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IRF Patterns in Junior High EFL Classes: Cycles, Feedback, and Student Participation

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pola interaksi Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) di tingkat sekolah menengah pertama berdasarkan kerangka analisis wacana kelas Sinclair dan Coulthard (1975). Penelitian deskriptif kualitatif ini mengkaji interaksi lisan dari rekaman video pembelajaran berdurasi 13 menit bertopik "Hobbies and Interests" pada kelas 7B di SMP IT Masjid Syuhada Yogyakarta. Seluruh tuturan verbal guru dan peserta didik ditranskripsikan secara verbatim, kemudian dianalisis melalui tahap kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil analisis terhadap 72 moves dalam 34 pertukaran (exchanges) menunjukkan bahwa interaksi kelas didominasi oleh guru, dengan Initiation Move sebesar 38,89%, Response Move sebesar 36,11%, dan Feedback Move sebesar 16,67%. Pola IRF tidak selalu berwujud siklus tripartit lengkap; ditemukan pola variatif seperti rangkaian I–R tanpa umpan balik, pertukaran lanjutan (extended exchanges), serta urutan terpotong (I–Silence–F). Umpan balik guru utamanya berfungsi secara evaluatif untuk mengonfirmasi kebenaran jawaban siswa daripada memperluas dialog. Meskipun demikian, inisiatif mandiri siswa muncul ketika mengonfirmasi kaidah tata bahasa (Ada doing-nya kan?), yang menunjukkan potensi agensi peserta didik. Berdasarkan temuan ini, guru disarankan untuk memperbanyak pertanyaan referensial dan umpan balik elaboratif serta menyediakan wait-time yang memadai guna mendorong interaksi kelas yang lebih dialogis dan berpusat pada peserta didik.

Kata kunci: Analisis Wacana Kelas, Model IRF, Sinclair dan Coulthard, Kualitas Umpan Balik, Inisiatif Siswa

Abstract

This study aims to examine the structural patterns of Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) interaction in a junior high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom using Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) discourse analysis framework. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study analyzed spoken interaction from a 13-minute video recording of a Grade 7B lesson on "Hobbies and Interests" at SMP IT Masjid Syuhada Yogyakarta. Spoken utterances between the teacher and students were transcribed verbatim and examined through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis identified 72 communicative moves across 34 exchanges, revealing a teacher-dominated interaction structure. Initiation moves accounted for 38.89% of the total moves, while Response moves represented 36.11%, and Feedback moves comprised 16.67%. Crucially, interaction did not always follow a complete tripartite IRF cycle; variations included truncated I–R sequences, extended multi-response exchanges, and an I–Silence–F sequence following student hesitation. Teacher feedback functioned primarily as evaluative confirmation rather than elaborative scaffolding. However, instances of student initiation emerged when learners sought grammatical clarification, illustrating moments of learner agency within structured talk. These findings suggest that teachers should incorporate more open-ended referential questions, provide sufficient wait-time, and deploy dialogic feedback rather than relying strictly on closed evaluation. Such pedagogical adjustments foster genuine communicative competence and promote active student participation in secondary EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Classroom Discourse Analysis, IRF Model, Sinclair and Coulthard, Feedback Quality, Student Initiative

1. Introduction

In EFL classes, spoken language serves two purposes: it is used by teachers to deliver lessons and is also a skill that students need to develop (Hashmi, 2025; Tukenmez Sahin & Karatepe, 2025). Communicative Language Teaching encourages students to interact with one another, share ideas, negotiate meaning, and take an active part in conversations (Hu, 2025). However, classroom interaction in many junior high schools where English is taught

as a foreign language remains largely teacher-led (Deji-Afuye & Zhou, 2025; Wanji, 2025). Teachers often decide who speaks and what is discussed. They also tend to use closed display questions that focus on checking students' knowledge rather than encouraging them to think more deeply (Hu, 2025; Tukenmez Sahin & Karatepe, 2025).

Classroom interaction can be analyzed using Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) rank-scale model, which builds on Halliday's grammatical hierarchy. The model consists of five ranks: Lesson, Transaction, Exchange, Move, and Act (Hashmi, 2025; Wang, 2024). The exchange is the basic unit for analyzing classroom interaction. There are two main types of exchange: boundary exchanges, which use framing and focusing moves to mark transitions between lesson stages, and teaching exchanges (Hashmi, 2025). Teaching exchanges commonly follow the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) pattern. The teacher initiates the interaction by asking a question, giving an instruction, or providing information. The student then responds, and the teacher follows up with an evaluation or comment (Handford & Gee, 2023; Hashmi, 2025; Paltridge, 2021). This pattern helps teachers manage lesson activities, follow the planned lesson, and maintain classroom order (Deji-Afuye & Zhou, 2025; Tukenmez Sahin & Karatepe, 2025). However, when teachers rely too heavily on IRF, students may have fewer opportunities to participate independently and communicate spontaneously (Rehman et al., 2025).

Previous studies have shown that teaching exchanges do not always contain all three parts of the IRF pattern (Aalbers & Steenbeek, 2024; Wanji, 2025). Some exchanges consist of only two parts, Initiation–Response (IR), when the teacher does not provide explicit feedback. Others include responses from several students before the teacher gives feedback (Tukenmez Sahin & Karatepe, 2025; Wanji, 2025). Some exchanges also end with pauses or silence when students have difficulty responding to a question (Deji-Afuye & Zhou, 2025; Soysal, 2024). In these situations, the teacher's follow-up turn becomes important. Feedback is not limited to short comments such as "good" or "correct." It can also support students through scaffolding by clarifying meaning and encouraging them to develop their answers further (Hu, 2025; Ulker & Yilmaz, 2023).

In teacher-led classrooms, students often take the role of responding to the teacher rather than initiating interaction themselves (Rehman et al., 2025). However, when students ask questions, check the meaning of something, or seek clarification about a task without being prompted, they take a more active role in classroom interaction (Klerk & van de Pol, 2022; Wang, 2024). In Indonesian junior high schools, previous studies on classroom interaction have mainly focused on measuring teacher talk or treating IRF cycles as a general and uniform pattern (Maghfur, 2021; Pei & Meng, 2024). Less attention has been given to how IRF exchanges vary in structure, how teacher feedback supports classroom learning, and how students initiate interaction. To address this gap, the present study examines spoken interaction in a seventh-grade EFL classroom in Indonesia using Sinclair and Coulthard's framework. It focuses on variations in IRF structures, the role of teacher feedback, and instances of student-initiated interaction.

2. Method

2.1 Research Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative design and classroom discourse analysis. Its aim was to look at how Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) exchanges are structured, what the teacher's feedback does, and when students start the interaction in an EFL class. The approach was chosen because it lets the researcher describe and interpret spoken interaction in a natural classroom, with no changes to how the lesson is taught. It also shows how the teacher and students organize their talk during the lesson.

2.2 Data and Data Sources

The data were the words spoken by the teacher and students in an English lesson. The main source was a video recording of a lesson on "Hobbies and Interests" in Class 7B at SMP IT Masjid Syuhada Yogyakarta, taken from a public educational repository (Wulansari, 2024). The recording was about 13 minutes long and included opening routines, questions based on a video, reading comprehension, grammar exercises, and group activities. This video was chosen because it showed many kinds of classroom interaction that matched the aims of the study. To protect the students' identities in the analysis, the teacher was labeled T, individual students were labeled S1–S4, and choral responses were labeled SS.

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2.3 Instruments of Data Collection

The researcher was the main instrument. The researcher watched the video, transcribed the talk, found the units of interaction, and classified the data. Two tools supported the analysis: a transcription guide and a discourse coding matrix. The transcription guide was used to record what was said, changes of speaker, pauses, overlapping speech, and switches between English and Indonesian when they mattered. The coding matrix was based on Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) rank-scale model and focused on exchanges, moves, and acts. Exchanges were sorted into boundary exchanges and teaching exchanges. Moves were coded as Initiation (I), Response (R), Follow-up/Feedback (F), or Framing/Boundary moves. Acts were identified by their communicative function, such as elicitation, directive, reply, accept, evaluate, comment, and clue.

2.4 Techniques of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed with the framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which has three parts: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis followed these steps.

1. Verbatim Transcription and Turn Segmentation: The video was watched and listened to several times to write a word-for-word transcript of the classroom talk. The transcript was split into turns each time the speaker changed. Pauses, overlapping speech, and switches between English and Indonesian were also noted when relevant.

2. Identification of Exchanges, Moves, and Acts: The transcript was checked to find the exchanges and the moves inside them. Boundary exchanges were found through framing and focusing moves that organized the lesson or marked a change from one stage to the next, while teaching exchanges carried the instructional talk. Each move was then classified by its function and its place in the interaction as Initiation, Response, Follow-up/Feedback, or Framing/Boundary. The acts inside the moves were identified by what each utterance was doing. This gave 34 exchanges and 72 moves.

3. Data Display and Analysis: The coded data were put into tables that show how often each type of move occurred and how much the teacher and students took part. The exchanges were also checked for differences in the IRF pattern, such as complete I–R–F cycles, I–R sequences with no separate feedback move, longer exchanges, and sequences with silence. Next, the analysis looked at what the teacher's feedback did, especially in judging answers, correcting errors, confirming responses, and helping students build their answers. Student-initiated moves were also checked to find times when students started the interaction without being called on by the teacher.

4. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: The findings were interpreted in light of the research aims and Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) framework. The analysis considered how teacher and student moves were distributed, the different structures of the exchanges, the functions of teacher feedback, and the presence of student-initiated interaction. To check consistency, the transcript was compared with the original video and with the coding matrix. Unclear classifications were reviewed again by looking at the talk around them. Where peer debriefing took place, differences in interpretation were discussed with a colleague until they agreed.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Result

The 13-minute classroom recording was transcribed and analyzed using Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) classroom discourse framework. The analysis identified 72 communicative moves across 34 interactional exchanges. The moves were classified into Initiation (I), Response (R), Follow-up/Feedback (F), and Framing/Boundary moves.

3.1.1 Distribution of Moves

Table 1 presents the overall distribution of the communicative moves found in the classroom interaction.

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Table 1. Distribution and frequency of moves

No	Move Type	Primary Speaker	Frequency (f)	%
1	Initiation(I)	Mostly teacher (26), some students (2)	28	38.89
2	Response (R)	Mostly students (24), some teacher (2)	26	36.11
3	Follow-up/ Feedback (F)	Teacher	12	16.67
4	Framing/ boundary move	Teacher	6	8.33
Total			72	100.00

Source: YouTube classroom video transcript (2024)

Initiation was the most frequent move, with 28 occurrences (38.89%), followed by Response with 26 occurrences (36.11%). Follow-up/Feedback occurred 12 times (16.67%), while Framing/Boundary moves accounted for 6 occurrences (8.33%).

In terms of speakers, the teacher produced 46 moves (63.89%), consisting of 26 Initiations, 12 Follow-up/Feedback moves, 6 Framing/Boundary moves, and 2 Responses to student-initiated questions. The students produced 26 moves (36.11%), consisting of 24 Responses and 2 Initiations. This distribution indicates that the teacher played the main role in directing the interaction, while students mainly participated by responding to the teacher's questions, prompts, and instructions.

3.1.2 Structure of the IRF Pattern

Across the 34 interactional exchanges, several structural patterns were found. The interaction did not follow a single fixed IRF sequence throughout the lesson. Instead, the exchanges included complete I–R–F cycles, I–R sequences, extended exchanges with more than one response or follow-up, and a truncated sequence involving silence.

A clear example of the complete pattern occurred during the discussion of hobbies. The teacher asked students what hobbies they remembered from the video, and the students responded with examples such as "swimming." The teacher then repeated or confirmed the answer. A similar pattern occurred during the grammar activity when the teacher asked students to complete an item, the students answered, and the teacher confirmed the answer.

The classroom also contained shorter I–R exchanges. These were common when the teacher asked a question and students immediately provided an answer, such as "What did we learn yesterday?" followed by "Hobby," or "How are you today?" followed by "I'm fine, thank you." In these cases, the teacher did not always provide a separate feedback move after the response.

Some exchanges were extended through additional responses and follow-ups. For example, during the video-based hobby activity, the teacher asked students to recall hobbies from the video. Students mentioned hobbies such as "swimming," "basketball," and "going to the concert." The teacher then prompted students to mention the hobbies more clearly and corrected the response "basketball" by clarifying that the intended answer was "playing baseball." The utterance "going to the concert" remained a student response to the teacher's prompt rather than a new student initiation. However, when the teacher asked, "Who is going to the concert?", this created a new initiation, followed by the student response "Erika" and the teacher's confirmation.

Another pattern appeared when the teacher asked a question and received no immediate response. For example, when discussing the final grammar item, the teacher introduced the item and students remained silent. The teacher then continued by explaining the grammatical point. This created a truncated **I–Silence–F** sequence.

The data therefore show that the IRF pattern was present in the lesson, but its realization varied according to the classroom activity. The teacher frequently initiated interaction and used feedback to confirm, correct, or extend students' responses.

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3.1.3 Teacher Follow-up and Its Functions

The 12 Follow-up/Feedback moves served different purposes in the classroom interaction. They were mainly used to evaluate students' answers, confirm correct responses, correct inaccurate answers, and encourage students to provide further information.

Some feedback moves were evaluative. For example, after students answered a grammar question, the teacher used expressions such as "That's right" to confirm the answer. In another example, after a student said "basketball," the teacher corrected the answer by saying, "Playing baseball ya, bukan basketball." These moves showed the teacher's role in checking and evaluating students' responses.

Other feedback moves were more supportive or scaffolding in nature. The teacher sometimes encouraged students to continue or make their answers clearer. For example, during the video activity, the teacher prompted the students to "mention the hobbies through the video" rather than simply accepting a short response. These follow-ups helped students provide more information without completely taking over the interaction.

Thus, the Follow-up/Feedback moves were not limited to simple evaluation. They also helped the teacher guide students toward more complete or accurate responses.

3.1.4 Student Initiatives and Framing/Boundary Moves

Although most Initiations were produced by the teacher, the data also contained two student-initiated moves. These occurred when students asked questions related to the worksheet or classroom task. For example, students asked about the worksheet during the group activity, after which the teacher responded and provided clarification. These instances show that students were not completely passive, although student-initiated interaction was much less frequent than teacher-initiated interaction.

The six Framing/Boundary moves were mainly produced by the teacher to organize the lesson rather than to develop an IRF exchange. They included opening the lesson, giving task instructions, moving from one activity to another, organizing group work, and closing the lesson. Examples include instructions to check the group, listen to the audio, read the text together, and end the meeting.

These framing moves are important because they show how the teacher managed the classroom beyond question-and-answer interaction. However, they were treated separately from the core I–R–F structure because their main function was procedural and organizational structure.

3.2 Discussion

The findings indicate that classroom interaction in this lower-secondary EFL class largely follows Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model. The interaction is mainly teacher-led, with the teacher taking the lead in organizing the lesson, selecting topics, managing student participation, and evaluating responses. As a result, students have fewer opportunities to direct the conversation themselves. This pattern is also reported in recent studies of secondary English classrooms in non-English-speaking contexts, where classroom interaction tends to focus on completing learning activities and maintaining classroom order rather than encouraging open discussion (Deji-Afuye & Zhou, 2025; Hu, 2025; Wanji, 2025).

Regarding the first research objective, the analysis shows that the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) pattern varies according to the classroom activity. Complete I–R–F sequences mainly occur when the teacher checks students' understanding, while shorter I–R exchanges are more common during grammar drills. In these shorter exchanges, students usually provide brief answers, and the teacher moves directly to the next question without giving additional verbal feedback. This is particularly noticeable in sentence-completion activities, where the expected answers are relatively clear. Similar patterns were reported by Wanji (2025) and Tukenmez Sahin and Karatepe (2025), who found that shortened I–R exchanges often occur during teacher-led drills when the lesson needs to progress quickly. However, the interaction becomes more extended during video-based activities. Students provide different answers to the teacher's questions, leading to further questions before the teacher evaluates their responses. This finding suggests that the type of activity and the variety of student responses can influence how classroom exchanges develop (Aalbers & Steenbeek, 2024; Wang, 2024).

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Another pattern found in the data is the Initiation–Silence–Feedback sequence. This occurs when students do not respond to a question and the teacher eventually provides the answer or explanation. For example, when the students could not answer the final grammar question, the teacher explained the rule instead of waiting longer for a response. Similar findings were reported by Deji-Afuye and Zhou (2025) and Soysal (2024), who observed that teachers in secondary classrooms sometimes limit waiting time to maintain lesson progress and reduce students' discomfort when they cannot answer. Although this approach allows the lesson to continue, it also limits students' opportunities to think through the problem and develop their own answers. In this classroom, the teacher's decision to move on reflects the difficulty of balancing lesson pace with opportunities for student participation, particularly in EFL settings (Hu, 2025; Rehman et al., 2025).

The second research objective concerns the role of teacher feedback. The findings show that feedback is used not only to confirm whether an answer is correct but also to help students understand the expected language form (Klerk & van de Pol, 2022; Ulker & Yilmaz, 2023). For instance, when a student answered "basketball" instead of "playing baseball," the teacher corrected the response by saying, "Playing baseball ya, bukan basketball." The teacher combined English and Indonesian to make the correction clearer. This use of the students' first language helped explain the difference between the incorrect answer and the expected expression. The finding is consistent with Hashmi (2025) and Ulker and Yilmaz (2023), who emphasize the role of feedback in supporting language learning. In this case, the teacher's response did more than evaluate the student's answer; it also provided guidance on how to produce a more accurate expression.

The third research objective focuses on learner agency, particularly students' willingness to initiate interaction. Although most student contributions occurred in response to the teacher's questions, the data also show instances of students speaking up on their own. One example is the clarification question "Ada doing-nya kan?" which indicates that the student was checking their understanding of the grammar rule. This moment is important because the student initiated an exchange without waiting to be called on. The teacher then responded to the question, briefly shifting the usual pattern in which the teacher controls the direction of interaction. Similar observations have been discussed by Klerk and van de Pol (2022) and Wang (2024), who highlight the importance of student-initiated interaction in classroom learning. The teacher's willingness to respond to the student's question also suggests that teacher-led instruction does not necessarily prevent students from taking initiative. As Pei and Meng (2024) and Zhao and Chen (2024) suggest, classroom interaction can remain structured while still allowing students to raise questions and express their learning needs.

4. Conclusion

This study found that classroom interaction in the 7th-grade English class was mainly organized around Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) IRF pattern. The teacher played a dominant role in the interaction, producing 63.89% of the total communicative moves, while students produced 36.11%. Most student moves were responses to the teacher's questions, prompts, and instructions, although two student-initiated moves were also identified. Across the 34 exchanges, the IRF pattern appeared in dynamic variations rather than a fixed formula: complete I–R–F sequences, shorter I–R sequences during rapid drills, extended sequences with multiple responses and follow-ups, and an incomplete sequence involving silence. Teacher feedback served multiple pedagogical purposes, including confirming answers, correcting errors, and encouraging students to expand their contributions. Furthermore, the student-initiated question *"Ada doing-nya kan?"* demonstrated that learners can actively participate and exercise communicative agency when clarifying their understanding. Overall, these findings indicate that while the IRF pattern remains central to classroom interaction, its structural realization adapts to task demands and learner responses. Based on these findings, English teachers are encouraged to provide greater opportunities for students to produce extended and independent utterances. Incorporating open-ended questions, elaborative follow-up prompts, and adequate wait-time can help learners formulate ideas in English rather than relying solely on short, single-word answers. Incorporating peer-to-peer communicative tasks can also foster bilateral interaction beyond teacher-fronted routines. For future researchers, investigating longer classroom recordings across multiple schools and instructional genres is recommended to capture a broader perspective of classroom discourse. In addition, future studies could incorporate teacher wait-time and multimodal resources, such as gestures, facial expressions, and gaze to provide deeper insights into how classroom interaction unfolds beyond verbal language alone.

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