

# An Analysis of College English Classroom Discourse From the IRF Perspective

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Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) refers to the classroom discourse mode proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard in 1975. This paper analyzes College English classroom discourse from the perspective of IRF mode and reveals that IRF has played a significant role in promoting the progress of classroom discourse and has been applied in a flexible and diversified way, as both the standard IRF and the variants of IRF like IR[I1RI(I2R2InRn)]F and IRF1RF2RFnRF can be found in College English classroom discourse. The enlightenment from the analysis is that teachers should attach enough importance to how to initiate a classroom discourse properly, how to evaluate a response effectively, and how to use IRF appropriately for different types of teaching tasks to optimize students' knowledge construction.

*Keywords:* IRF, classroom discourse, IR[I1RI(I2R2InRn)]F, IRF1RF2RFnRF

## Introduction

The discovery of Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) mode is one of the most important contributions in discourse analysis, which exerts great influence on classroom teaching and learning. Ever since its discovery, researchers have been discussing and disputing it for a long time before they realize its significance again. IRF has been widely applied in classroom teaching and learning. Analyzing classroom discourse according to IRF mode may help to shed some light on how to effectively use IRF to provide more chances for students to participate in classroom activities and help them to realize knowledge learning and internalization. This paper intends to review IRF theory firstly and then analyze the application of IRF in College English classroom discourse with specific examples to reveal its significance to language teaching and learning.

## IRF Theory

Ever since the American structuralism linguist Zellig Harris proposed the term “discourse analysis”, there has been more and more relevant research. In 1970s, discourse analysis became an independent discipline, which was studied by researchers from different perspectives. The Birmingham school in the UK represented by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) attached great importance to the description of the structure of information. They analyzed abundant classroom discourses and set up a five-scale analysis mode: lesson, transaction, exchange, move, and act. According to this mode, acts are the smallest units, which include initiation, response, evaluation, and the like. Besides, they extracted the classroom teaching mode to be IRF, namely, Initiation-Response-Feedback, focusing on the power and obligation relationship reflected by teacher-student

discourse. Mehan (1979) adopted an ethnographic approach and specified the IRF mode as IRE mode, namely, Initiation (teacher)-Response (student)-Evaluation (teacher) with the help of Hymes' conceptual framework of communicative competence. According to Mehan, students should not only grasp the academic knowledge of classroom teaching, but also learn to express the academic knowledge in an appropriate interactive form. This "appropriate interactive form" is IRE, which reflects the specificity of classroom discourse compared with ordinary discourse. In Mehan's research, the nature of the third turn of IRF has been highlighted. Cazden (1988) verified the wide existence of IRE structure in classroom discourse and employed it to describe classroom discourse. According to him, IRE reflected the sequence of classroom discourse, on the basis of which, variants of IRE could be discovered. Sometimes, IRE sequence is not complete, being just IR. Some questions may be answered and evaluated after several or many turns. Therefore, classroom discourse is complex in structure and may be featured by IRE and its variants. However, IRE sequence still exists in complete teaching process over the long time span of teacher-student interaction. Though Cazde discovered the existence of variants of IRE in classroom discourse, IRE proposed by Mehan is still universally regarded as standard IRF.

IRF structure reveals the discourse mode formed during the interaction between teachers and students. Since it was put forward by Sinclair and Coulthard, it has been applied and also questioned. At first, disputes mainly focused on the way that Sinclair and Coulthard discovered IRF, as it was believed Sinclair and Coulthard had mainly selected data from traditional and teacher-centered classrooms, which could not reflect the diversity of classroom discourses. With more and more interactive teacher-student data being collected and analyzed, the universal existence of IRF structure has been confirmed. Then, researchers shifted their criticism of methodology to the rationality of this practice in classroom discourse. The criticisms centered on three aspects: the unnatural quality of classroom discourse, the unequal power relation reflected by IRF, and the knowledge transmission that features classroom teaching which deprives students of chances to participate in classroom discourse and to study. The most obvious difference between classroom discourse and ordinary discourse in real situations lies in the nature of the third turn. The third turn of IRF in classroom discourse turns out to be an evaluation instead of a natural response like appreciation and reveals the unequal relationship between teachers and students. In a classroom discourse, the person who initiates a question is usually the teacher who possesses information (as he/she knows the answer), while an ordinary discourse may be initiated by a person who does not possess information. In a classroom discourse, students need to get the speech power for the second turn, while in an ordinary discourse, the next turn is chosen by the participants. So an IRF structured classroom discourse is unnatural and unequal in power relationship. Besides, from the social and cultural perspective, IRF not only reflects that the teacher dominates classroom interaction as a privileged possessor of knowledge, but also presumes that knowledge is prior which can be transmitted by classroom teaching. As a result, students can only passively participate in classroom activities instead of participating in them actively.

However, researchers also have gained new understanding about IRF after more than 40 years' of application, verification, and discussion of it. They have tried to defend for the significance of IRF in classroom discourse. They argue that classroom discourse should not be compared with ordinary discourse, as the former should not be casual and natural, but instead, should have educational purposes. IRF does not deprive students of opportunities of participation and learning, but ensures the planned learning activities of teachers to be effectively implemented. Although IRF sequence may reflect the unequal power relationship between teachers and students to some extent, changing the nature of each turn can be a way to make up for such a weakness. For

example, classroom discourse can be initiated by either a teacher or a student. Initiation can be in various forms: a question, an order, or a declarative remark. The feedback can be an acceptance, an encouragement, a retelling, an expansion, an impetus, etc. Thus IRF may not necessarily lead to the unequal relationship between teachers and students. What's important is whether a teacher can be successful in encouraging students to think, providing students with learning chances and adjusting the learning process.

So, the theory of IRF has undergone a process of being applied, being doubted, and finally being recognized since its birth. As a universal mode in classroom discourse, it deserves our attention as for how it can be applied effectively to enhance classroom teaching and learning.

In the following part, the author will analyze the application of IRF in College English classroom discourse with specific examples to reveal its significance.

### **The Application of IRF in College English Classroom Discourse**

College English is an integrated English course set for college students, whose aim is to train students' abilities of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation in a systematic way. Students are expected to learn knowledge and skills about English language, enhance their language awareness, and cultivate the abilities of using English in a comprehensive way. Thus, it is of great importance for teachers and students to cooperate well with each other and conduct effective classroom discourse, which can help and encourage students to absorb, reconstruct, and internalize ideas. Here, the author intends to analyze College English classroom discourse from the perspective of IRF structure based on personal teaching experiences to reveal the diversified nature of IRF and the significance of IRF.

#### **IRF**

The standard IRF can be found in College English classroom discourse. For example, when students are required to listen to a passage and then answer the questions according to what they have heard, IRF mode may occur during the teacher-student discourse.

Example 1:

T: Where did the woman see the three old men? (I)

S: In her front yard. (R)

T: You are right! (F)

After the teacher initiates the question regarding the passage, one student gives a correct response, based on which, the teacher gives the positive evaluation as feedback.

Example 2:

T: Who were the three old men respectively? (I)

S: Wealth, Faith and Success. (R)

T: Not really. According to the relevant part in the passage, the answer should be "Love, Success and Wealth". (F)

The teacher first initiates the question, which is followed by the student's wrong answer. So, the teacher gives a negative evaluation and then provides the correct answer.

But IRF is far from being so standard and simple in its application in classroom discourse, as classroom discourse is complex in itself. Teachers should be able to help students to think and to learn by further initiation or encouragement, employing the extended versions of IRF like IR[I1RI(I2R2InRn)]F and IRF1RF2RFnRF.

**IR[I1R1(I2R2InRn)]F**

IR[I1R1(I2R2InRn)]F is an extended version of IRF, including more than three turns. It refers to the situation in which the teacher does not give any evaluative feedback after one student's response, but makes another initiation to get another response from students, which can go on and on. Generally speaking, responses are given by different students in IR[I1R1(I2R2InRn)]F mode. The following is a good example.

Example 3:

- T: Would you please make a sentence with “reminiscent”? (I)  
 S: The old song reminiscent of his childhood. (R)  
 T: The old song reminiscent his childhood? (I1)  
 S1: The old song is reminiscent of his childhood. (R1)  
 T: Exactly right! Please don't omit the *be* verb. You should remember the expression “be reminiscent of”. (F)

In this example, the first student's response is not correct, lacking the word “is” before “reminiscent”. The teacher does not give an evaluative feedback, but repeats the first student's answer with an interrogative mood, which serves as another initiation to get responses from other students. After another student provides the correct response, the teacher gives the positive evaluative feedback. The whole discourse mode includes five turns. Of course, this mode of turn-taking can go on and includes more turns in classroom discourse.

**IRF1RF2RFnRF**

Sometimes, the teacher may give more than one evaluative feedback on the same student's responses. This happens especially when the student's response is very long after the teacher's initiation. In the process of the student's answering the question, the teacher gives evaluative feedback from time to time to either encourage or help the student to answer before giving the final positive evaluative feedback. This extended version of IRF can be called IRF1RF2RFnRF mode.

Example 4:

- T: Would you please give some examples about the differences between Chinese culture and Western culture? (I)  
 S: Chinese people like asking “Have you eaten?” when they meet. But Western people do not ask this kind of questions. (R)  
 T: Good. Chinese people and Western people have different ways of ADDRESSING each other. (F1)  
 S: And when a Westerner is given a gift, he will say “thank you” and open it immediately. When a Chinese is given a gift, he will not open it immediately. (R)  
 T: Right, he may also express his gratitude by saying “Thank you so much. You shouldn't have bought such an expensive gift for me.” (F2)  
 S: Er, Western people don't like other people to ask about their salary. (R)  
 T: Yes, generally speaking, Western people attach more importance to their privacy compared with Chinese people. So, you mentioned three differences: different ways of addressing people, receiving gifts and viewing privacy. Very good! Thank you so much for your answer! (F)

In this example, whenever the student finishes a turn, the teacher gives a positive evaluative feedback and also helps the student to express more accurately and comprehensively before giving the final evaluative feedback.

### Enlightenment

The analysis above enables us to see that IRF mode is applied in College English classroom discourse in a flexible and diversified way. Besides the variants mentioned above, there may also be other variants of IRF. The significance of the mode cannot be denied, as it helps the smooth progress of teacher-student interaction in the specific context of classroom. What a teacher needs to reflect is how to optimize the effect of IRF by using appropriate teaching materials and methods, for example, how to effectively initiate a discourse, how to encourage students to think, how to offer students more learning chances, how to adjust the learning process, and how to give effective evaluative feedback. Teachers should know the importance and strategies of effective feedback. According to the linguist Nunan (1991), positive feedback like smile, nod, appreciation, and recognition helps enhance students' emotional experience and personality development. On the contrary, negative feedback like negative evaluation, teacher's answer-giving, or asking other students to answer is not helpful to students' emotional experience and personality development.

The standard IRF and the different variants of IRF may be appropriate for different teaching tasks as they exhibit different features. Teachers can learn to use and adjust them consciously when tackling different teaching tasks so as to achieve the desired effect.

### Conclusion

This paper analyzes College English classroom discourse from the perspective of IRF mode and reveals that both the standard IRF and the variants of IRF can be found in College English classroom discourse. It's undeniable that IRF plays a significant role in classroom discourse as it helps the smooth progress of classroom discourse and enables students to learn knowledge and skills effectively. But how to effectively apply IRF so as to maximize students' knowledge construction is still worthy of attention for language teachers.

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