cenário da Sala de Aula* [Interaction and Foreign Language Acquisition in the Classroom Context], between August 1999 and July 2001.
- 2 Students who answered a questionnaire on classroom language and language learning, and then were interviewed on their views about the same topics.
- 3 Students in C1 and C2 were doing a BA in Translation (*Bacharelado em Letras – Tradutor*) and those in C3 were doing a BA towards a degree in the teaching of English and Portuguese (*Licenciatura em Letras*).
- 4 Allan, D. (1992). *Oxford placement test*. Oxford:OUP.

- 5 Other information on how the students were assessed and further details on their levels of oral proficiency fall outside the scope of this discussion and are expected to be dealt with in future reports about the same study.
- 6 None of them had had previous experience or preparation to collect or analyse classroom data.
- 7 "First grade" stands for the first eight years of regular school in Brazil (*Escola Fundamental*) and "second grade" stands for the next three years of school (*Escola Média*), after which students may proceed to university.
- 8 This is a general view of the country and may be altered if one considers the resources from the internet, as well as some contexts of bilingualism/multilingualism within the Brazilian territory.
- 9 Report on data collected and analysed by V. C. Lindolfo; see references.
- 10 A2 presented four written reports over the two-year period.
- 11 Discourse categories presented in Consolo (1996), based on Sinclair and Coulthard (1975, 1992).
- 12 From Consolo and Rezende, 2001.
- 13 Rezende, 1999.

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