

UNPACKING THE IRF PATTERN: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOM INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) interaction pattern in a high school English classroom to determine the most effective strategies for enhancing student engagement during class and improving interactions between teachers and students. This study employed a qualitative descriptive method using classroom observation and audio recordings to examine IRF patterns. Discourse analysis was used to identify and classify each stage of the IRF structure. To obtain data, the researcher conducted classroom observations in one of the SMKN in Kediri City involving an English teacher and 35 students, this study used audio recordings to analyze discourse patterns during the lesson. Based on the results of the analysis, the student response stage is the most dominant stage with 41.38% followed by teacher initiation 34.48% and feedback 24.14%. The analysis indicates that while students actively participate, their responses are often limited to repetition rather than reflecting true comprehension. This highlights the crucial role of the teacher in facilitating meaningful classroom discourse and also the importance of students preparing themselves before receiving class material.

Keywords: Classroom Interaction, IRF Pattern, Discourse Analysis, EFL

A. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized era, English functions as the primary international language, enabling communication across nations (Atmojo et al., 2020). Its role extends beyond daily interactions to the classroom setting, where communication is a key element of the learning process. Within this environment, teachers often hold a central position, guiding discussions and exerting substantial influence over classroom dynamics. This tendency results in teachers initiating questions more frequently than students, shaping the overall flow of interaction. However, a common problem for EFL teachers is dealing with passive classes where students are unresponsive and avoid interaction with the teacher. This passive attitude of students makes the teacher act more dominantly during the learning process (Atmojo et al., 2020). This means that teacher dominance in classroom interactions can discourage students from participating and speaking more in the target language (Kurniawati & Fitriati, 2017). Excessive teacher talk and control over classroom interactions can create an

imbalance that significantly discourages students from actively participating and, crucially, from speaking more extensively in the target language. This often leads to a passive learning environment where students become reluctant to initiate conversations or express themselves freely. Therefore, the subject of classroom interaction has emerged as a captivating topic in discourse research as well as in language education.

Understanding this interactional framework is essential for achieving effective classroom communication. As noted by Nunan (1999), teachers typically initiate exchanges, while students respond to these openings, creating a structured dialogue. This interactional pattern is commonly captured by the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) model, which systematically maps the turn-taking process and highlights the teacher’s authority in classroom discourse. The IRF framework offers a structured way to analyze classroom interactions by breaking them down into three main stages: the teacher initiates, the student responds, and the teacher provides feedback (Tabios, 2025). The following section elaborates on these three components in greater detail.

The first aspect is initiation (I), a teacher-led process in which interaction begins through a question or prompt (Hashmi, 2025). As Dayag (2013) explains, initiation aims to stimulate student participation by encouraging them to respond or engage. The second aspect is response (R), referring to students’ actions following the teacher’s initiation (Nasution, 2022). According to Dayag (2013), these responses reflect students’ engagement with the teacher’s prompts. The final aspect is feedback (F), where the teacher evaluates and responds to students’ answers, completing the interaction cycle. Dayag (2013) notes that feedback confirms whether students’ responses are correct and provides closure to the exchange. This indicates that the IRF structure starts with a question posed by the teacher, then comes the replies from the students. Educators can assist students in navigating the interpretation of meaning with them, and they ought to achieve this by seeking clarification, performing confirmation checks, and carrying out understanding assessments (Mathieu et al., 2021). Thus, classroom interactions play a vital role in the learning process to create a classroom atmosphere that supports students in implementing communication between teachers and students, especially for 10th grade students who are still in the transition phase from junior high school to high school. This makes classroom interaction very important to build the confidence of students who are still adapting to a new environment.

Several previous studies have examined the IRF framework in classroom interactions. Hasanah et al. (2024) found that students actively engaged in English lessons using this model. Similarly, Rustandi and Mubarak (2017) examined classroom engagement in EFL speaking classes through the IRF model. Their findings show that teacher initiation occurs when teachers pose questions to elicit answers and select who will speak next, highlighting the essence of teacher–student engagement in speaking classes. They also noted that students’ responses primarily emerge during classroom activities and are influenced by the lesson content and the teacher’s strategies to involve them; student participation tends to increase when the topic is relatively simple. Furthermore, Dalia and Putra (2024) investigated the implementation of the IRF model in 10th-grade classrooms to identify effective strategies that can promote student-led communication and enhance overall classroom engagement. In contrast, Rymes (2015) reported differing outcomes, arguing that classroom discourse dominated by teachers—as outlined in the Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) framework—fails to foster students’ learning of English as a foreign language because it limits their opportunities to contribute meaningfully.

However, these studies have not specifically examined IRF patterns in vocational classes, such as culinary majors in Indonesia. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) interaction pattern in a high school English classroom to determine the most effective strategies for enhancing student engagement during class and improving interactions between teachers and students.

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate teacher talk in a senior high school English classroom, using the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) model developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). A qualitative study is suitable for exploring complex classroom interactions within a natural setting, as it enables researchers to provide in depth descriptions (Sugiyono, 2018). Furthermore, Creswell (2012) posits that the researcher focuses on the meaning, understanding, and processes derived from words or images in qualitative research. The participants in this study include one English teacher and 35 students from class X Kuliner 2 one of SMKN in Kediri. This class was purposefully selected because Researchers had the opportunity to observe during PLP 1. The teacher was selected due to recommendation from the headmaster. Data were collected through audio recordings of one classroom sessions approximately 45 minutes in length. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection ensuring anonymity and confidentiality (Lau et al., 2024). All recordings were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis involved a detailed coding scheme based on the IRF model by Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) categorizing each utterance as an initiation, response, or feedback (Taherdoost, 2021).

To ensure inter-rater reliability, researcher used data triangulation. Triangulation is defined as a data collection technique that combines various existing data collection techniques and data sources (Donkoh et al., 2023). In this research, data was obtained through observation (school environment), documentation by recording sound during the learning process. Testing the validity of this data was carried out by researchers and thesis supervisors as well as experts in the field of classroom discourse analysis. Limitations of this study include the small sample size and the specific context of the chosen classroom. The findings may not be generalizable to other classrooms or teaching contexts.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the analysis of IRF patterns observed in the classroom environment.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of IRF Moves in Classroom Interactions

IRF move	frequency	percentage
Initiations	10 times	34.48%
Response	12 times	41.38%
Feedback	7 times	24.14%
Total	29 times	100%

The result of analysis found that there were 29 interactions among teacher and students the results are that the response stage is the most dominant, namely 12 times (41.38%), followed by the initiation stage, namely 10 times (34.48%) and the feedback stage is the least with 7 times (24.14%). To better understand the IRF patterns during the interaction, the analysis results are shown below:

1. Initiation.

The most prominent pattern found in this analysis is the teacher's use of questions as a form of Initiation in the IRF sequence. A total of 10 instances (34.48%) of initiation moves were identified during the classroom interaction. These initiations function to involve students in the learning process, check prior understanding, and stimulate further thinking. For example, the teacher began the session by asking,

T: *"Oke, berikutnya apa?"*
 Okay, what's next? (translation version)

This question served as a bridge to recall previous material and prepare students for the upcoming content. According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), such initiations act as a means to open the discourse and guide the flow of interaction. Subsequent questions followed a similar pattern:

T: *"Apa contohnya?"*
 What is the example? (translation version)
T: *"May I give you a hand, artinya apa?"*
 What does "may I give you a hand" mean? (translation version)
T: *"Give artinya apa?"*
 What does give mean? (translation version)
T: *"You?"*
T: *"A hand?"*
T: *"intinya menawarkan.?"*
 The point is to offer.? (translation version)

These utterances demonstrate how the teacher deconstructs an English expression and prompts students to engage in meaning-making. By doing so, the teacher scaffolds student understanding while retaining control of the discourse. Another question,

T: *"yg lain.?"*
 others? (translation version)

The above initiation is used by the teacher to ensure whether there are students who want to participate by providing other answers.

T: *"Paham?"*
 Do you understand? (translation version)
T: *"karena ini ungkapan atau expression jadi artinya bisakah saya membantu."*
 because this is an expression or saying so it means maybe I'm helping
 (translation version)

The statement above was used to confirm comprehension at the end of a sequence. This shows the teacher's strategic use of initiation not only to elicit responses but also to assess understanding and reinforce concepts. These findings suggest that teacher-initiated questions serve both pedagogical and interactional functions. In line with Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) framework, such initiation moves are essential for maintaining classroom discourse structure. Moreover, this pattern reflects what Hardman (2008) describes as *structured dialogic teaching*, where teachers use questioning not only to assess knowledge but also to promote student thinking. However, while the teacher's frequent questioning encourages participation, the next section will explore whether these interactions lead to meaningful student responses (i.e., the R in IRF) or remain limited to mechanical recall.

2. Response

The second pattern is the responds stage which is the most dominant stage with 12 times (41.38%). Most of the students' responses were answers to questions given by the teacher, but the answers given were answers that were answered together with other students, but there were also a few students who dared to give their own answers. For example, students respond to teacher questions

SS: *"offering.!"*

The first response given by the students was to answer the teacher's questions about the material that would be discussed today, thus the teacher triggered the students to remember the lesson in the previous meeting, then continue with.

S1: *"can I help u.!"*

SS: *"can I help u."*

S2: *"may I help u"*

These utterances show how the students collectively responded to the teacher's questions. This response occurs because the teacher's initiation encourages students to participate in class interactions, thus enabling students to gain knowledge in using English. However, some students were able to provide answers independently, as shown below:

S1: *"bolehkah aku membantumu!!"*
 may i give you a hand.! (translation version)

Then in this case, one of the students gave an answer to the teacher's question about the meaning of "may i give you a hand" in Indonesian, then when the teacher asked if there was an alternative answer the student answered

SS: *"ngak tau pak.!"*
 we don't know sir.! (translation version)

All the students confirm teacher's questions.

SS: *"memberi.!"*
 Give.! (translation version)

SS: *"kamu.!"*
 You.! (translation version)

- SS: *"tangan.!"*
 A hand.!! (translation version)
SS: *"muu.!!"*
 You.!! (translation version)
SS: *"bantuan.!"*
 A help.!! (translation version)

These utterances are the students' responses to the teacher's questions about translation, which were also answered together. From these responses, it can be seen that the students have sufficient English language skills in basic vocabulary.

- SS: *"paham.!"*
 Understand.!! (translation version)

Finally, students confirm their understanding of the explanation given by the teacher. Of all the responses, most students gave correct answers, with many responding collectively, while a few students dared to answer individually. Furthermore, this finding reflects the *self determination theory* (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985). Students' difficulty expressing ideas in English is one of the reasons they struggle to engage in IRF conversations, particularly when responding to teachers or other peers in English. This stems from their lack of English language skills. Therefore, students need to carefully consider what they want to convey and how to translate it. Social factors also influence students' interactions in class, students admitted to feeling embarrassed to respond in class, this impacted their confidence in speaking. Therefore, they felt embarrassed to respond or speak in front of the class (Rone, et al., 2023). In addition, students' lack of preparation for learning is also a factor. Students are often unprepared to participate in learning. This occurs not only in the classroom, but also due to students' lack of preparation for learning at home. As a result, during class discussions, students are unable to respond effectively to teacher questions.

3. Feedback.

The last pattern is the "feedback" stage which is the least, namely 7 times (24.14%), the feedback given by the teacher was such as providing an explanation of the responses given by the students, and also confirming the students' understanding of the material explained.

- T: *"ini artinya sama yaitu "apa yg bisa saya bantu"*
 This means the same as "what can I help you" (translation version)
T: *"ini semua variasi"*
 These are all variations (translation version)
T: *"ada lagi what can I do for you"*
 There is another "what can I do for you" (translation version)
T: *"nah ini varian juga "may I give you a hand"*
 Well, this is also a variant May I give you a hand (translation version)
T: *"oke bisa"*
 Ok, that's fine (translation version)
T: *"jadi ini hanya variasi yg artinya "bolehkah aku membantmu"*
 So this is just a variation that means may I help you
T: *"kalau diartikan may I "bolehkah saya"*
 If translated may I "may I" (translation version)

Based on the findings above, teacher feedback rarely occurs due to the lack of response from students, the responses given by students are mostly just repetitions of the explanations given by the teacher. As a result, the teacher only uses verbal responses to answer student responses, but the teacher also uses material explanations and expanded feedback at this stage as a form of feedback, expanded feedback occurs when the teacher doesn't just repeat an identical or similar answer to the student's, but adds a few words. This indicates that the teacher wants to add more information about the student's answer. Expanded feedback can make feedback more informative and comprehensive. Feedback is useful for teachers to motivate students to start interactions (Suryadi, et al., 2022). The analysis using Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) pattern in this study indicate that the most dominant interaction that occurs between I, R, and F in class X culinary 2 is student response with a percentage of 41.38% followed by teacher initiation 34.48% and feedback 24.14%, student response is the most dominant stage but the responses given by students are mostly repetitions, this makes the role of teachers very necessary in classroom learning. In relation to engagement during the teaching and learning process in X culinary class 2. Walsh (2011) asserts that interaction is a means to demonstrate how educators can generate learning opportunities by utilizing language and interaction resources. Teachers promote student engagement by using both verbal and non-verbal methods to develop language that encourages students to establish learning goals. When learning English as a second language, there are various advantages and disadvantages regarding teacher-student interactions that emphasize the teacher solely as a learning facilitator (Rahmania, 2025). Conversely, in non-English speaking nations, English instructors must exhibit increased patience in guiding students to speak English by first introducing vocabulary before encouraging writing and speaking, which creates the perception that teachers supply all necessary material to their students.

This aligns with the work of Mitchel and Martin (1997) in the book by Stave Walsh that asserts that assigning all tasks to students unfamiliar with learning English is ineffective and adequate for learning a foreign language, however, guidance is necessary, along with the role of educators to arrange and supply resources initially, yet according to the results of (Musumeci, 1996) Stave Walsh's book suggests that if the focus of interaction solely revolves around the teacher or When the teacher elaborates further, a number of students tend to be quieter and appear to comprehend better. what the instructor clarifies, yet many of them feel shy to articulate what they do not comprehend in relation to the content that has been discussed up to this point. Conversely, this also has drawbacks. To teach students to become more self-sufficient in their education, learning and interaction should not focus solely on the teacher; students should be encouraged to engage actively as well. articulate and communicate their understanding of the learning content.

Alongside the significant role played by teachers, students serve as a crucial factor in the learning process even though teachers facilitate it, if students lack the desire to learn from their errors or do not make an effort to improve, then the teacher's efforts in class will be pointless (Serin, 2018). However, in this study, students gave a more dominant response but only in the form of repetition. This occurred due to a lack of student interest in learning English. Considering that this study was conducted at a culinary vocational school where English is a plus skill, not a primary skill that must be developed by students, most students preferred practical lessons in the practice room rather than lessons in the classroom, especially English lessons which are considered relatively difficult for students to learn.

Based on the research results, there are two solutions to overcome students' difficulties in learning IRF in conversation which solutions for teachers and solutions for students. The first solution for teachers is to limit initiations so that students can respond appropriately, If the teacher tries to approach students by making a pleasant first impression, both generally and regarding the material they are using. Then, gradually increase the difficulty level of the initial initiation so that students can respond quickly and consistently. Once the initial conversation has successfully engaged students, they can move on to a more in-depth discussion of the material. Secondly, for students, some students are not ready to participate in lessons. This is because they lack responsibility in studying the material or topics previously presented by the teacher. However, if students have prepared themselves for the lesson, they will certainly be able to overcome any difficulties that arise during class.

D. CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) interaction pattern in high school English classes to determine the most effective strategies for increasing student engagement during class and enhancing interactions between teachers and students. The findings of this study showed 29 interactions between teachers and students. The results showed that the response stage was the most dominant, namely 12 times (41.38%), followed by the initiation stage, namely 10 times (34.48%), and the feedback stage, namely 7 times (24.14%). However, although student responses were the most dominant stage, most student responses were only repetitions, this makes the role of the teacher as a facilitator in the learning process very important to identify their learning needs. There are two solutions to overcome these findings, solutions for teachers and solutions for students, Teachers are recommended to use new initiation strategies so that students have more opportunities to provide effective responses and teachers are advised to provide formative feedback regularly to help students understand their strengths and weaknesses during the learning process. And suggestions for students are to start implementing time management by creating a regular study schedule so that students have provisions to receive lessons in class. The limitations of this study include the relatively small sample size and the specific context of the selected class, so it cannot represent and generalize the population as a whole, and this study was conducted in one class and one subject which does not fully represent other classes or other subjects in the school, suggestions for further researchers are to explore similar findings in various educational contexts or environments, as well as with larger and more diverse samples that can offer a broader perspective and increase the generalizability of the results.

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