

## **The effect of teacher feedback on EFL learners' functional production in classroom discourse**

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The present study is based on the analysis of classroom interactions between children and with their teacher both in first and second language contexts. The subjects of our study are two five-year-old classes in an English bilingual school in Madrid, with two different teachers, and one five-year-old monolingual class.

The source of our analysis is Halliday's classification of the communicative functions that children can convey in their mother tongue at the pre-school level (Halliday, 1975). Our premise is that the functional variety of children's production and their use of language for their own communicative purposes is highly related to both frequency and type of teacher feedback. This is especially important in the case of second language learners, in order to avoid their L2 language production being limited to responses to their teacher's questions.

### **1 Introduction**

Halliday's (1975) functional analysis of child language shows the development of communicative functions in the language of a child from nine to eighteen months. He analyses the way language is used to serve certain communicative needs that children have in their interaction with the people that surround them. Against the common belief in the 1960's that language is an autonomous being, language development studies in the 1970's move away from this direction. Language is no longer seen as a "kind of spontaneous once-for-all happening resting on a given biological foundation, to be achieved by a certain maturational stage or not at all" (Halliday, 1975: 139).

Halliday (1975) advocates that language is mainly a social phenomenon. The child constructs a system of meaning that represents his/her own reality. It is a cognitive process but it always takes place in contact with the others. According to Halliday (1975), the social context is the generator of the meanings that are learnt. The social context is based on the contextualised language that children hear around them and, therefore, it seems necessary to focus on the functions that the child employs to make meanings, rather than the structures used to make those meanings manifest.

More recently, Painter (1999) also analyses the development of the ideational function in the language of a child from two to five, from a systemic functional perspective. In her work, she states the importance of the analysis of the child's interpretation of the world in the interaction with the others.

In western cultures one of the most significant social contexts that represent the reality of the child is the classroom. The language that children use in the class, as well as the language that they hear, is expected to be related to the context that surrounds them, and thus, it will convey the functions needed for that particular context. In my view, the functional analysis of classroom discourse (Christie, 2002) needs to be supplemented with the analysis of language development in foreign language contexts and, in order to have significant results, it is necessary to work with learner corpora (Granger, 1998; Llinares García, 2004).

## 2 Methodology of the study

This paper analyses the different types of feedback used by teachers with their pupils, comparing a native and a foreign language context, in order to see to what extent the quantity and quality of the feedback enhances a functionally richer learner production in the L2.

The data for the present study comes from the UAMLESC<sup>1</sup> (UAM Learner English Spoken Corpus), which is collecting spoken data from EFL learners at different educational levels with different degrees of immersion in the L2. The English native data comes from the CHILDES corpus. The total number of sessions analysed was 15 (five sessions in each of the three groups: the native group and the two EFL groups).

This study follows the ones carried out by Romero and Llinares (2001) and Llinares (2004; in press) based on a corpus driven analysis of the communicative functions realised by pre-school children in the classroom settings mentioned above.

## 3 The study of teacher feedback

The study of verbal interaction in the classroom dates back to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), who describe the structure of classroom discourse. Other interesting studies are Stubbs' (1976) observation of the control that teachers have of the relevance and validity of children's discourse, and the study carried out by Barnes (1989), who analyses one day in a secondary school class in a British school, focusing on the effect of the abstract language used by the teacher on the pupils' learning process. As far as second language contexts are concerned, Richards and Lockhart (1994) focus on the importance of not only letting learners know how well they have performed but also of increasing their motivation.

There are different types of classifications of teacher feedback. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) focus on the "evaluative feedback" used by the teacher in classroom discourse, which usually consists of the acts of accepting, evaluating and commenting. Richards and Lockhart's (1994) classification includes saying that something is correct or incorrect, praising, modifying a student's answer, repeating, summarising and criticising.

### 3.1 Classification of teacher feedback in the present study

Based on the analysis of the data, we have distinguished two main types of feedback: a *pedagogic feedback*, of the type identified by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), and an *interactional feedback*, which reflects the type of feedback used in ordinary conversations outside the classroom. The different types are defined below and are illustrated with examples from the corpus:

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*Interactional Feedback (IF)*: comment made by the teacher, with no evaluative or corrective purpose, which may enhance the learner's linguistic production. This type of feedback includes expressions of agreement, disagreement or acknowledgement<sup>2</sup>.

- (1)CH: because the battery's finished  
TCH: **Oh, you need to get new batteries (IF)**  
CH: I can take this one

*Pedagogic Feedback (PF)*: acknowledgment or comment made by the teacher, with the purpose of correcting or evaluating the children's performance. Four main types of pedagogic feedback (PF) have been identified:

- PF that evaluates the learners' production positively (PF1)

- (2)CH: Mum put the... wallpaper on the wall  
TCH: **Good (PF1)**

- PF that evaluates the learners' production negatively (PF2)

- (3)TCH: **No, scardy isn't a word (PF2)**

- PF that corrects the learners' production (PF3)

- (4)TCH: No, scardy isn't a word. You must say **scared (PF3)**

- PF that gives the learners a clue for the right answer (PF4)

- (5)TCH: Yes, where does the bread come from: plants or animals?  
CH: I don't know  
TCH: You remember what it's made from? **It's made from wheat (PF4)**

- PF that prompts the learners to respond (PF5)

- (6)TCH: Can you tell me the right order?  
CH: I don't know  
TCH: **Come on! (PF5)**

As Chaudron (1988) points out, the teacher's presentation of the correct answer after correct and incorrect responses can lead to ambiguity: "... repetition of a speaker's utterance can serve several functions, of either a negative (correcting) or a positive nature (agreeing, appreciating, understanding ...)" (Chaudron 1988:145). Thus, the learner may see the modification as a mere alternative to his/her own utterance, because accepting, approving, confirming repetitions occur frequently in the same contexts. In the taxonomy presented here, we have distinguished between the feedback used by the teacher that includes changes in the learner's utterance (which has been classified as pedagogic corrective feedback, PF3) and the feedback which does not change the child's utterance or, if it does, shows interest in the content and not the form (this type has been classified as interactional feedback).

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<sup>2</sup> The function of acknowledgement corresponds to what Chaudron (1988) calls "Signs of approval". This function involves a teacher responding affirmatively to the content and ignoring the error by moving on to topic continuation.

#### **4 Taxonomy of children's communicative functions**

One of the aims of this study is to find out whether the use of different types of feedback by the teachers may lead to a richer functional production in the learners' L2. In order to understand what is meant by "rich functional production", it is necessary to summarise the main functional categories proposed by Halliday (1975) and later adapted by Llinares García (2004) to the EFL context. Each category is illustrated with examples of learners' production in the EFL context.

##### *Instrumental (I)*

It is the function that language serves of satisfying the child's needs. Llinares García (2004) identified the functions of expressing wishes and asking for permission as the main subcategories within this group, as shown in examples (7) and (8) from the corpus:

(7)CH1: **Give me a pencil (I)**

CH2: No

(8)CH1: **I can do it? (I)**

CH2: No

##### *Regulatory (R)*

It is the function used to control the behaviour of others.

(9)CH:**Turn it up (R)**

##### **Informative (Inf)**

It is the function of language to give information about people, things and actions. Llinares García (2004) included in this category functions such as describing, identifying and narrating.

(10) CH: No, it doesn't work (Inf)

##### **Personal (P)**

It is the function used to express the uniqueness of the speaker and his/her perception of things and events.

(11) CH: ((TALKING ABOUT DEATH)) **I think we would not.. grow again (P1)**

##### **Interactional (In)**

It is the language used by the child to interact with those around him/her. This function includes greetings, apologies, etc...

(12) CH: **Oh, sorry I didn't see it (In2)**

##### **Heuristic (H)**

It is the use of language to request information.

(13) CH: **Is it red?(H1)**

TCH: No.

In our opinion, the realisation of these functions by EFL learners would make their L2 production "functionally richer", as they would be using the target language in a similar way to the L1.

## 5 Analysis of the data

### 5.1 Frequency of functions

The children's production in the fifteen sessions was codified according to the main functions presented above. The first step was to quantify the number of occurrences of each of the functions per group, with a further differentiation between teachers and pupils. This differentiation was made on the assumption that the functions used by the children would heavily rely on the use made by the teachers. We used the data from the native group (from the CHILDES corpus) as an example of the language used by five-year-old children in classroom contexts. It served as a contrasting group as we were interested in finding out to what extent the two EFL groups were close or distant to the native group in the type of functions used.

Figures 1a, 1b and 1c show the distribution of functions in the first language context and in groups A and B in the EFL context.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1a. Frequency of communicative functions in the EFL context: Group A

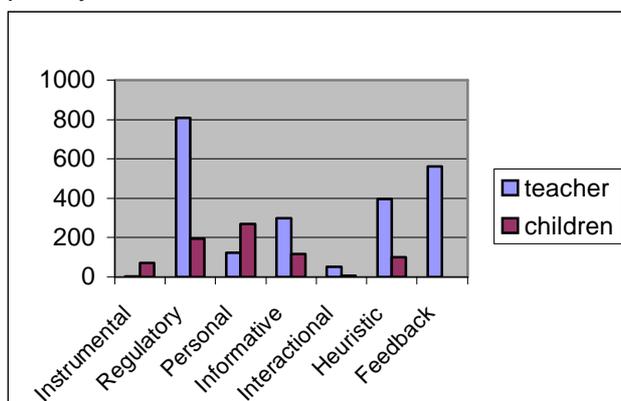
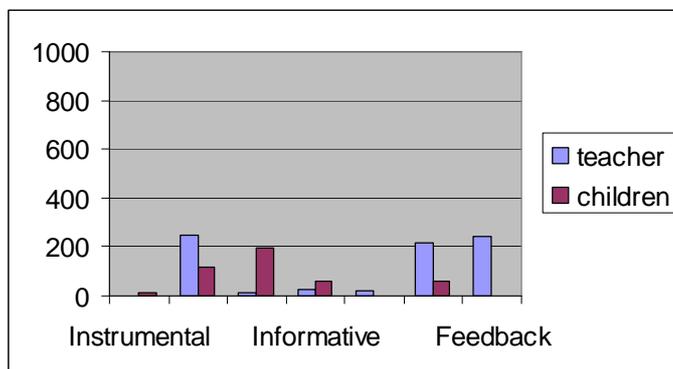


Figure 1b. Frequency of communicative functions in the EFL context: Group B



<sup>3</sup> We have also included here the frequency of use of the teacher feedback.

Figure 1c. Frequency of communicative functions in the First Language context

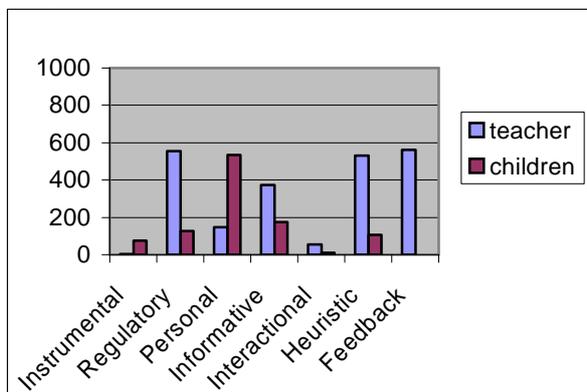


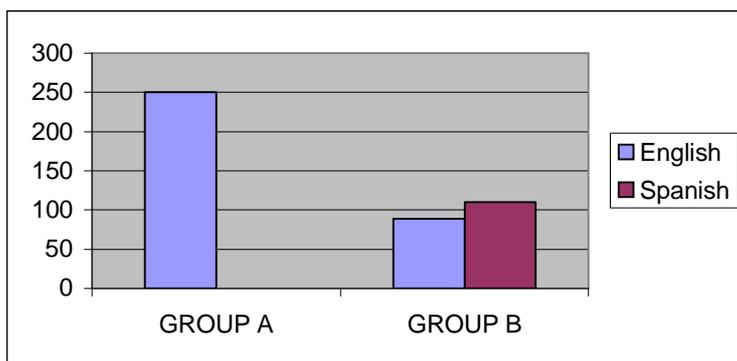
Figure 1c above shows that, in the first language context, the teacher uses most functions with a higher frequency than the children, except in the case of the personal function. The most common functions in the language of the teacher are regulatory, feedback and heuristic, which correspond to the most common realisations identified in teacher talk (Chaudron, 1988).

In group A in the EFL context (see figure 1a above), we can also observe the leading use of the regulatory, feedback and heuristic functions by the teacher. Again, we can see that the personal function is used more often by the children than by the teacher, and it is the most frequent function in the language of the children.

Group B shows a similar pattern in the type of functions used by the teacher. Also, as in the previous cases, the children's most frequent function is the personal one. However, it is important to stress that the main difference with group A is that 55.2% of the realisations of the personal function in this group are in Spanish. In fact, 53.1% of all the functions realised by the children in this group are in the mother tongue.

These results confirm the importance of the personal function in child language at this age. The results in the first language context show that children need to perform this function, in other words, they like talking about their personal things. This also happens in the EFL context, but here the two groups differ significantly: the children in group A use the L2, whereas in group B they often use the L1 (Figure 2):

Fig. 2. Language used by Spanish children in the EFL context to realise the personal function

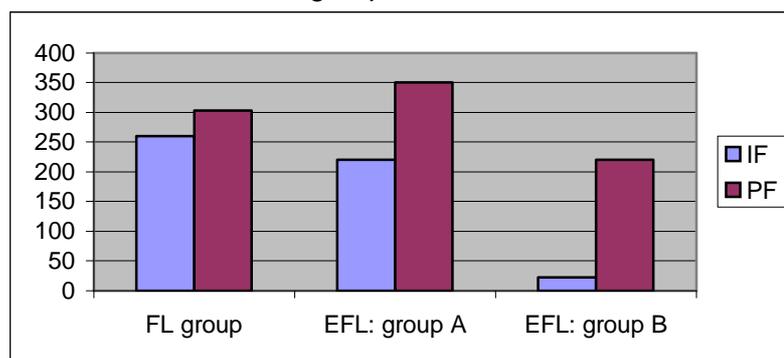


In the next section we will argue that the quantity and quality of the teacher feedback enhances the realisation of the personal function in the L2 in group A, whereas in group B the lack of appropriate feedback by the teacher leads to a more frequent use of the L1.

## 5.2 The effect of teacher feedback

As figure 3 below shows, the quantitative analysis of the two main types of feedback proposed in this paper indicates the most frequent use of pedagogic feedback (PF) in all groups. This result is not surprising as classroom feedback tends to be used for pedagogic purposes (evaluating, correcting, etc...). However, in the first language group (FL) this frequency is not significantly higher than the use of interactional feedback (IF). As far as the EFL context is concerned, there is again an interesting difference between both groups. In group A, where the teacher interacted more with the children<sup>4</sup>, the teacher's performance of interactional feedback is much higher:

Figure 3: Distribution of the *Pedagogic (PF)* and *Interactional (IF)* feedback in the three groups



In the EFL context, the frequency of the function of feedback in both groups is very similar and even higher in group B (21.3% in group A and 25.6% in group B of the total number of functions realised). However, the type of feedback used is very different. In group A 38.5% of the feedback provided is of an interactional type, whereas in group B it only represents 9%.

Another common feature in all groups is that the most frequent type of pedagogic feedback is positive evaluation (PF1). This result contradicts Nunan and Lamb's (1996) conclusion that error correction is one of the first tasks of the language teacher. According to our data, this does not seem to be the case in pre-school contexts, where positive evaluation is more frequent than correction.

As far as interactional feedback is concerned, as we have already indicated, it was more frequent in the language of the teacher in the native group than in the teachers in the EFL groups. In the case of Group A, where it represents a higher percentage than in group B, almost 70% of the realisations of this type of feedback generated a personal function from the children. Moreover, in group B 18 out of the 22 realisations of this feedback by the teacher (more than 80%) generated the children's realisation of the personal function in the L2.

## 5.3 Summary of results

The main results of the analysis can be summarised as follows:

- The personal function of language is the most common function in the language of five-year old children in the classroom, both in the L1 and the L2.

<sup>4</sup> The total number of utterances realised by the teacher in group A was 2,675, against 943 in group B, being the number and length of the sessions the same.

- Pre-school first language contexts show a similar frequency of use of *pedagogic* and *interactional feedback*. However, in EFL contexts the first type is more frequent.
- In both first language and foreign language pre-school contexts, "positive evaluation" is the most common type of *pedagogic feedback*, contrary to previous research that point to "corrective feedback" as the most frequent.
- The teacher's use of interactional feedback in the EFL context seems to encourage the learners' realisations of the personal function in the L2.

## 6 General conclusions

From this study, we can conclude that EFL young learners can realise the same functions in the L2 as native speakers of the same age, if their teacher encourages them to do it. The frequent use of the personal function by the children in the native context indicates its importance as a communicative tool at this age, also in classroom contexts. Therefore, it seems to be a function that should be enhanced in EFL contexts.

The present study shows that *interactional feedback*, which is frequently used in first language contexts, is also necessary in EFL classrooms if children are expected to use the L2 to convey functions such as the personal one. This has been observed in our analysis of Group B in which the teacher's low frequency of use of this type of feedback has resulted in the children's use of their mother tongue to compensate for their lack of functional competence in English.

Finally, it is essential, in our opinion, that we establish clear comparative correlational models with the native language classroom context that could help the non-native teacher of English to establish the parameters of use of the different discourse functions. This type of studies are especially aimed at the promotion of children's language production and communication in a foreign language from the early stages of their learning process. This is a factor which will certainly facilitate their oral communication skills in a foreign language as they grow older.

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Corpora:

The CHILDES Corpus

The UAM-Learner English Spoken Corpus