WHAT *DO* TEACHERS DO?
A LOOK AT THE ORAL SKILLS PRACTICES IN THE LESLLA
CLASSROOM

Susanna Strube, Radboud University Nijmegen

1   Introduction

This paper concerns what teachers say in their verbal interactions with their LESLLA[1] students during the practice of the oral skills. Many studies have focused on interaction in the L2 classroom (Chaudron, 1988; Ellis, 1990, 1999; Gass, 1997; Johson, 1995; Mackey, 2007; Van Lier, 1988, 1996, 2001) but none have taken a look at interaction during the practice of the oral skills in the literacy classroom. This paper will do just that. Most of the studies in the past focusing on the L2 classroom have not taken the L2 literacy classroom into account. Consequently SLA theory is largely based on the performance demonstrated by literate, and often highly educated L2 learners. Bigelow & Tarone, who have undertaken one of the few experimental studies on the effect of literacy on the oral production of a L2 state that 'The failure to investigate illiterate learners has resulted in SLA theory that may not account for the full range of contexts in which human beings learn L2' (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004:690). They continue by stating: 'If accepted findings describe only literate and educated language learners, then theory has limited applicability and little value in guiding teachers who work with illiterate learners' (op. cit.). In undertaking a study concerning illiterate learners one must take into account that these learners are, in the first place, low- or not educated and low- or non-literate, meaning that the written word is not available as a support in their study. Parallel to their limited literacy skills, literacy students' command of the L2 oral skills is often very restricted. This means that their vocabulary and the intrinsic knowledge of sounds, words and sentences are inadequately developed. Consequently literacy students have a double challenge: learning to read and write while at the same time working on the oral skills, the building blocks on which learning to read can materialize. Also as Bigelow et al., (2006:666) stated 'lack of L1 literacy may affect not just the acquisition of L2 literacy, but also the use and acquisition of L2 oral skills.' Secondly, through the lack of formal education literacy students have not learned the cognitive skills necessary for learning success in a classroom context. For many of these learners formal education such as in a classroom is their major source for developing these skills. If, for whatever reason, their access to the L2 is restricted, the classroom is their only source. For these reasons

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[1] LESLLA is an acronym for Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition. Here I will use this term to refer to this specific type of second language learner.

knowing what goes on in the L2 classroom is of the utmost importance. This study focused on two questions: what characterizes interaction in the L2 literacy classroom during the practice of the oral skills and specifically, how does the student partake in the interaction? In section 2 the method, participants and classroom activities will be described. In section 3 classroom interaction will be discussed. In section 4 student initiations will be examined. The results will be presented in section 5 with a final discussion and conclusions in section 6.

2   Method

The data for this longitudinal on-going study was collected during the practice of the oral skills of six different L2 literacy classrooms at centers of adult education in the Netherlands (see also Strube, 2006, 2007). Each class was observed eight times, once a month in the period from November 2006 to October 2007. The recordings of the classroom sessions were transcribed and analyzed. The teacher-student verbal interactions were then analyzed according to structure and question type. For this paper five minutes of the initial activity in each classroom were selected for analysis. Below, the participants and the classroom activities are described.

2.1   Participants

All the students in the six classrooms belong to the Leslla category of learners, which means that they have had no or just a few years of education in their country of origin and were illiterate or low-literate upon arrival in the Netherlands. Table 1 gives a summary of the students in each class.

Table 1: Student characteristics of the literacy classroom during oral practice for the six classes at onset of the research project circa January 2007

Class room	Age		Gender	Country of origin	Years of schooling				Years in the Netherlands	
					L1		DSL			
	Mean	SD			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	35.3	13.3	14 F	various	1.7	2.5	0.8	0.6	9.3	11.8
2	41	10.6	11 F	various	0.3	0.8	1.3	1.4	4.9	3.2
3	46.4	15.8	6 F 1 M	various	1.1	1.9	1.1	0.4	2.6	2.3
4	33.0	13.4	10 F 1 M	various	3.8	3.5	0.8	0.8	3.8	4.7
5	48	7.1	13 F	Morocco	0.6	1.5	1.3	0.3	15.4	7.4
6	42.8	8.5	11 F	10 Mor. 1 Turkey	0	0	1.8	1.2	14.5	7.2

2.2   Classroom activities

In all six classrooms the whole class worked together on one central activity with the teacher in control. She was the one who decided how the activity was to be executed, what material was to be used, and who was allowed to speak, with whom, and when. The initial activity in classroom 1 was the weekend story. First the students, in dyads,

told each other about their past weekend happenings. Then each student had to tell the whole class about his classmate's weekend. Classroom 2 started each lesson in a fixed manner: first the date, then the weather and finally news of the week passed the review. Here a distinction is made between talking and telling (see also Van Lier, 1988: 153-54). Talking refers to a conversation, a spoken exchange of ideas and implies two or more speakers. Telling expresses the giving of information, such as instructions, explanations, or a story and usually involves only one speaker. In classroom 1 the students were telling about weekend events, while in classroom 2 the students were talking about the news. Classroom 3 was working on the topic 'the house', the rooms and their contents. After having located a particular room on a prefabricated floor plan, the teacher would ask each student in turn about that particular room in their own house. In classroom 4 the topic was grocery shopping. Working with a work sheet and real objects the teacher reviewed vocabulary, the formation of the plural and the use of the present singular of the verb to have. In classroom 5 the teacher started by greeting the students, not to be polite, but as a review of the routine. Subsequently she reviewed the days and the months of the calendar. Classroom 6 focused on making sentences. First the teacher placed at random objects in front of each student. Then each student had to name the object along with the correct definite article (Dutch has two definite articles, 'de' and 'het'). With that word, with or without use of the definite article, the student had to construct a simple sentence. Table 2 gives a brief overview of these classroom activities.

Table 2: Classroom activities in the literacy classroom during oral practice for the six classes during a single observation.

Classroom	Topic	Activity objective	Materials
1	Weekend story	Telling about events	None
2	Calendar, weather and news of the week	Vocabulary and talking about events.	None
3	The house	Vocabulary, telling and preposition use	Floor plan
4	Grocery shopping	Vocabulary, plural formation and the verb to have.	Worksheet and real objects
5	Greeting and the calendar	Routines and vocabulary	None
6	Making sentences	Vocabulary and sentence structure.	Real objects

3 Instructional interaction

Classroom interaction tends to have an instructional quality (Ellis, 1990; Johnson, 1995; Van Lier, 2001). For this reason, I have termed this type of interaction as 'instructional interaction' and will focus primarily on verbal interactions between teacher and student. The most common type of instructional interaction is called the IRF exchange pattern. In this pattern I stands for initiation which usually is the teacher's input; R stands for response and is the (student's) reaction to the initiation; F stands for feedback and is the (teacher's) evaluation of or follow-up to the response.

In 1975 Sinclair and Coulthard brought this structure to the attention of researchers and educators. Later researchers such as in 1979 Mehan and Cazden in 1988 showed that in the classroom the IRF pattern is the most frequent type of teacher-student exchange pattern. It occurs most often in teacher-fronted type of classrooms where the teacher controls all the events from topic choice to activity and interaction structure (Ellis, 1990, 1999; Johnson, 1995; Van Lier, 1996, 2001). There has been considerable criticism on a too frequent reliance on this structure in the language classroom as it does not allow for student variation or experimentation. The IRF exchange pattern does not leave room for asking questions, expanding on requests, self-correcting or even initiating an exchange outside the requested response (Sinclair & Brazil, 1982; Ellis, 1999; Mercer, 2001; Van Lier, 2001). In spite of these drawbacks, Van Lier (1996, 2001) proposed that the IRF exchange can be a valued pedagogical tool with different pedagogical purposes. Depending on the type of questions asked the student can be requested to produce learned material, explain usage or even display understanding. If viewed from this angle the IRF exchange structure becomes an important didactic technique in classroom interaction. It is not a question *if* this pattern occurs, but rather *how* it is manipulated. In this paper is discussed how the IRF exchanges manifest themselves in the Leslla classroom and what effect these exchanges have on L2 learning. In subsection 3.1 the types of questions that teachers pose are discussed and in subsection 3.2 the pedagogical focus of these questions are discussed.

3.1   Types of questions in instructional interaction

Within the IRF pattern variation can occur through the types of questions the teacher poses and through the focus of her questions, either on form or meaning. Question types can broadly be grouped into two main categories: referential versus display questions and open versus closed questions. Referential questions are also referred to as real or genuine questions by Spada and Fröhlich (1995). The answers to such questions are not known by the teacher beforehand and they are usually not restricted in form and often contain more than a few words. An example of a referential question is: What did you do yesterday? In contrast to referential questions stand display questions. These types of questions are also referred to as test or tutorial questions in that the teacher expects a predetermined answer (Ellis, 1990). These questions are frequently routine type of questions which check for knowledge or understanding, such as: When is your birthday? The student's response is often restricted in form and is usually short.

The second category is the open versus closed questions. Open questions require more than a mere 'yes' or 'no' answer. Often they contain who, what, where, when, why and how questions, such as: Where will you go on vacation? Open questions are frequently referential questions. In contrast stand the closed questions for which only one answer is possible. It could be a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, such as in: Is today Friday? or a choice out of a closed set of possibilities, such as in: What day is it today? Example (1) illustrates the basic IRF pattern taken from classroom 6 where the students have to name an object along with the correct definite article.

(1) *Basic IRF pattern in the classroom*
    1 Teacher: *En wat is 't, de of het vaas?*   (initiation – closed display)
                  And what is it, (de) or (het) vase?
    2 Student: *De vaas.*   (response)

        (de) vase.
 3 Teacher: *De vaas, goed zo, ja.*   (feedback)
            The vase, good, okay

Here we see that the student's response in turn 2 is sandwiched between the teacher's question and her feedback. The teacher's closed display question, checking on grammar knowledge, seeks only one answer – the correct definite article for the given noun. In her feedback, turn 3, the teacher concludes by adding a positive reinforcement signalling that the response was correct. As to be expected, not all interactions strictly follow the IRF pattern as in example (1). Most interactions are variations of extended IRF patterns with re-initiations and multiple feedbacks. A wrong answer to a question might even be ignored by the teacher who then re-initiates her question by rewording it or by changing from an open referential to a closed display question. When the student responds to her feedback the teacher may continue with another feedback. In the following sections expanded types of IRF exchange patterns will be illustrated.

3.2   Focus and IRF instructional interactions

In addition to questions being open referential, closed referential, open display and closed display, they can also focus on a particular pedagogical purpose – that of form or meaning. A question focusing on form refers to the linguistic content and is directed toward aspects of grammar, vocabulary and/or pronunciation. A focus on meaning pertains to the manner in which the language is applied for communicating ideas, thoughts or information and to the ability to use language appropriately in a particular situation (Canale & Swain, 1980). This involves functional and sociolinguistic knowledge which, when incorrectly used, can result in producing the wrong communicative effect (Hymes, 1972). Example (1) above, is clearly an example of a form focused instructional interaction. The student nor the teacher are engaged in meaningful exchange of information. The focus in example (2) is on meaning and grammatical accuracy plays a subsidiary role. It is taken from classroom 2 in which the students are talking about the calendar and the news of the week. Just previous to this example the teacher stressed the importance of watching Dutch television for language development.

 (2) *IRF instructional interaction with a focus on meaning*
    1-Teacher: *Jij, maar kijk jij televisie thuis?*   (initiation – closed
               you, but do you watch television at home?   referential)
    2-Student: *Turkije nee, nee.*   (response)
               Turkey no, no.
    3-Teacher: *Jij kijkt alleen Turkse televisie?*   (confirmation check)
               You only watch Turkish television?
    4-Student: *Uuh computer, kenne praten Turkije computer.*   (response)
               Uuh, computer, can talk Turkey computer.
    5-Teacher: *Jij praat met de computer?*   (confirmation check)
               You talk with the computer?
    6-Student: *Turkije familie Nederland.*   (response)
               Turkey family Netherlands.
    7-Teacher: *Okay, maar jij kijkt niet naar de Nederlandse* (feedback)

televisie?
Okay, but you don't watch Dutch television?

In this extended IRF exchange the teacher has already initiated twice with closed referential questions in trying to get the student to focus on the topic of the moment – the importance of watching television. Example 2 starts with her third initiation to which the student in turn 2 gives a seemingly illogical response. The teacher tries to follow the reasoning of the student by responding with a confirmation check in turn 3. In turn 4 the student is apparently able to demystify the ambiguity of his replies as the teacher's check for confirmation in turn 5 seems to reflect some understanding. In her closing remark, turn 7, the teacher reverts to her original question of watching television and concludes that the student probably does not watch Dutch programs on television. This example distinctly shows how a teacher maneuvers in the face of obvious grammatical problems to comprehend the message the student is trying to convey without correcting linguistic errors.

4   Student initiation

In spite of skilful lesson planning not all that happens in the classroom develops according to plan. The above example (2) is one example of an unplanned interaction to which the teacher must react. In that example the teacher is trying repeatedly to get the student to respond to her questions while at the same time the student is trying to get his own message across. On the surface it appears that the teacher and the student are on different lines of thought, but there is a certain relationship between the two. The teacher, telling the students about the importance of watching television, triggered one student's memory on the subject of using the computer to communicate with relatives in the home land. Van Lier states that "it is predominantly during unplanned sequences that we can see learners employ initiative and use language creatively" (1988:215). Students taking initiative in the initiation phase in IRF exchanges are examples of such unplanned initiatives. In example (2) the teacher repeatedly tried to pull the student back to the subject at hand, while the student did not want to be sidetracked from his own topic. Even though the language the student produced spontaneously was flawed, it was a creative endeavour. In the samples of classroom interactions four types of teacher reactions to student initiations surfaced: a cut-off reply, corrective feedback, negotiation of meaning and negotiation of content. These are discussed in the following subsections.

4.1   Student initiation and teacher cut-off reply

The first example, example (3), is from classroom 5 during a review activity on dates and the calendar. It illustrates how the teacher maintains a tight control over the interaction by using a cut-off technique.

(3) *Student initiation with teacher cut-off reply*
    1-Teacher: *Wat is de datum vandaag?*   (initiation – closed
                      What is the date today?   display)
    2-Student A: *Uuh zes februari.*   (response)

	Uuh six February.	
3-Teacher:	*Zes februari.*	(feedback)
	Six February.	
4-Student B:	*Januari thuis.*	(student initiation)
	January at home.	
5-Teacher:	*Ja, januari is thuis. Dit is februari.*	(teacher feedback)
	Yes, January is at home. This is February.	

Turns 1-3 depict a basic IRF exchange during which the teacher initiates using closed display question to ask for specific information. Then in turn 4 another student unexpectedly pops up with a remark, which on the surface seems to have no bearing on the topic at hand. Most likely the mention of the month (February) triggered the student's memory about the preceding month (January). The first two weeks in that month were still Christmas vacation, during which the student probably was at home. To this bit of information the teacher does not respond by evaluating the utterance, as in a corrective feedback, nor does she ignore it. She gives an indication of having heard the utterance – in this instance by repeating it – but does not follow through on it. She then immediately pulls the student back to the topic at hand, consequently closing off any possibility for further development on part of the student and by doing so keeps control of the activity in the class.

4.2   Student initiation and teacher feedback

Example 4 illustrates how the teacher replies to a student initiation with a corrective feedback; in this case a recast. This example was taken from classroom 1 during the weekend story exchange.

(4)	*Student initiation with teacher feedback*	
	1-Student:	*Zondag ook zitten thuis en*	(student initiation 1)
		schoonmaken en eten …	
		Sunday also sit home and	
		Clean and eat …	
	2-Teacher:	O*kay, prima. En Mina …*	(cut-off reply and
		Okay, fine. And Mina …	initiation)
	3-Student:	*En uuh strieken.*	(student initiation 2)
		And uuh eron.	
	4-Teacher:	*Strijken, denk ik, strijken hè, strijken.*	(corrective feedback)
		Iron, I think, iron hè, iron.	
	5-Teacher:	*… En wat heeft Aida gedaan?*	(teacher initiation
		… And what did Aida do?	continued)

In turn 1 the student is giving a closing remark on the weekend activity of her classmate. The teacher gives a short cut-off reply in turn 2 and immediately goes on to the next student. The student, ignoring or not having heard the cut-off reply by the teacher, continues his message in turn 3. The teacher responds in turn 4 with a corrective feedback on the student's faulty pronunciation. Then in turn 5, as if this interruption had not taken place, the teacher finishes the request she started in turn 2.

4.3   Student initiation and teacher negotiation of meaning

Example 5 is taken from classroom 1 during the weekend story activity. Here the teacher tries to keep the conversation going while at the same time she checks her understanding of the student's message by using confirmation checks. Student A starts off to tell about the weekend of student B. Student B cuts in and the interaction continues between the teacher and student B.

(5)   *Student initiation with teacher negotiation of meaning*
     1-Student A: *Ik weet het niet precies voor uuh.*   (response)
                   I don't know exactly for uuh.
     2-Student B: *Voor bril voor mijn dochter.*   (student B initiation)
                   For glasses for my daughter.
     3-Teacher: *Okay.*   (teacher feedback)
                   Okay.
     4-Student B: *Klaar met uuh.*   (student B initiation)
                   Finished with uuh.
     5-Teacher: *Voor de crèche voor de kinderopvang?*   (confirmation check)
                   For the nursery for the daycare center?
     6-Student B: *Nee voor bril.*   (response)
                   No for glasses.
     7-Teacher: *Okay, okay, ze moest 'n nieuwe bril, ah*   (confirmation check)
                 ze moet 'n nieuwe bril.
                   Okay she had to have new glasses, ah she
                   had to have new glasses.
     8-Student B: *Ja.*   (response)
                   Yes.

In turn 2 the teacher accepts student B's interruption by responding with a feedback of acknowledgement (turn 3) while student B continues her story. In turn 5 the teacher concludes in a 'confirmation check in advance' that student B's comment has something to do with the daycare center – information she apparently already was aware of. Her assumption is incorrect as student B corrects her to which the teacher responds with a true confirmation check. Throughout the entire second part of the interaction the teacher is not partaking in the exchange as a conversation partner, but remains a teacher by intermittently checking her own understanding.

4.4   Student and teacher negotiation of content

Example 6 illustrates the use of negotiation of content and is taken from classroom 2 where the topic is news of the week. Three different students partake in the interaction with the teacher.

(6) *Student and teacher negotiation of content*
     1-Teacher: *Hebben jullie het echt niet gehoord?*   (initiation – closed
                   Haven't you really heard?   referential)
     2-Student A: *Waarom?*   (student A response)
                   Why?

3-Teacher:	*Dat weet ik niet. Dat weet ik niet waarom.*	(teacher response)
	That I don't know. That I don't know why.	
4-Student B:	*Twee mensen in Zaandam.*	(student B initiation)
	Two people in Zaandam.	
5-Teacher:	*Twee mensen in Zaandam ook?*	(teacher response)
	Two people in Zaandam too?	
6-Student B:	*Ja.*	(student B response)
	Yes.	
7-Teacher:	*Waren dat ook Turkse mensen?*	(teacher response)
	Were they also Turkish people?	
8-Student B:	*Ja, Turkse mensen.*	(student B response)
	Yes, Turkish people.	
9-Student C:	*Waarom altijd Turkse mensen?*	(student C response)
	Why always Turkish people?	
10-Teacher:	*Ik weet het niet. Ik weet het niet, F…...*	(teacher response)
	I don't know. I don't know, F…...	

In this exchange, although the teacher initiates in turn 1 with a closed referential question, she is actually demonstrating surprise rather than seeking a response to her question. Thus she veers away from the static question-answer format inflicted by the IRF pattern allowing student initiation and encouraging class participation creating genuine class involvement. To the teacher initiation student A asks why in turn 2 and the teacher answers. Here it is not a matter of non-understanding by the student because of lack of linguistic knowledge. The student clearly understands the message, but wishes more information on the subject. This type of questioning is referred to as negotiation of content (Rulon & McCreary, 1986; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). 'The negotiation of content is the process of spoken interaction, whereby the content of a previously encountered passage (aural or written) is clarified to the satisfaction of both parties, either NSs or NNSs' (Rulon & McCreary, 1986:128). Student B sets in with an initiation in turn 4 spontaneously offering more information. Surprised, the teacher responds in turn 5 with confirmation check on the content of the message and in turn 7 asks for elaboration on the given information. This is a clear example of a social interaction where the participants are spontaneously responding to each other by using negotiation of content.

5   Results

In Table 3 the statistics referring to the IRF pattern and the question types for each classroom are given. Table 4 gives an overview of the types of teacher reactions to the student initiations in each classroom

5.1   Activity focus

All the classes, except classroom 1, focused on vocabulary building. Of these three classrooms, numbers 3, 4, and 6, also focused on grammar. In three classrooms a major part of the activity was focused on talking or telling; these were classrooms 1, 2 and 3. The difference between talking and telling was made in the discussion in subsection 2.3.

In classroom 2 talking involved several students during the topic a certain news item. Classrooms 1 and 3 focused in the activity on telling. In classroom 1 each student had to tell about another student's weekend. In classroom 3 the student told about their own house in response to the teacher's questions.

5.2   Initiations

The results clearly indicate that teacher initiations were most prevalent in all the classrooms, averaging 87%. The classes with the most teacher initiations were classrooms 3, 4, 5 and 6. These were 95.3%, 95.8%, 88.9% and 91.3% respectively, with an average of 92.8%. Classrooms 1 and 2 have the least amount of teacher initiations, 71% and 80% respectively. Student initiations occurred in these classrooms the most: 29% and 20% respectively. In sharp contrast, student initiations occurred in the other four classrooms (3, 4, 5 and 6) 4.7%, 4.2%, 11.1% and 8.7% respectively, or an average of 7.1%.

Table 3: Number of student and teacher initiations in IRF exchanges and the distribution of question types in the teacher initiations for each classroom during the first five minutes of the initial activity.

Classroom	Activity focus	Initiations			Teacher initiation question types				
		Teacher initiations	Student initiations	Total initiations	Referential open	Referential closed	Display open	Display closed	Total
1	Telling	22	9	31	8	8	0	1	17
		71%	29%		47.1%	47.1%	0%	5.9%	
2	Vocabulary/ talking	28	7	35	2	10	0	8	20
		80%	20%		10%	50%	0%	40%	
3	Vocabulary/ Telling/gram.	41	2	43	9	17	3	5	34
		95.3%	4.7%		26.5%	50%	8.8%	14.7%	
4	Vocabulary/ grammar	23	1	24	0	0	0	15	15
		95.8%	4.2%		0%	0%	0%	100%	
5	Vocabulary/ Routines	32	4	36	2	1	0	20	23
		88.9%	11.1%		8.7%	4.3%	0%	87%	
6	Vocabulary/ grammar	21	2	23	0	0	1	9	10
		91.3%	8.7%		0%	0%	10%	90%	
Totals		167	25	192	21	36	4	58	119
		87%	13%	100%	17.6%	30.3%	3.4%	48.7%	100%

5.3   Teacher initiation question types

In each class, except classroom 6, more than half of the teacher initiations were questions. Other types of initiations were, for example, the giving of information or instructions. These types of initiations were not included in the analysis in Table 3 as

they did not require a student response. Four types of questions were taken into consideration: the open and closed forms of referential and display questions, discussed in subsection 3.1. Of these four types of questions, the display closed questions occurred most frequently and the display open least frequently, an average of 48.7% and 3.4% respectively. By taking a look at each class separately another picture emerges. In classroom 4, 5 and 6 an overwhelming majority of the questions were display closed, 100%, 87% and 90%. On the other end of the scale the percentages for classroom 1, 2 and 3 were 5.9%, 40% and 14.7%. Display open questions occurred incidentally in two classrooms, numbers 3 and 6, with 8.8% and 10% respectively.

The occurrence of referential questions gives an entire different picture. Although the averages for the referential open and referential closed were 17.6% and 30.3%, the majority occurred in classroom 1, 2 and 3. In those classes the referential open occurred 47.2%, 10% and 26.5% and the referential closed questions occurred 47.1%, 50% and 50% respectively. In the other three classes, referential questions (open and closed) only were asked in classroom 5 with 8.7% referential open questions and 4.3% referential closed.

5.4   Student initiations and teacher reactions

Student initiations occurred in all the classrooms, but stand out in classrooms 1 and 2 with 29% and 20% of the total number of initiations being student initiations. In the six analyzed samples four different types of teacher reactions to student initiations occurred: cut-off reply, corrective feedback, negotiation of meaning and negotiation of content (see section 4). By looking at the totals it seems that most of the teacher reactions are feedbacks and negotiation of content. In each class feedbacks occurred, but negotiation of content only occurred in classroom 2 and 5. All the other types of teacher reactions occurred sparingly in the classrooms. Cut-off replies were only found in classrooms 1, 5 and 6. Negotiation of meaning occurred only twice and that was in classroom 1. Three responses, which were not further analyzed, were student reactions to student initiations. These occurred in classroom 1 and 3.

Table 4: Student initiations and types of teacher reactions for each classroom during the first five minutes of the initial activity.

Class-room	Total student initiations	Types of teacher reactions to student initiations				Student response to student initiation
		Cut-off reply	Feedback	Negotiation of meaning	Negotiation of content	
1	9	1	4	2	0	2
2	7	0	1	0	6	0
3	2	0	1	0	0	1
4	1	0	1	0	0	0
5	4	1	1	0	2	0
6	2	1	1	0	0	0
Totals	25	3	9	2	8	3

6   Discussion and conclusions

In answering the questions posed at the beginning of this paper, investigated a small sample of teacher–student interactions in six Leslla classrooms during the practice of the oral skills. In using the IRF structure it was illustrated that the teacher could inhibit a student's opportunity to expand on his utterance by using for example a cut-off reply as well as enhance a student's opportunity to speak by using negotiation of content. Classrooms 3, 4, 5 and 6 were strongly form focused classrooms practicing on vocabulary, a routine and/or grammar. Little room was left open for student initiation and expansion. In all four of these classrooms the teacher persisted in using the IRF exchange structure. When a student came forward with an unrestrained remark the teacher responded with either a cut-off reply (example 3) or with a corrective feedback (example 3). Classroom 5 illustrates that during unplanned instances students sometimes do react spontaneously, if not creatively. A broken window and the possibility of a repairman coming that same morning triggered students to react with questions – they were negotiating content. These spontaneous reactions were not bound by the classroom activity as were those during the activity practice. In classroom 2 students also responded spontaneously, but during the activity news-of-the-week. The subject of this particular news item, a liquidation in the Turkish criminal circuit, inspired student involvement in the discussion using negotiation of content. The situation was somewhat different in classroom 1. Although the students just as in classroom 2 were not restricted as to language form while telling the class about each other's weekend events, there was no real exchange of information as in a conversation. The teacher did not get involved in the interaction, but remained on the whole a bystander asking and checking for her own understanding. She was the one who used negotiation of meaning, not the students. Nevertheless through her negotiation she forced the student to rephrase his utterance for better comprehensibility. In classroom 3, where the students also participated by telling about their own houses in comparison to the floor plan worksheet, the teacher held strict control on the developments in the class. Intermittently asking referential questions, but only allowing the students to respond within the set frame of the topic. Although the IRF pattern constrains student responses in order to check for knowledge, it also has positive side. Van Lier (1988, 2001) and Mercer (1995, 2001) express that the IRF pattern while checking on knowledge can at the same time can be used to stimulate creative language use by skilful manipulation of questions. If so, then it is essential that these aspects of IRF be explored.

In this discussion it is evident that the IRF pattern is not static. Its usability depends on the type of questions the teacher asks and how she responds to her students. Van Lier views the use of the IRF structure in the classroom as "building a bridge" to creative language use (1996:156). "In addition, teacher-learner interaction, such as the IRF, that is designed for scaffolding learners' language use (cognitively or socially) must contain within it the seeds of handover, that is, the teacher must continually be on the lookout for signs that learners are ready to be more autonomous language users"(Van Lier 2001:104). By selecting her response to her students wisely in the type of questions she poses or the type of feedback she gives the teacher can fluctuate between focusing on rote learning, checking (vocabulary or grammar) knowledge, scaffolding, modelling or even challenging the students to think creatively.

A final point concerns specifically the Leslla classroom. The above described characterizations could also pertain to other L2 classrooms. Therefore the question arises of what is LESLLA-specific. A typical LESLLA learner, as characterized by the teachers who have collaborated with this on-going research project, is foremost a learner with weak study skills. To accommodate such a learner these teachers advocated the use of modelling and scaffolding techniques and ample positive feedback. In a study by Oliver (2000) age differences in ESL classrooms and pair work concerning negotiation and feedback were examined. She observed that "in the child ESL classes the teacher keeps a tight control over the learner's language production, and the resulting didactic pattern of interaction reduces the opportunity for risk taking, and thus for non-target like production" (Oliver 2000:138). Further on in the same article she states that 'topics selected by the teachers for children, and the opportunity they gave their students to discuss them, meant that the child learners were provided with a linguistic scaffold. This scaffold seemed to reduce the possibility of non-native like production' (Oliver, 2000:138-139). This sounds very similar to what is happening in the LESLLA context where the didactic pattern, the IRF structure, is predominant – only allowing a predetermined selection of responses. In the LESLLA classrooms the topics and the practiced language elements were all preselected by the teachers. Of course the LESLLA learner is not a child, but as a child he is at the beginning of his learning process and cannot apply academic skills learned during L1 schooling as a literate adult. In studying the LESLLA learner in a classroom context it is essential that next to interaction patterns aspects of learning skills should also be considered. Further research of the material will reveal if indeed the above results exemplify what happens in a LESLLA classroom.

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