ISRF sequences and their anti-pedagogical value

Amir Marzban\textsuperscript{a*}, Baqer Yaqoubi\textsuperscript{b}, Mojtaba Qalandari\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}English Language Department, Qaemshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr, Iran
\textsuperscript{b}English Language Department, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran
\textsuperscript{c}M.A. Candidiate, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran

Abstract

IRF sequences have been examined profusely before and were reported to be negatively correlated with participation opportunities (Barnes, 1992; Cazden, 1986; Ellis, 1994). In all these studies, IRFs have been considered as a static and inflexible interaction patterns. Based on video- taped data from ten English classes, which were analyzed within conversation analysis framework, this study uncovers a modified version of IRFs labeled as ISRF sequences, ISRFs have been shown here to destroy even those very limited learning opportunities which IRFs could offer. The finding implies that teachers must totally exclude ISRFs sequences from their practice.

© 2012 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of ALSC 2012

Keywords: conversation analysis framework, classroom interaction, IRF sequences, ISRF sequences

1. Introduction

Within the framework of Vygotskian psychology, learning is conceived as participation in the act of learning than acquisition (Donato, 2000). This governing metaphor of learning as participation explicitly signifies the fact that the quality of learning can be gauged through the analysis of the participation quality of students. On the grounds that teacher and students' participation in classroom events is largely realized through interaction, the investigation of the classroom interaction is regarded as the principal through which participation can be investigated. Further, the interaction between teacher students within classrooms is largely unfolded through IRF sequences.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +98 911 153 4121
E-mail address: marzban2006@yahoo.com
2. IRF sequences

The most frequently occurring interaction system within the classroom discourse are IRF sequences which is the most investigated speech exchange system as well. Nonetheless, it is important to note as quoted by Waring (2009, p.797) that "IRF is not the only interaction that takes place in the classroom; neither is it a single sequence type". IRFs are three parts structures, which start by initiation of a question by teacher (I), followed by a student response (R), and evaluated by the teacher feedback (F). Thinking of IRF cycles as the most frequently occurring interaction system within classroom, it becomes crystal clear that teacher's talk takes up the most proportion of the classroom interaction since in each sequence teacher has privilege to contribute twice to the ongoing network of interaction in the classroom. The first contribution of the teacher is manifested in Initiation move of the IRF sequence when he, in fact, opens up the sequence. The second contribution is realized via his feedback or assessment move. Therefore, the impact of IRF cycles on the creation or suppression of learning opportunities could be thought of as originating from two different constructs within IRF sequences.

2.1. Opponents of use of IRF sequences in classroom

IRF sequences, though the most frequent interaction pattern in any type of classroom, were criticized harshly owing to their anti-pedagogical nature (Barnes, 1992; Cazden, 1986; Ellis, 1994). Many of these researchers claimed that in classes in which the activities were based on strict use of IRF sequences, the teacher took up the large portion of talking and giving opinion letting only bordered space for students to come up with their very limited replies. Having examined the data from her own and some other classrooms, Cazden (1988) revealed that the teacher's use of this speech pattern more often facilitated his control of the interaction rather than the students learning of the content of the lesson. Similarly, Barnes (1992) studied the interaction between the teacher and the students in several classrooms which led him to conclude that extensive use of IRF sequences in the class did not allow for the complex ways of communication. He was also too much surprised to see how IRF sequences evoked the teacher to talk abundantly while a very short time was left for pupils' answers and most importantly he was amazed by the pupils' passivity and absence of their engagement in the issues being presented to them. More recently, he noted that IRF sequences performs the function of managing the class and holding student's attention but it does not easily give opportunities for pupils to work on understanding through talk (2008, p.10). Moreover, Gutierrez (1994) in her study of journal sharing in language arts classroom argued that recitation scripts (IRF sequences) resulted in the creation of static and extremely structured contexts for learning. In addition, the strictness and highly controlled nature of this type of discourse provided limited opportunities for students to produce elaborated talk, especially about topics or subtopics they generated. More importantly, she claimed that the directionality of talk floods from teacher to individual student and back to teacher, therefore, creates the least possible opportunity for students to respond to one another’s utterances. Through the analysis of the patterns of interaction across those classrooms, she also showed that recitation scripts ruined the students’ chances for interacting with and receiving assistance from peers and for participating in the very discourse they were ultimately expected to produce. The most significant finding of these researchers was their strong conviction in the ineffectiveness of use of IRF cycles and its irrelevance to institutional setting. Indeed, a strong case could be made that the very underlying objective of classroom instruction abandons the idea of use of IRF sequences in language classes. Limited IRF cycles of classroom speech exchange system falls foul of preparing students to attain communicative skill to use in the target society which possess a severely complex nature of communication system.
2.2. Modified version of IRF sequences called ISRF sequences

Not unlike a common feature of IRF sequences (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975), in ISRF sequences, an initiation move addressing a specific student is projected by teacher. Most of these initiations are personal questions (Nassaji and Wells, 2000, p.388). In the case of IRF sequences, in the second moves, students are provided with a turn to come up with their answers. Whereas in ISRF because of the abrupt projection of subsequent move, students have only short time to struggle (S) and show only their readiness to answer using a physical gesture. Immediately following the second turn, third turn of ISRF sequence is projected by the teacher himself and surprisingly it contains a complete answer to his own projected initiation at the beginning of the sequence. The answer is so complete both in terms of its communicative function and linguistic accuracy and also in terms of its discoursal relevance that no need is felt by student to introduce his/her own response. In the third turn of ISRF sequences it could be claimed that teacher is actually insincerely robbing a student's participation opportunity and appropriates the chance for himself. The nature of the fourth move of ISRF sequence is again surprising in terms of both its content and origin. As a key feature of IRF sequences, a specific type of feedback or any other type of follow-ups (Nassaji and Wells, 2000, p.379) were provided by the teacher to indicate to the students, the quality of their responses or to show whether they needed to add some new aspects to their answer or produce it differently. Similarly in ISRF sequences a feedback is provided to ensure the appropriateness of the answer given in the previous turn. Nonetheless, this time, as it may seem surprising, the feedback move is projected by student. In all the cases of ISRF sequences which were investigated for this research, unexceptionally all the feedback moves of the students were limited to a single word turn-constructional units (TCUs), as it is noticeable in the excerpt A (line 293). ISRF sequence can be either a single sequence consisting of a teacher initiation, student struggle, teacher response, and student feedback, as is the case with excerpt A or they can start a nuclear exchange"(Nassaji and Wells, 2000, p.379) or what Mehan calls as "topically related sets"(1979, 65) which entails the projection of a number of dependent exchanges as is the case with excerpt B. Below examples excerpts of each kind will be provided and their anti-pedagogical value will be examined.

3. Methodology

The primary source of data for the present study was ten two-hour adult English as a foreign language classes in a private language school in Naqadeh, Iran which the researcher recorded in the summer, 2011. These classes ranged in level from beginner to intermediate and advanced. The data was actually collected by four different procedures within those classes. These resources were video-tapes, audio-recordings, transcriptions, and field notes. The video-tapes of the class were captured from the very moment the teacher entered the class to the moment the class was over. During the class the researcher also prepared field notes concerning some special events of the classroom.

The audio-recorded and video-taped data were transcribed attentively line-by-line based on a simplified version of Jefferson's model developed by Ten Have (2007). Using Conversation Analysis framework, we tried to investigate this question: Do IRF sequences have a fixed structure? If they undergo any modification in their internal structure, how does such change have potential to suppress learning opportunities? The final data for this study were extracted from teacher C’s class.

3.1. Single ISRF sequences

Excerpt A is an example of a single ISRF sequence which is taken from Teacher C’s Elementary class where she is going to review the previous lesson and elicits some information about Mattie Smith. The grammatical focus of the lesson under question is past tense of verbs after several elicitations concerning
Mattie Smith's past life, topic of discussion changes to personal questions about teacher. She provides students with some personal questions about herself in Turkish, and entices students to render the given question into English, (line 249) of the excerpt A. Her last question which later turns out to launch an example of ISRF sequences is actually addressing all the student of the class. In line 249 Teacher D asks the class to translate a question into English and ask her. (i.e. ne zeman bashladin ishlemeaga? [when did you start to work?]). All the class interestingly gets engaged in the ongoing process of producing the given question correctly. All the students have opportunities to come up with their answers and try to test their hypotheses (lines 249-272).

Excerpt A: a single ISRF sequence (Taken from Teacher C's class)

0249 (Teacher C): ((asks in Turkish)) Soal sorushun manan, mana deyin ne zeman bashladin ishlemeaga? (Ask me a question; ask me, when did you start to work?)

0250

0251 LL: [when] do(.) you started when do you started

0252 (Teacher C): whe::n <di::d you= [when did you started your work?/ your job?] = sorushun zama::ne Gozashte (ask in past tense)

0253 (Teacher C): ne zeman bashladin ishlemeaga? (ask in past tense)

0254 LL: when/when

0255 (Teacher C): [when did you started your work] when/when]

0256 (Teacher C): ne zeman bashladin ishlemeaga? (when did you started your work)

0257 LL: when/when

0258 (Teacher C): whe::n <di::d you= start/start to work/work

0259 LL: [when did you started your work?/ your job?] = sorushun zama::ne Gozashte (ask in past tense)

0260 (Teacher C): <y you

0261 LL: did you:: [you::=]

0262 (Teacher C): <you

0263 LL: started/start/started/start?

0264 (Teacher C): you::? =

0265 LL: started/start/started/start?

0266 (Teacher C): (.) start or started?

0267 LL: start/start/started/start?

0268 (Teacher C): sta::rt/ start/start to work/work

0269 LL: start/start to work/work

0270 (Teacher C): to::? to:

0271 LL: to/ work/work

0272 (Teacher C): to:: < work(.) o:: k <answer>

0273 (Mohamad ): I started to work when I=

0274 (Teacher C): =aha

0275 (Mohamad ): = when I was

0276 (Teacher C): I::::?= when I was

0277 (Mohamad ): = twenty

0278 (Ali): I started to work

0279 (Teacher C): started

0280 (Ali): to work when I was=

0281 (Teacher C): to:: work ?

0282 L: when you was

0283 (Ali): when I was(.)

0284 (Teacher C): I wa::s < I was↑>

0285 (Ali): ten

0286 (Teacher C): ten you were kid?
Finally, through their collaboration and with joint help of their teacher, students could arrive at the correct form of the question. Subsequently, teacher demands the students to answer the question. Mohamad who is one of the most active students of the class, easily takes the talking floor. His classmates join him and help him to produce an accurate and appropriate answer which is then successfully accomplished through intimate cooperation of the teacher. Reza who is a less active student, compared to his classmates seems to be less satisfied with his passivity in class discussion. Therefore, he ventures to take the floor and produce an alternative answer to the given question (line 289). His reply is pleasantly a personal and self directed response to the question at hand (or I never start to work). Showing a sincere interest in Reza's personal answer and the fact that he actually tried to participate, teacher C repeats his question in high pitch to appreciate his contribution. After teacher's repetition, interaction pattern changes and ISRF sequence unfolds. Following her repetition of Reza's question in line 290, she asks a referential question which shows her full understating of the significance of the opportunity under question. In the last TCU (Schegloff and Sacks, 1974, pp.702-704) of line 290, she initiates a new sequence "why?" and expects him to come up with an appropriate answer. Teacher C's "why" is actually the first move of ISRF sequence. As a result of teacher's initiation move, Reza is struggling to provide a response in his second move. Through his physical gesture, he shows that he is, in fact, undertaking the process of meaning making and is trying to come up with answer. Quickly following Reza's second turn, teacher's third turn move unfolds which contains an appropriate answer to her own "why" in the initiation move. The answer in line 292 is a clue to the fact that teacher C has a good amount of information about Reza. When she gives the answer in line 292 (i.e. because you are a college student†?) the smile on her face and her declarative tone of the statement shows that she is quite certain about the accuracy of the response. Finally as a matter of fact, Reza inevitably orients to teacher's modification to interaction network and readily adopts the role of providing the teacher with feedback in the forth move of ISRF sequences. Therefore, he comes up with answer "yes"(line 293) to certify the accuracy of teacher's response.

4. Discussion

As we showed before, when Reza delivers his second turn, he is actually getting involved in a social event with his teacher. But the social event underway is of no value from sociocultural perspective. The fact is that Reza has no right or chance in this turn to help teacher to locate his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Therefore, it can be argued that Reza, by no means, will manage to internalize teacher C's mediated language owing to the following principles. First he had neither chance nor right to exercise his own curiosity in situ. Therefore, he might resist such a response because he received it without trying to seek for it. Moreover, it's against Goodwin's (2007, as cited in Waring, 2009, p. 815) "occasioned knowledge exploration" in which learners themselves get down on exploring the needed response. Second, considering the fact that ZPD possesses a dynamic nature, there is no evidence on teacher's part to guarantee his response is, indeed, in Reza's ZPD in that specific moment. Prior to his
response, teacher has, in fact, no idea about how Reza might undertake such a meaning making process. Therefore, his response is in position that is not sensitive to Reza's ZPD. Third, one of the fruitful moments for learning is when the object of learning evolves from the students themselves. As Waring (2009) maintains students might alienate from such a response simply on the grounds that it does not belong to him. Forth, teacher C is actually superimposing his response to Reza at this special point. Without waiting to receive willingness from Reza to give a response on behalf of him, teacher C is preemptively loading his response on him. As Hawkins puts, a rich learning environment is where teacher bends towards the students to grasp their understandings before getting the students converge to his own expert understandings. Therefore, teacher's response in that special case might lead to any microgenetic development. All those above-mentioned anti-pedagogical qualities can be easily traced in any ISRF sequences. Therefore, it can be strongly claimed that ISRF sequences are anti-pedagogical sequences on the basis of aforementioned reasons along with some other reasons which are latent at the moment.

5. Conclusion

The present study was actually intended to investigate the correlation between IRF sequences. It was discussed that IRF sequences have been criticized harshly within the field of language teaching. Afterwards, our finding managed to cast light on two related issues concerning IRF sequences. First was the fact that IRF sequences do actually undergo internal changes. And the second is that their changes have potential to double or triple the detrimental impact of the whole sequence. The reason of such degree of detriments is that within IRF sequences, students are bereft of even response turns. That is to say, these sequences strongly obstruct learning opportunities of students. Therefore, teachers should create rich participation contexts where students are provided with multiple opportunities to easily grasp the speaking floor and manage the discourse and to choose when they want to speak. Working in this way, they can provide invaluable space for students to practice the skills needed for the realities of the target society. Based on our findings, it is compulsory for teacher to exclude ISRF sequences on the grounds that these sequences have potential to destroy any participation opportunities nearby. It is also advisable for teachers to help students to build on previous utterances, to engage others (specifically low achievers) in interaction, to negotiate in the current discussions of the classroom, and in some instances to offer them extended wait-time.

6. References


