Challenges in Implementing Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) Sequences in EAP Class

by Priyatno Ardi

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Abstract

IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) sequence becomes a common practice in classroom discourse. This research is aimed to investigate teacher and students contribution to IRF sequence in classroom interaction. In addition, it also investigates its problems and challenges in implementing IRF sequence. Quantitative and qualitative approach was used. Classroom observation, tape-recording, and interview was used to collect the data. The participants were twenty students and one teacher of EAP class at Universitas Siswa Bangsa Internasional. The result shows that both teacher and students gave contribution in the whole part of IRF sequence, even though the percentage of their contribution was different. The percentage of teacher's initiation was 94.0%, the teacher's response was 3.4%, and the teacher's feedback was 97.4%. Meanwhile, the percentage of students' initiation was 6.5%, the students' response was 96.7%, and the students' feedback was only 1%. Another result shows that there were three categories of problems and challenges which were found namely students factor, social factors, and educational factors.

Keywords: IRF sequence, teacher's contribution, students' contribution, problems, challenges.

1. Introduction

Classroom interaction is important in a teaching and learning process in a language classroom. According to Tsui (2001) and Walsh (2006), classroom interaction is the interaction that happens between teacher and students as a central to teaching and learning. Classroom interaction is also a central to language acquisition (Ellis, as cited in Walsh, 2006) because teacher-students interaction is important in promoting acquisition (Swain, 1995, 2005). In classroom interaction context, the teacher has a role as an informer to give comprehensible input to the students. Comprehensible input (i+1) is rich information and knowledge which is comprehensible with students' current knowledge (Krashen, 2003). If the students already get comprehensible input through interaction with the teacher, they can construct their current knowledge and their understanding by making connection and building their mental schemata (Walsh, 2006 &Dagarin, 2004).

In classroom interaction, teacher can give comprehensible input to the students by asking questions which related to the students' knowledge and real life as initiation. Through

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interaction, teacher also can help the students arouse their potential natural learning ability as unconsciousness (Wedell, as cited from Liu, 2012). By responding teacher's questions, the students can increase their ability in learning.

A considerable amount of research on classroom discourse has found the pattern of interaction (Cullen, 2002; Waring, 2009 & Pei, 2012). In classroom the common structure of interaction is the teacher asking question, then the students will answer the question after that the teacher will give comment on the answer. The structure is called as IRF sequence (Initiation-response-feedback). IRF sequence becomes a common practice in classroom discourse. It is a single sequence type that is used in classroom interaction (Waring, 2009).

Literature Review

According to Marzban, Yaqoubi, and Qalandari (2012) IRF was divided in to three part structures. It started by teacher questioning which is called as initiation (I), then followed by student's response (R), and the teacher gives feedback (F) as an evaluation for the students. The following is example of IRF sequence (Cullen, 2002):

    Extract 1.1:
    T (I): Where was the picture taken? Yes, please?
    S (R): In the aero plane
    T (F): In the aero plane. Good, yes. In the aero plane

The function of IRF sequences is to manage the class and hold students' attention. Cazden (1988) and Gutierrez (1994) said that by using IRF as classroom interaction pattern, the teacher had a larger portion of talking. Thus, it is only facilitated by teachers control rather than students learning of the content of the lesson. This pattern did not give enough opportunities for the students to talk (Barnes, 2008). Then, Hall and Walsh (2002) stated that sometimes the teacher ignore certain students' response. When there is a student who responses, the teacher just pass that student and instead of move on to ask a question of another student. It will be a problem in classroom interaction. The teacher should give same opportunity to all the students in classroom.

There has been interest in conducting research on IRF sequences. Marzban, Yaqoubi and Qalandari (2012) conducted a research about the possibility of IRF structure change. The participants were ten adults in English as foreign language classes in a private language school in Naqadeh, Iran. The researchers used video tapes, audio recordings, transcription, and field notes as instruments to collect data. The result of the research shows that IRF sequences actually limited students' opportunity to contribute their talk in class. The researchers (Marzban, Yaqoubi, &Qalandari, 2012) though that the teacher should give the students multiple opportunities to engage in interaction classroom. In conclusion the researchers suggested for teacher to implement ISRF (Teacher initiation-Student struggle-teacher response-student feedback) sequences in class. It is because based on their findings, ISRF sequences could help students to have more opportunities to talk in classroom interaction.

However, previous studies did not examine the problems and challenges of the implementation of IRF sequence. The problems and challenges that are occurred in the implementation need to be taken into account because by knowing the problems and challenges, it can help the teacher to improve the implementation of IRF sequences. Moreover,

the previous studies employed qualitative approach. Quantitative approach needs to be considered so that the results can picture the teacher and students' contribution to IRF sequence in classroom numerically.

The present study aims at investigating the implementation of IRF sequence in EAP class at Universitas Siswa Bangsa Internasional and figuring out encountered challenges during the implementation. This is part of collaborative research on the implementation of IRF move in EAP classroom. A lecturer deliberately implements thus sequence. A research which is conducted by a lecturer is focus on the impact of IRF sequence to Students' writing ability. Then, another research which is conduct by another student is focus on teacher's questions and student' response based on Bloom taxonomy. Considering the fact that most existing research approaches to IRF sequences are qualitative approach, this research uses mixed method. Therefore in this study the researcher will investigate these patterns not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. Hence, the research questions addressed in this study are:

1). How does the lecturer contribute to IRF sequence in EAP class?
2). How do the students contribute to IRF sequence in EAP class?
3). What are challenges encountered in the implementation of IRF sequence?

2. Methods

2.1. Types of Research

This research was used ethnography communication studies. Ethnography communication is a research method which is used to study about classroom discourse, such as conversational analysis between teacher and students in classroom (McKay, 2006). To collect and analyze the data, this research was used mixed method research. Mixed method is methodology that used in a single study by combining quantitative and qualitative approach. By using both approaches the researcher can get a more complete understanding of research problem rather than using one approach (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2012).

In this research, quantitative approach was used for seeing the quantity of teacher and students' contribution to IRF sequence in classroom by seeing how many I (initiation), R (responses), and F (feedback) sequence used by the teacher and students in general. Furthermore, Qualitative approach was used to explain and explore depth about the implementation of IRF sequences, its problems and challenges in classroom interaction. It is because according to Baxter and Jack (2008), qualitative research study is an approach to facilitate the research in exploring the phenomenon by using variety of data sources.

2.2. Participants

Nineteen students and one teacher in EAP class at USBI were chosen as the participants. In choosing the participants, the researcher used purposive sampling. It was because this research was needed the participants with certain criteria such as the class should implement IRF sequences, and the students are English foreign language learners.

2.3. Data collections techniques and instruments

The research used some steps to collect and obtain data. First step was observation and tape-recording. Then, the second step was interview. Those techniques were chosen to answer the research questions. The last step was data triangulation to check validity of the data.

Step one: Classroom observation

In order to answer the research questions, this research employed classroom observation as the first step. According to Jupp and Sapsford (2006), observation can gain information about physical environment and human behavior and it can be recorded directly. The observation was conducted since September until November 2013. The classroom observation was conducted one meeting per a week during a half of semester, so the observation was six times with the total twelve hours. The observation was observed during the whole session of EAP class in every meeting and both the teacher and the students were a center of observation. During classroom observation, the researcher took a note to write the interesting thing of the implementation IRF sequence.

While doing observation the teachers were recorded. Tape-recording was a tool to documentary teacher's talk and students' talk, in this research was classroom interaction. Due to the research investigated IRF sequences in classroom interaction so both teacher and students were a focus of recording. The recording was conducted during observation in every meeting from the beginning of class until finish.

Step two: Interview

In the second step of this research used interview. According to Mason (2002) interview is one of the most commonly recognized forms of qualitative research method. This method was used to get depth information and perception from the participants. The interview used open-ended questions. . This interview is for teacher and students. The interview was conducted on December 2013.

Step three: Data triangulation

After all the data was completed in order to check the validity of the result, the researcher did methodology triangulation. Triangulation refers to a method that used in a research to check and establish validity in the study by analyzing research question based on multiple perspectives (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2002). There were multiple methods that used in this research, classroom observation, tape-recording, and interview. The result from those methods was compared to see the similar result for analysis.

Data analysis

In analysis the data, this research was used two steps. The first step was analysis transcription and coding. After all the data gather as a recoding, the data was transcribed into transcription. Then, the transcription is coded to organize and group IRF sequences (Initiation-Responses-Feedback). The coding used table to make easily for conduct. Then, the last step was analysis the data from interview in order to get depth information about the implementation of IRF sequences and its problem based on teacher's view and students' view.

3. Results

3.1. Frequency of IFR implementation

The data gained from classroom observation, audio recording, and interview were collected to see the findings of this research. From the analysis of the data, this research found that there was IRF sequences which was contributed by teacher's talk and students' talk in EAP classroom. Based on the findings from the data, the researcher found that there were 785 initiations which were contributed by both teacher and students. Then, the responses were 865 with the feedback were 623. Different total of IRF sequences was found in each meeting. The detailed data for IRF sequences is provided in Table 1 which showed each meeting with the date of the meeting, and the number of I (initiation), R (response) and F (feedback) that were implemented in classroom.

Table 1. Quantity of IRF sequences

No	Meeting/Date	Topics	Initiation (I)	Response (R)	Feed-back (F)
1	2/Sept, 13th 2013	Unity & Coherence	207 (33.9%)	255 (41.75%)	149 (24.35%)
2	3/Sept, 20th 2013	From Paragraph to Essay 1	163 (33.3%)	184 (37.5%)	143 (29.2%)
3	4/Sept, 27th 2013	From Paragraph to Essay 2	163 (37.3%)	151 (34.6%)	123 (28.1%)
4	5/Oct, 4th 2013	From Paragraph to Essay 3	135 (34.7 %)	156 (40.1 %)	98 (25.2 %)
5	6/Oct, 11th 2013	Editing & Proof reading 1	117 (33.8%)	119 (34. 4%)	110 (31.8%)
	TOTAL		785	865	623

3.2. Teacher's contribution in IRF sequences

There were three teacher's contributions found in the implementation of IRF sequences. The first was teacher's initiation. The second was teacher's response. The last was teacher's feedback.
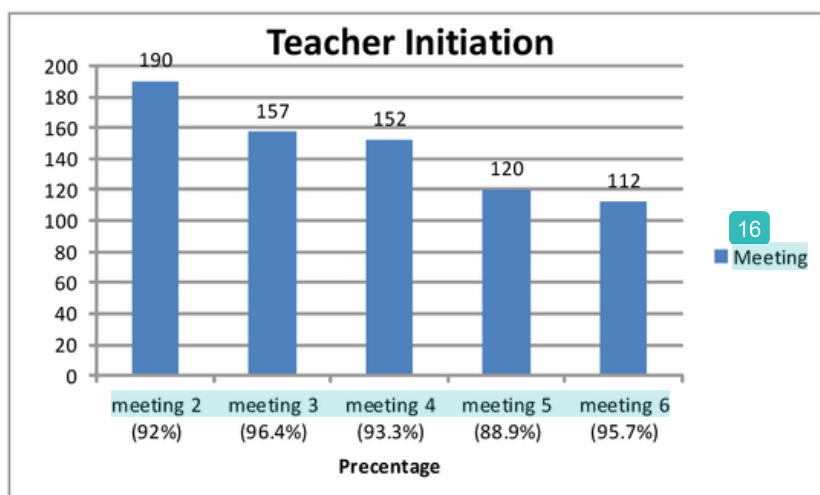
Initiation

Figure 1. Quantity of Teachers Initiation

In initiation, the percentage of teacher's contribution was 88.9% until 96.4%. The teacher mostly used question to open the sequence of the interaction in class. The following is the transcript from audio-recording which shows the teacher's question for initiating the class. From the extract it can be seen that the teacher asked more than one question in one turn.

Extract 1
T: Good. Anybody want to aa share what is unity and coherence? (.5) what is unity? (.7) anyone? Speak up ya don't mumble, speak up! Anyone want to share what is unity in your opinion? (.6) unity, yes **(I)**
S1: I think unity is a group that have one mission and one a a apa ya program to a to reach the mission together. **(R)**
T: Ok a group that has one purpose to achieve a mission, ok good. **(F)**

Moreover the teacher used initiation to engage the students in further discussion. It can be seen in the extract below that the teacher asked question after the student's gave response to the teacher initiation.

Extract 2
T : Umm thank you. Let's have a review. How will you organize your essay? Anyone? **(F and I)**
S1: General to specific **(R)**
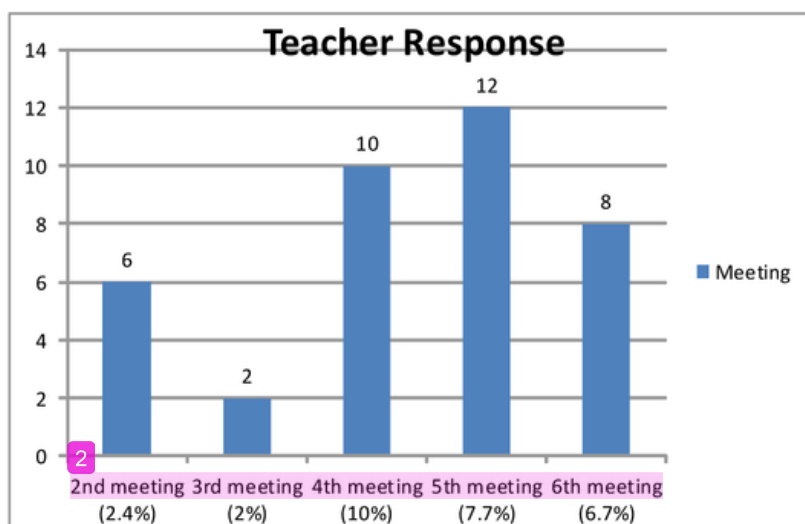T : General to specific? [↑] It is in the? **(I)**

Response

Figure 2. Quantity of Teacher Response

There were only several teacher's responses which were found in this research. Based on Figure 2, from the total response which was found in IRF sequences the percentage of teacher response was low. It was indicated that the teacher rarely gave contribution in responding. Most of the responses that were given by the teacher were to answer the student's initiation or question. It can see in the following extract.

Extract 3
S : Means one group only one write one? **(I)**
T : One. Now. **(R)**
S : Concluding paragraph or? **(I)**
T : Concluding paragraph. Concluding paragraph. You guess an idea. You have an essay in front of you about aggressive driver. Your job you just to write as a group. Write a concluding paragraph. A concluding paragraph not long, it's short. It can be resentences. **(F)**
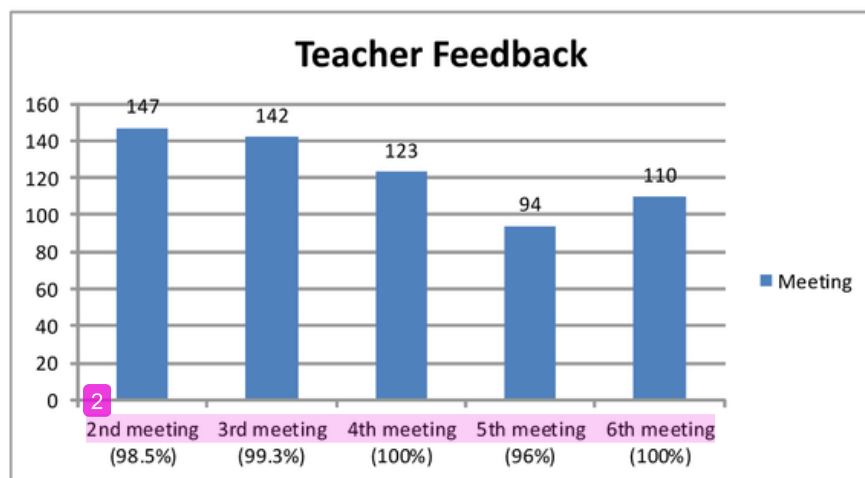
Feedback

Teacher Feedback

Figure 3. Quantity of Teacher Feedback

From Figure 3, there were many feedbacks which were given by the teacher during classroom interaction. The percentage shows that the teacher gave biggest contribution in giving feedback in the class. One of the feedbacks which were found in this research was positive feedback or praise. It can be shown in the extract below:

Extract 4
T : No, why not? [,] (.3) **(I)**
S : It's kindda boring **(R)**
T : Good, kind a boring. Excellent **(F)**, when you write something and then you start with something to specific like measurement or very specific stuff it will make your reader? **(I)**

The other feedback which was found was repetition. It was feedback which was the most used by the teacher in the classroom interaction. Below the example of repetition feedback which were found in the transcription.

Extract 5
T : Three, right? From the three we maximize it into three. So the first should be? **(I)**
S6 : Introduction **(R)**
S7 : Opening **(R)**
T : Opening, oke opening **(F)**

The teacher also used extending feedback as shown in the following extract. As it can be seen in extract 6, the teacher did not only repeat identically the student's answer, but the teacher added some words by saying "you need to plan attention gather".

Extract 6

T : Is to write? (.5) Remember the elements of introductory paragraph. The first one? **(I)**

Ss : Attention gather **(R)**

T : You need to plan attention gather. You need to plan attention gather. Oke attention gather what kind of attention gather that you can make for for injuries? It can be quotation for injuries **(F)**

3.3. Students' Contribution in IRF sequences

This present research found that there were three students contribution in the implementation of IRF sequence. The first was students' contribution in initiation, the second was the students' contribution in giving response, and the last was the students' contribution in giving feedback.

Initiation
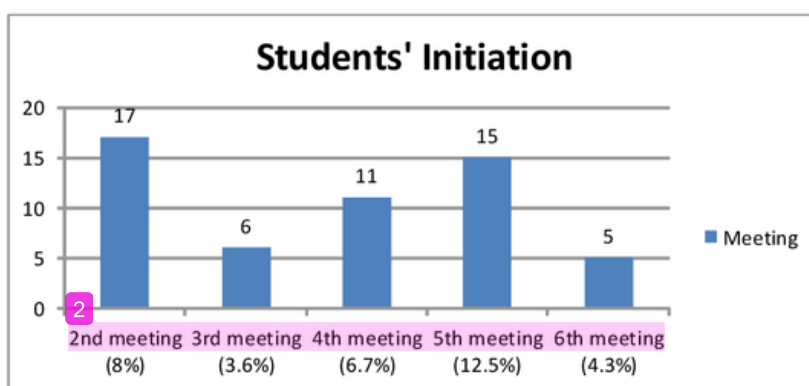
Figure 4. Quantity of Students Initiation

Figure 4 above shows that the students took a role as initiator in IRF sequence. However the percentage of the students' contribution in initiation is low. Based on the transcription, there are not many initiations or question which is asked by the students in class and only a few students who did initiation to the teacher. The pattern can be seen in the extract below:

Extract 7

T : Thank you because of the transition signals. **(F)**

S : Should every essay have a transition signal I mean it too mainstream? [,] **(I)**

T : Too mainstream? [,] If? [,] **(R)**

S : Should first, second, third [,] **(R)**

T : Ok, that's another question. [.] **(R)** So my first question which one is better, this one or that one? [,] **(I)**

The student initiated to ask a question to the teacher which was aimed to confirm student's understanding about the teacher feedback. The teacher's response was yes. It meant that the student's understanding was right. It was shown by the following extract.

Extract 8
T : Yes do you have any suggestion? In addition two you already have two [.] (I)
S : So we can combine it? **(I)**
T : Yes, you can combine. In addition two (.7) remember guys the first one you have you already have the first one is what is it? Cut off right? **(R)**

Response
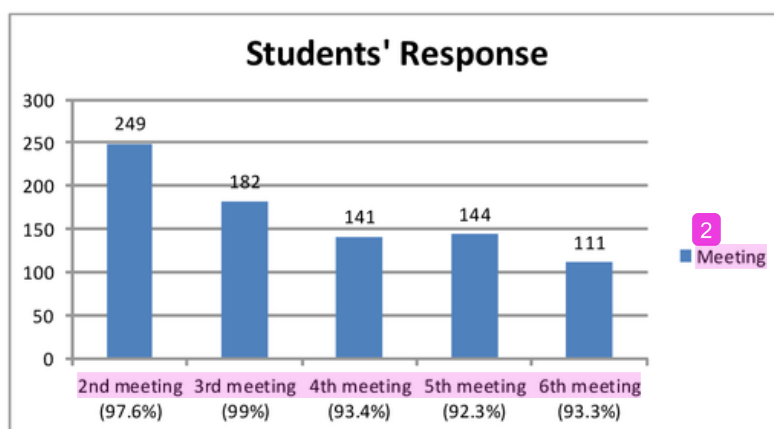
Figure 5. Quantity of Students Response

This research also found student's response during classroom interaction. Based on the Figure 5 the students took the highest percentage in giving response. The following are the examples of their response to the teacher's initiation.

Extract 9
T : But how you organize the essay? Number one you should put? (I)
Ss : Title (R)
T : Of course (F)

Based on the classroom observation, there was also another case when the teacher asked some questions to the students, and they did not give any response to the question. It can be seen in the extract 10 that the teacher asked more than two questions, and the teacher gave the waiting time for three seconds (.3) after asking the second question. The students gave response when the teacher asked question in the second turn of initiation.

Extract 10

T : They can have, ok yes you can say that. You can say directly umm this one is said in directly so the writer want to emphasize on the good notes. So by having good notes taken from the note taking so that's will be easy to be take if remember you say your all information. ok, what else that you can comment on this bar paragraph? Introductory paragraph? (.3) can you see the bridge? to thesis statement? **(I)**

Ss: () **(R)**

T : Effect not all students know how to take a good note so in () so how to take a note well while the teacher is explaining. Actually the idea is already? **(I)**

Ss: Good **(R)**

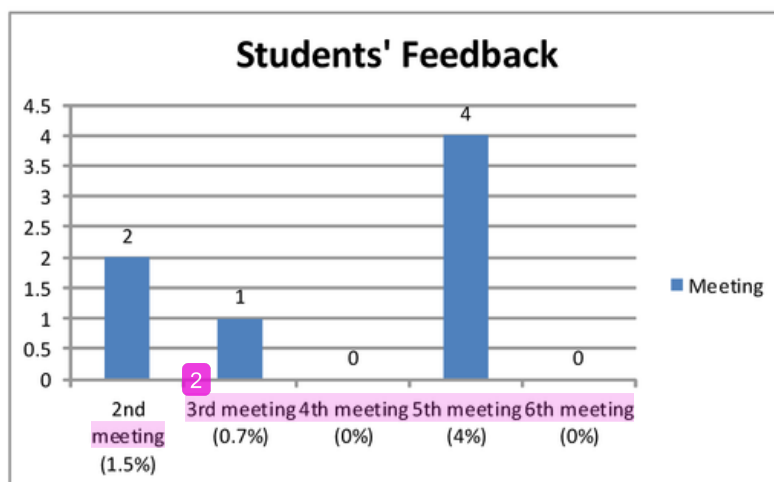T : Good, the flow is already? **(F and I)**

Feedback

Figure 6. Quantity of Students Feedback

As it can be seen in Figure 6, there was only 0% up to 4% feedback which was found in the two last meetings. Teacher had the most contribution in giving feedback to the student's response. Yet, there was feedback from the student as it can be seen below in the extract.

Extract 11

S1 : Winds is an enduring… **(I)**

S2 : Louder. **(R)**

S1 : [↑] Source of power. Water is also an unlimited energy source. Dams produce hydraulic power. They have existed for a long time. Windmills are relatively new. **(I)**

T : When she read it (.), it's like we're riding a bicycle but we full of? [,] **(I)**

3.4. Problems and challenges in implementing IRF sequences

Student factors

When the teacher asked some questions for further discussion, there was no response from the students. All the students were silent. Because there was no response from the students, the teacher answered his questions by himself. It can be seen in the following extract.

Extract 12

T : They can have, ok yes you can say that. You can say directly umm this one is said in directly so the writer want to emphasize on the good notes. So by having good notes taken from the note taking so that's will be easy to be take if remember you say your all information. ok, what else that you can comment on this bar paragraph? [↑] Introductory paragraph? (.3) can you see the bridge? [↑] to thesis statement? **(I)**

Ss : () **(R)**

T : Effect not all students know how to take a good note so in () so how to take a note well while the teacher is explaining. Actually the idea is already? **(F and I)**

The student said it happened because the student did not know the answer so the student felt confused about what it should be said to respond the teacher's question. Besides, the student also had a problem in saying something when the student wanted to give an opinion or response. It happened because they felt that their English ability was lack.

Social factors

Social factor also influenced the student in doing classroom interaction. The student said that she was afraid and shame to give response in class. It was because there was another student who had intimate relationship in the past with her in the class. It influenced her confident in speak up at class. Therefore, she felt embarrassed to respond.

Educational factors

From the interview, the student said that the teacher always asked critical thinking question to the students in order to improve the students' critical thinking. However, it made the students felt challenging to answer the question.

Another factor was told by the students that when the teacher asked more than one question, sometimes they felt confused to answer. The student said it happened because the teacher asked another question before the student responded toward the first question and it made the student difficult to answer the questions.

4. Discussion

4.1. Teachers' contribution in IRF sequences

Based on the research findings, teachers took three roles in IRF sequences. However, teachers mostly did initiation and gave feedback in the interaction rather than gave response. It is shown by Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4 from the percentage that 88.9% until 96. 4% of all initiation in the interaction is done by the teacher and 96% until 100% feedback is given by the teacher. Meanwhile, in giving response, the teacher only took 1% until 7.7%. It happened because the student's initiation also had low percentage. It was only 3.6% until 12.5%.

In the initiation, the teacher usually used open ended question to start IRF sequences. The question which was asked by the teacher was the questions that elicited the expected information, such as, "what is unity?". It meant that the teacher had already known the answer of the question. It was supported by Morgan and Saxton (2006) that questions which elicit information draw out what is already known in terms of both information and experience.

In the initiation the teacher often asked more than one question in one turn. Some of the questions that the teacher asked mostly related each other with the previous question. The second or third question which was asked by the teacher was more specific rather than the first question. Besides, the teacher also often repeated his question. Its purpose was to make the question clearly and the students could easily understand the teacher's question and it could lead the students to the right question which was expected by the teacher.

However, the percentage of teacher's response was very low. It was only about 1% until 7.7%. Response that the teacher used in order to give confirmation toward the student's question and also gave more information that the students' need related the material.

In this present research, the teacher used various feedbacks for students' response. There were repetition, extending and positive feedback. For repetition, the teacher repeated what the student's said, such as when student answered "opening" the teacher said "opening, ok opening". Sometimes, the teacher also used high intonation and recast when repeating the student's answer. It seemed the teacher wanted to confirm the answer. Pei (2012) said that repeating identically what the student said it was indicated acceptance and repeating by using questioning tone or high intonation expressed disapproval which is led the students to realize their wrong answer.

In extending feedback the teacher did not only repeat identically or similarly with the student's answer but the teacher added some words, such as shown in extract 4.24 at findings. It indicated that the teacher wanted to add more information about the student answer. It was supported by Pei (2012) that extending feedback can make input more informative and comprehensible.

Positive feedback was one of feedbacks which were mostly shown in the classroom interaction. The teacher usually used "good", and "excellent" to give feedback toward student's response and in interview the students said their like that kind of feedback. It could motivate them in being active in interaction at classroom and it helped them to build their confidence.

4.2. Students' contribution in IRF sequences

According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and Mehan (1979), a teacher usually uses questions to initiate the whole class or one single student. Then students responded to the questions and the teacher followed up the respond or gave feedback. However, this present research found different discourse pattern with the previous research conducted by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and Mehan (1979). Based on the findings, this present research found that not only teacher who conducted initiation in class, but the students also conducted that.The students initiated the class in several times although it was still limited contribution, the percentage was only 3.6% until 12.5%. This finding was similar with Sunderland's finding (as cited in Saikko, 2007). In her study, the teacher often initiated the students by asking question and the students also conducted initiation and took different role in IRF pattern.

The students took a big role in responding the teacher's question. The percentage was between 92.3% until 99%. Regarding the quantity of teacher initiation and student response, this present research shown different result with previous research conducted by Hong (2011) According to Hong (2011) teacher discourse in asking question to the students as initiation was more dominated in class rather than students' response. In the present research, teacher's initiation was less than students' response. The total percentage of teacher's initiation during six meetings was 93.1 % and the total percentage of students' response is 95.6 %. It shown that students' response was dominated teacher's initiation during classroom interaction.

4.3. Encountered Challenges

The researchers adapted categories of challenges of oral communication at classroom from Fawzia (as cited in Tuan & Nhu, 2010) to categorize challenges in IRF sequences. There were three categories i.e. student factor, social factor, and educational factor. In the finding, no response from the students when the teacher asked question was being a problem.

The students were silent because of some reasons. First, they did not know the answer of the teacher questions, so they preferred to be silent because they did not know what should be said to the teacher. The second was because they knew the answer but they were confused how to explain it, they felt difficult to give their opinion. The third was because they were lack in English and it challenged them in class to give response to the teacher. Those reasons were same with the result of previous research conducted by Hu and Fell-Eisenkraft (2003) about silent students in New York. The result shows there were four different causes of silent. The first was because shy, the second was because of not having the correct answer, the third was because of unfamiliarity with talking to learn, and the last was because of lack of confidence in speaking English language. It became common reason from the students, especially for second language learner.

This research found that the problem which can influence the students in interaction was not only student personal affective, but also social factor. For example, a student said that she preferred to be silent and passive in class because there was a student who had intimate relationship in the past with her at the class and she felt embraced when she want to talk or give response in the class. It supported by Tatar's study (as cited in Tuan & Nhu, 2010) that when the students avoid making mistakes and avoid any embarrassing situation in front of the teacher and other friends, they will silence as their strategy to save their face. Those reasons can make the students being lack of confidence.

Moreover, types of question which was used by the teacher also became a problem and challenge the students to answer it. The students said that the teacher usually used critical thinking question in the class. That kind of question made the students though deeply and sometimes they felt difficult to answer it. It supported by Alexander, Commander, Greenberg, and Ward (2010) that asking question by using variety way or critical thinking question can promote students' learning and deeper thinking.

5.   Conclusion and Suggestion

Based on the result of this present research, there were three conclusions which were answered three research questions. First, the teacher gave contribution in the whole part of IRF (initiation, response, and feedback). The teacher had high percentage in giving contribution for initiation in class. The percentage was 93.1%. Then, in giving response the teacher only had 4. 4%. Meanwhile the percentage of teacher's feedback was 98.9%.

Second, the students also gave contribution in all part of IRF sequence. The percentage of students' initiation was 6. 9%, and students' response was 95.6%. In giving feedback, the students had lowest percentage it was only 1.1 %.

Third, there were challenges which were found in the implementation of IRF sequence at EAP class. There were three categories of challenges which included students' factors, social factors, and educational factors. Students' factors occurred because of students' personality problem. Social factors occurred because of influence from teacher or other friends. Meanwhile, one of the causes which were influenced by the educational factors was the types of teacher's question.

The present research was reported that in implementation of IRF sequences in EAP class both teacher and students gave their contribution in classroom interaction. They contributed in all three parts of IRF sequence, initiation, response, and feedback. However the teacher still had the larger portion of talk in classroom. For that reason, it is recommended to do further research in comparing teacher and students' contribution in two classes with one class use IRF sequence and the other classes which use another pattern such as ISRF sequence.

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