

UNIVERSITATEA DE VEST DIN TIMIȘOARA
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE ȘTIINȚE UMANISTE
DOMENIUL FILOLOGIE

PECULIARITIES OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE.
THE CASE OF THE EFL CLASS

-ABSTRACT-

Scientific coordinator:

Prof. univ. dr. habil. Loredana Mihaela PUNGĂ

Candidate:

Iozeфина CÎRLOBAN
(SANDOR)

Timișoara
2022

The starting point for the present study is discovering that, for most of the secondary school students I have been interacting with (as an EFL teacher) over the past years, speaking in English is difficult and challenging. Their English communication (in class) is mostly limited to answering questions. Moreover, informal discussions with students' parents revealed that students are reluctant to speaking English when travelling abroad with their family (on holiday) and they reduce their interaction to a minimum (answering *yes-no* questions, avoiding to initiate interaction), despite their high marks obtained in English classes within the schools they attend, in Romania. The majority of the children understand what they are being said, but, for most of them it is difficult to "find their words" and communicate.

Therefore, what might be the generating cause for the students' unwillingness/incapacity to speak English? On the one hand, I suppose their unwillingness to initiate/continue interaction is determined by psychological factors (such as personality traits or frequent discouragements they faced), while their incapacity to interact might be caused by their lack of practice. I consider that the linguistic structures students are exposed to during EFL classes have a major impact on the development of their communicative competence in foreign language and determine among the learners a certain attitude towards it.

The present thesis is structured in five chapters, followed by a list of references and appendices, including transcription glossary, full lessons transcriptions of the eight analyzed lessons and the sample of the

written consent, both for teachers involved in the study and for the learners' parents.

The first chapter, *General Background of the Study. Study Methodology*, is divided in two sub-chapters. The former pinpoints some Discourse Analysis (DA) and Conversation Analysis (CA) key features (both being methodological approaches for the study of talk), talk-in-interaction and communicative competence in EFL, moving forward to Classroom Discourse and its characteristics (institutional and instructional; turn-taking and sequential oriented), together with the main ideas contained in a series of studies carried out in the field of Classroom Discourse, among which I mention Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) *Towards an Analysis of Discourse. The English Used by Teachers and Pupils* (the IRF/IRE interaction pattern), Walsh (2006) *Investigating Classroom Discourse* (classroom seen as a social context), Heritage (1998) *Conversation Analysis and Institutional Talk. Analyzing Distinctive Turn-Taking Systems* (the institutionality of classroom discourse/teacher talk), Tsui (2008) *Classroom Discourse. Approaches and Perspectives* (teachers' modified speech in order to facilitate learners' comprehension and to increase participation in their communities of practice), Krashen (1982) *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition* (the concept of language acquisition as a consequence of being exposed to a particular language use).

Despite not having been paid much attention in Romanian context, to the best of my knowledge, classroom discourse analysis was

the subject to studies carried out by Cehan (2010) *Thank You: An Analysis of the Thanking Strategies Taught in the English Classrooms in Romania* (*thank you* mostly used as a pre-closing/closing signal in classroom talk, sometimes at the beginning of the lesson, i.e. *How are you? I'm fine, thank you*, and difficult to find *thank you* or *thanks* as an expression of gratitude in classroom talk), Cehan (2002) *Interpersonal and Pedagogical Communication: An Argument for Natural Communication Practices in the Romanian EFL Classroom* (limited opportunity in classroom context to introduce authentic language use) and Mureşan (2017) *Oral Communication in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom* (classroom talk - mainly instructional oriented and less inclined towards natural conversation).

The second part of the first chapter describes the study methodology used. The following aspects are mentioned:

- the aim of my research: to investigate and identify the way in which classroom interaction and teacher-talk contribute to developing learners' communicative competence and to analyse the possibility that the learning process to be supported or inhibited by teacher-talk;
- the research questions: a) Is there really a linguistic pattern (code) that teachers of English use in the EFL class?; b) If yes, does this code vary with each teacher or are there "universal" characteristics of the EFL classroom discourse?; c) Are there any detectable/obvious factors that influence the way in which teachers

of English shape their discourse in class? If yes, which are these factors?; d) What are the individual and general characteristics of the EFL classroom discourse at the level of: vocabulary, syntactic structures, stylistic devices employed and pragmatic framing?; e) To what extent do teachers control their language output taking into consideration that they know (and signed a written consent) the lessons are recorded?;

- the type of analysis: the analysis is both qualitative – the data is transcribed and analyzed, and quantitative – the amount of time allocated to teacher talk expressed as a percentage and the number of classroom discourse modulators are indicated in the case of the two teachers, for each of their recorded lessons (a total of eight lessons - four lessons for each teacher, two for beginner students and two for intermediate students);
- the selection of teachers and classes: the two teachers who volunteered to take part in my study (identified as T1 and T2) are non-native English-speaking teachers; they teach in two different state schools in the same town, having the same structure of the curricula and quite similar number of students in each class; the two teachers individually decided what lessons they want to record;
- the recording of the material: laptops connected to a small video camera were used (those used to supervise national examinations) in order to provide data as accurately as possible;

- the transcription of the recording: full lesson transcription (using a simplified method adapted from ten Have's (2007) and Jefferson's (2004) transcription convention) contains between 3.000 and 4.000 words for each of the eight lessons, to which clarifications are added by the transcriber (the author of the present study) marked between double brackets, and the amount of time for each intervention, expressed in seconds;
- Sketch Engine and its usefulness: being both qualitative and quantitative, the present study required a text analysis software. Therefore, Sketch Engine was used in order to be able to offer precise results of the presence and frequency of modulators; I offered some brief explanation of the way in which Sketch Engine works and I included illustrative screenshots of the results provided, for the analysis;
- the significance of the present study: my focus is mainly on the possible effects that teacher-talk might have on developing the learners' communicative competence (as they tend to use the linguistic structures they are being exposed to), as well as on their participation and interaction in class;
- the ethical issues were not ignored and, consequently, in order to carry out the present study, I requested, in advance, the two schools' management approval (schools where the two teachers involved in the study teach); moreover, the identity of the two

teachers, and of the students' as well, was protected and all the participants signed a written consent before recording the lessons;

Chapter two, *Teacher-Student Talking Time in the EFL Classroom Discourse*, focuses on teacher-student interaction amount and content, including some observations related to traditional and non-traditional classes as well as to unplanned moments which appear in classroom interaction.

In order to offer a description of the results I used a number of graphics (for each teacher and for each lesson, both for beginner and for intermediate level students), in which various colours were employed so as to render the results more visible. The number above each column in the graphics represent the amount of time in percentage (considering the entire EFL class as corresponding to 100%). Despite not being the main focus of my study, students' talk amount, teacher-controlled breaks, natural fluency and choral repetition were all taken into consideration in order to be able to qualitatively analyse teacher-talk. Moreover, I grouped the results according to the language proficiency level displayed by the students and the lessons are chronologically numbered according to the date when these were recorded.

In terms of teacher-talk amount, the results show that, with beginner students, T1 speaks less than T2 (66.32% compared to 69.86%), graphics showing a difference of 3.54%. However, considering students' declarative and interrogative sentences, in terms of interaction initiation, T2 was more inclined towards developing students' communicative

competence, as T2's beginner students have 4.72% interrogative sentences, in contrast to only 0.24% for interrogative initiations belonging to T1's students. Students' declarative again shows some significant difference, a percentage of 4.45 in favour of T2's students (12.63% compared to 17.08%).

With intermediate students, despite the similar amount of teacher talk (66.09% for T1 compared to 67.57% for T2), students' declarative statements show higher difference manifested during T2's classes, whose students produce 22.36% declarative, in contrast to 15.91% for T1's students (6.45% difference, which confirms a higher interaction openness manifested by T2). However, although surprising, intermediate students' interrogative initiations are quantitatively more reduced than beginner students' initiations for both of the two teachers, T2's students producing 0.6% of this type of initiations, while these (interrogative initiations) are totally absent in the case of T1's students.

Both T1 and T2 provide quite linear linguistic output, since, for instance, T1 provides 66.32% teacher-talk with beginner students and 66.09% with intermediate ones (a reduction of only 0.23% T1's teacher-talk with intermediate students). On the other hand, T2's talk represents 69.86% with beginner students as compared to 67.57% with intermediate ones (a reduction of 2.29% with intermediate students). This result may suggest T2's awareness regarding the necessity of a reduced teacher-talk when she interacts with intermediate students.

Furthermore, in terms of teacher-talk content, T1 seems to be more inclined towards a traditional approach, mostly relying on the IRF pattern (initiation-response-feedback). For instance, what I called *the simulation game* appears in T1's talk, when she checks homework. The difference between T1's intended meaning for the questions "What was your homework for today?" or "Have you got any homework for today?" (marking in this way a transition from one lesson stage to another) and these questions' direct meaning (decoded by some students as a speech act through which information is being elicited) might confuse learners as, despite their direct meaning, the previous mentioned questions are not meant to clarify if the students had any homework, but they are intended to prepare the students for checking homework. A student's negative answer to one of these questions (that student being ignored by T1) together with the teacher's offering specific information about the homework assignment confirm that T1 knew exactly what their homework was. From a psychological perspective, *the simulation game* might be demotivating unless the teacher's intended meaning of the questions "Have you got any homework for today?" or "What was your homework for today?" becomes clear for the students.

The general conclusion of this chapter is that both teachers (T1 and T2) produced, throughout the recorded lessons, quite similar amount of teacher talk and both of them reduced the allocated teacher-talking time during intermediate students' classes. However, at the level of students' interrogative sentences, some significant contrast appears: T2's

beginner students are visibly more inclined towards asking questions and speaking freely during the class (which, in my opinion, stimulates communicative competence development, focusing on fluency). On the other hand, T1's students tend to use short declarative statements and to respond addressed questions, which reduces their involvement in classroom interaction, coming as a confirmation for a more evident institutional character of T1's talk.

In chapter three, *Discourse Modulators in the EFL Classroom Discourse*, focus falls on what I named *classroom discourse modulators* (“Ok”, “good”, “now”, “ready”, “so”, “let's”), which I consider to be, to a great extent, responsible for the speed and rhythm of the lesson, both teacher-controlled/imposed.

Discourse markers or pragmatic markers (Brinton, 1996) identify different kinds of boundaries and limitations in speech, while classroom modulators mark transitions between diverse sub-sequences of the lesson, depending on the teacher's intended purpose. *To modulate* means “to adjust or to keep in proper measure or proportion” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary [online]) and “to change something, such as an action or a process to make it more suitable for its situation” (Cambridge Dictionary [online]). Therefore, in classroom context, modulators fulfil different functions (despite their apparent character of *fillers*, which are meant to fill moments of transition): *feedback modulators*, *kick modulators* and *imperative modulators*. Judging by the learners' (re)actions, it becomes

visible that the use of modulators has an impact on them, motivating students to actively participate in the lesson and, consequently, to learn.

Within this chapter, I analysed the frequency of modulators and the context in which these appear (see Tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3). To demonstrate, I included two illustrative screenshots of the first and last displayed page in Sketch Engine for each of the mentioned modulators, in each category. Their use seems to stimulate a faster pace and sequencing of events in such a way that the (chrono)logical flow of the lesson stages and elements become clear to the students. The place of the modulators is not a fixed one and some encoded meaning is attached to their proper meaning, which seems to be easily decoded by the students, suggesting a certain familiarity between the teacher and the learners. Moreover, the teacher's use of modulators helps students concentrate and prepare for the next sub-sequence of the lesson.

My study introduces the following classroom used modulators:

1. Feedback modulators: “Ok” and “good”- despite their apparent synonymy, they are used in different proportions and preferred by both teachers. Still, visible difference can be noticed in table 3.1: T1 prefers to use “ok”, while T2 is more inclined towards using “good”. An interesting remark appears as T1 uses “ok” 44 times in each of the two recorded lessons, taught to beginner students, while T2 uses “good” 35 times in each of the two lessons taught to intermediate students. This might indicate the fact that the teachers (un)consciously follow the same pattern in the lessons they teach (pattern which includes, as we can see,

linguistic habits which almost become tics), T1 for beginner students and T2 for the intermediate ones.

Judging by the number of occurrences and by their flexible position, these modulators not only seem to stimulate learners (by offering quick positive feedback), but they also have an important role for the teacher's interior reflection on what has happened in the classroom up to a particular moment in the lesson, thus helping the teacher organize and adjust her further teaching.

2. Kick modulators: “now”, “ready”, “so” – used to determine the learners to mentally orient towards what the teacher intended to happen next in the lesson. “Now” and “so” unambiguously mark some forward movement and impose the rhythm of the lesson. “Ready”, on the other hand, seems to allow students to interfere within the lesson flow (when this is addressed by the teacher with the purpose of receiving an answer) and to decrease (if necessary) the speed of the lesson; a negative answer from the learners' part (taken into consideration by the teacher) might allow students reveal and impose their own rhythm, mainly during task completion, “ready” being the only modulator addressed interrogatively. Its reduced number of uses (T1 uses “ready” four times with beginner students and not at all with intermediate ones, while and T2 uses it 16 times with beginner students and only once with intermediate learners) betrays a certain rigidity manifested by both teachers, who seem to impose, to a great extent and indirectly, a certain rhythm which they

consider appropriate for the lesson. This does not encourage learners' participation, being a less student-centred approach.

The numbers in table 3.2 show that, with beginner students, more kick modulators are used, probably because of the learners' age, of their reduced capacity to focus for longer periods of time and of their lack of familiarity with classroom environment. Therefore, I consider that marking transition by using kick modulators seems to have a determinant role in the learners' activity, without leaving them too much space to deconcentrate and disconnect from the lesson.

3. Imperative modulators: "let's"- despite its apparent meaning of a suggestion, in classroom context, "let's" is decoded by the learners as a command, coming from the teacher, but addressed to a group that includes both the teacher and the students as well, thus suggesting a sense of unity in the teacher-imposed action (despite her being the authority who takes all decisions in the classroom).

Comparing the two teachers, table 3.3 shows that T1 is more inclined to use "let's" to introduce a new sequence of the lesson, presenting subsequent actions as indirect commands. Therefore, "let's" is always followed by a verb, which mostly refers to actions students should perform in classroom. On the other hand, T2 prefers to use "let's see" (where "see" means to analyse, to discover, to understand), the goal being the same, namely to determine students to get to action.

All these being considered, it could be concluded that modulators are used with multiple functions: to organize, to connect, to stimulate and

to provoke the students, assuring the learners' mental participation and involvement in the lesson and creating a certain dynamic in the classroom. Modulators are vital if we are to consider the limited amount of time teachers have to achieve the lesson's objectives (modulators accelerate or decelerate the rhythm of the lesson). However, an overuse of modulators might inhibit students' participation and their successive use at speed creates the image of a *highway-lesson* (one in which it is the teacher who knows what s/he is supposed to do and only acts according to the lesson plan, without flexibility or adaptability during the lesson, and without showing much interest for the learners' unpredicted needs). What I consider to be a *highway-lesson* does not allow teachers to adapt to students' needs or to explore any learning opportunities which occur during the lesson, consequently inhibiting students' development of communicative competence.

Chapter four, *Mirroring Expressions in the EFL Classroom Discourse*, analyses the concept of *mirroring in EFL* (Sandor, 2019) from a comparative perspective. On the one hand, *mirroring* comes as evidence of the standardized formulas and linguistic stereotypes used by some teachers (expressions which might negatively influence the students' ability to develop their communicative competence). However, on the other hand, teacher's complete failure to clearly mark the two extreme points of the lesson (beginning and the rounding off) could give the learners a feeling of a succession difficult to follow.

I defined *mirroring in EFL* as the use of “complementary linguistic structures in order to have one-to-one correspondent in different lesson stages” (Sandor, 2019: 158). To analyse the discursive practice thus defined, I took into consideration both similarities and differences between beginner and intermediate classes for each of the two teachers.

The two teachers in my study prefer to clearly announce their lessons (in a more or less obvious manner), but it seems that the (mirroring) signal, in linguistic terms, of the end of the lesson is less frequent or even absent. Therefore, with beginner students, expressions such as: “now, today we are going to do some exercises with the present tense simple ...”, “today we are going to learn new words, new things from page 20...”, “now we are going to look at page 42; we have another lesson called ...” seem to introduce the lessons/topics in discussion. However, at the end of the lesson, different formulations are used, without explicit reference to the introductory part. Therefore, partial mirroring or no mirroring at all occurred. For instance, “Thank you very much. We stop here. Next time we are going to [...] but it’s enough for today”, “Is it clear? That was all for today.”, “It’s very easy, please pay attention” mark the end of the lesson and the two teachers prefer to use the pronouns “it” or “that” (the demonstrative pronoun which seems to include the entire lesson) in order to refer to the lesson that has just been taught (suggesting some induced mirroring, not clearly expressed).

On the other hand, with intermediate students, in order to introduce the lessons, the two teachers use formulas such as “Today we have a new lesson”, “today we are going to learn, to find more interesting things about the American culture and civilization”, “today we’re going to talk about the relative pronouns”, “now please open your books [...] today we are going to read a text about ...” which do not mirror at all the final part, this final part mostly consisting in offering feedback and encouragements to the learners or in indicating their homework assignment: “thank you for being active today”, “for next time each of you is going to write a short paragraph ...” or “as homework...”.

Moreover, there are some differences to be noticed in terms of students’ interaction and involvement. T1’s students seem to be less active than T2’s learners, despite T1’s direct encouragements regarding their active participation in the lesson. This might suggest that the linguistic pattern used by T1 does not necessarily support learners’ participation, and probably the use of mirroring expressions might direct the learners towards a distant attitude.

In contrast, T2’s learners (especially beginner students) are more inclined towards interaction, to ask or answer questions, which even creates minor discipline problems in class. I think that T2’s approach facilitates more the development of the learners’ communicative competence.

The results of my analysis indicate that, despite both teachers’ tendency to strictly follow the lesson stages, they slightly neglect

rounding the lesson off. However, the end of the lesson is marked (mostly by mentioning the tasks assigned for homework), but without much mirroring or reference to the recently taught lesson. On the one hand, this could have a positive impact on the learners, as frequent and too much mirroring might increase (and emphasize) the institutional character of classroom discourse. On the other hand, moderate mirroring is necessary in order to help learners mentally visualize essential aspects of the lesson, but without using specific terminology (most of the times difficult to be understood by the learners).

To sum up, as far as *mirroring* (as a discursive option) is concerned, the standardised formulas and linguistic stereotypes in the data I have analysed are not a guarantee for developing students' communicative competence.

Chapter five, *Conclusion*, includes my answers to the research questions, possible pedagogical implications of the present study, and some of the study limitations.

The answers to the initial research questions could be synthesised as follows:

- There is a linguistic pattern that teachers of English use in the EFL class; both teachers in my study prefer to announce the new lesson, but one of them (T2) prefers a more direct approach, without much linguistic marking, while the other (T1) is more inclined towards using a standardised formula (for instance, “today we are going to ...”). Moreover, the end of the lesson is briefly marked by

expressions such as “thank you” or “as homework”, but without explicit mirroring (neither with beginner students nor with intermediate ones), despite the possible psychological positive impact that the use of mirroring expressions might have on the students’ understanding of their newly acquired information;

- The present study demonstrates that there are slight variations in terms of the linguistic code the two teachers use in EFL classes. They both tend to adopt a traditional IRF approach (initiation-response-feedback), although this approach is more visible in T1’s classes, who, to a great extent, uses institutional and instructional language during the lesson. This inevitably suggests that communication is directed towards an institutional specific purpose, and, therefore, this is not much in favour of developing students’ communicative abilities. Moreover, despite some timid attempts for real communication, this does not happen and the lesson was evidently constructed around the topic to be taught or around the skill to be developed;
- The factors which influence teacher-talk in EFL classes could be classified in two categories, according to the dimension they belong: observable dimension (including objective factors, such as setting, cultural background, learners’ age, language proficiency level of the students, native or non-native English-speaking teacher) and unobservable dimension (which includes subjective factors, such as emotions, perceptions, power relations and

students' predominant learning styles). The two teachers in my study took into consideration most of the factors mentioned above (both subjective and objective) and adapted their talk accordingly. However, despite several unplanned situations which occurred during the recorded lessons, these were not incorporated in the teaching-learning process and therefore, spontaneous circumstances were not transformed in learning opportunities (this might be due to the fact that both teachers are non-native English speakers);

- In terms of the EFL classroom discourse characteristics, my study demonstrates that what I named *classroom discourse modulators* play an essential role in facilitating logical transition from one episode of the lesson to another or from one topic to the following. Moreover, the use of modulators offers reflection time to the speaker (in order to rearrange and adapt the speech) as well as permit the speaker impose a certain rhythm and dynamic to the lesson. I categorized modulators in three different groups: *feedback modulators* (“ok”, “good”), *kick modulators* (“now”, “ready”, “so”) and *imperative modulator* (“let’s”). Judging by the learners’ (re)actions, these modulators seem to impact the students’ involvement in the lesson. At the same time, paying attention to both a conscious use of modulators and the impact they have on students’ engagement, teachers could self-evaluate their talk and

determine the right measure, in relation to each class (through the indirect feedback provided by the students) even during class time.

- The idea of the two teachers' consciously and intentionally controlled language output (considering they knew they were recorded) cannot be totally excluded. However, a lower degree of naturalness of the two teachers' talk could not have been unnoticed by their students who seem to be familiar with the teachers' linguistic manifestations as well as with the sequencing of the lesson (which comes to prove they both acted as they normally do and justifies my belief that, to a great extent, the teachers' behaviour was the usual one). Yet, the two teachers' tendency not to exploit unplanned situations which occurred during the recorded lessons (especially T1 who deliberately ignored some of the students' interrogative initiations) might betray a certain self-imposed decision to stick to the initial lesson plan (probably to avoid some less favourable unpredicted situations which could have been recorded by the camera).

This study admittedly has limitations that may be turned into future research starting points. Videotaping classroom lessons does not perform as objective as we might consider: I accepted the two teachers to choose which lessons and when to record them, as my intention was to offer them the freedom in order to feel as comfortable as possible and to perform as natural as possible. Hence, I cannot ignore the possibility that some aspects might have been adapted or intentionally excluded

(although, as above mentioned, students' reactions plead for the conviction that, although these aspects cannot be ignored, they probably had minimum dimensions).

Another limitation of the present study might be determined by the fact that, while recording, the camera did not completely catch the entire classroom, therefore, some of the teachers' reactions were mostly deductively associated, rather than evidently connected to an issue (this is the reason why I tried to include in the transcripts as many details as possible from what the video could offer). Furthermore, although the microphone recording the voice has caught most of the sounds, some shy students manifested visible tendency to whisper rather than clearly articulate their utterances, which created some problems in understanding their talk (the lack of clarity being marked by the use of empty parentheses in the transcription). However, my study does not focus on students' talk and, therefore, being able to clearly understand teacher-talk helped me connect the entire interaction and take out the necessary elements required by the present study.

The research depicted in the present PhD thesis might have future pedagogical implications as it may impact teachers' awareness about the importance of their language output during EFL classes, impact which could positively contribute to a more efficient teaching-learning process, shifting the teacher-centred lesson towards a student-centred one. Furthermore, some of the psychological implications of (in)appropriate teacher-talk might be acknowledged, especially by beginner teachers,

and, consequently, teachers could avoid using instructional discourse exclusively and they might consider learners' need to develop their communicative competence (competence to be used both inside and outside the classroom), this creating a change (probably small, but necessary) in the Romanian educational system. The conclusions obtained based on the analysis of teacher-talk in EFL are, to a large extent, transferable to the classes in which other subjects are taught. Thus, the relevance of the present study may be seen as broader.

Keywords: teacher-talk, communicative competence, mirroring expressions, discourse modulators, duration of interaction sequences