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Teacher–student talk in Singapore Chinese language classrooms: a case study of initiation/response/follow-up (IRF)

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In this article, I analyse the initiation/response/follow-up (IRF) exchanges between teachers and students in teacher-fronted instruction by using transcribed classroom data. Adopting a social constructivist position, I examine ways in which teachers construct or reduce students' learning opportunities in these communications. Furthermore, I demonstrate how language is used to serve the functions of mediation and to provide learning opportunities. Although teachers talk most of the time and control most of the turns, I argue that teachers can improve their talk and control in their fronted instruction to optimise student contributions and to facilitate students' learning.

Keywords: interaction; IRF; social constructivism; Chinese; Singapore

Introduction

Singapore, a multiethnic and multicultural city-state, has implemented an English-knowing bilingual policy, which has been perceived by many local and international scholars (e.g. Gopinathan, Pakir, Ho, & Saravanan, 1998; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Shepherd, 2005) as a success that has contributed to Singapore's economic miracle. In this English-knowing bilingual policy, English, not being of Asian origin, is legitimised as the de facto national language used not only in government administration, law, business, workplaces, and among different ethnic communities, but also as the medium of instruction in the school system (Shepherd, 2005). Meanwhile, Chinese, Malay and Tamil are defined in specific Singaporean terms as the official "mother tongues", which are taught as school subjects, with their proficiencies seen as enabling direct access to cultural traditions and related values of the Singaporean ethnic communities (see Shepherd, 2005 and Silver, 2005 for its historical development).

This English-knowing bilingual policy is mainly played out in the school system through a top-down model of language-in-education planning (see, for example, Silver, 2005; Tan, 2006). As far as the Chinese language is concerned, the education system has successively tried curricular and pedagogical reforms over the past twenty years, and yet Chinese language instruction in schools is largely seen as a "problem" rather than a satisfactory accomplishment (see, for example, Silver, 2005; Tan, 2006). Despite social-cultural and political factors, among others, the Chinese classroom is often portrayed as teacher-centred with passive students, and Chinese teachers are criticised for their

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excessive teacher talk (see, for example, Pan, 2004; Shen, 2003). Such pedagogic environments are perceived as detrimental to Chinese language learning and demoralising for students' learning, interest and motivation (see, for example, Goh, 2004; Pan, 2004; Shen, 2003).

However, few studies of Chinese classroom interaction have been reported in the local research literature (see Liu, Zhao, & Goh, 2007, for a review). They are also rare, if not non-existent, in the international literature. In this article, I address this gap by analysing one type of Chinese language classroom discourses and triadic dialogues (Lemke, 1990), typically defined as initiation/response/follow-up (IRF) (Mehan, 1979), between teachers and students in teacher-fronted instruction.¹ Adopting the position that maximising student involvement in interaction is conducive to language learning (Mackey, 2006; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997), I examine the ways in which two teachers, through their control of content, procedure and choice of language, constructed or reduced the students' learning opportunities through their triadic dialogues in classroom interactions. I also demonstrate, through an analysis of transcribed data of students' interactions, how language is used to serve the functions of mediation and to provide learning opportunities for students involved in classroom interaction. I conclude by arguing that although teachers talk most of the time and control most of the turns, they can improve the talk and control in their fronted instruction to optimise students' contributions and facilitate student learning. I hope the analyses in this article can provide some suggestions for Chinese language teaching programmes in other countries, especially where it is common to have a large number of students in a class.

Background of the study

As noted earlier, Chinese pedagogical practice in the classroom is viewed as anachronistic, and Chinese teachers are criticised for talking too much in order to engage and motivate students to learn the language (see, for example, Pan, 2004; Shen, 2003). Therefore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore has recently restructured Chinese curriculum and pedagogy, with a clear shift from emphasising teacher-centred pedagogy to student-oriented pedagogy and from emphasising knowledge transmission to knowledge construction (MOE, 2002; Tan, 2006). This shift is variously discussed by local academics and education policymakers as a holistic or integrated approach to curricula and pedagogy (see, for example, Chin, 2003; MOE, 2002; Tan, 2006). Informed by what is generally termed *social constructivism*, this integrated approach emphasises the employment of interactive methods (e.g. teacher–student interaction, peer interaction, task-based pair work) in a classroom where students are seen as active participants and the teacher as a facilitator or organiser. While acknowledging that this student interactive-oriented approach in classroom practice is conducive to Chinese learning, I argue in line with some classroom researchers that classrooms are specific contexts in their own right where teachers largely control both content and procedure and classroom pedagogic discourse takes the form of various language routines that accompany specific curricular activities (e.g. Cazden, 2001; Huang, 2003; Mohan & Huang, 2002; Wells, 1993, 2002; Westgate & Hughes, 1997). Thus teacher-dominated talk, or the quantity of teacher talk, is not the determinant of whether teachers do or do not facilitate students' learning. By recognising the important relationship between language use and pedagogic purpose, I assume that quality rather than quantity should be the focus in understanding the nature of classroom discourse, especially in classrooms with a large number of students.

Within the classroom, teacher–student interactions or pedagogic discourse can take the form of various language patterns that accompany different curricular activities (Cazden, 2001; Wells, 2002). In this view, classroom verbal behaviour is curricular goal-oriented and governed by certain rules, and learning in the classroom is tied to specific interactive patterns that are largely set by the teacher and used by students to question and respond to new information (Cazden, 2001). According to Cazden, “the teacher . . . is responsible for controlling not just negatively, as a traffic officer does to avoid collisions but also positively, to enhance the purpose of education” (p. 2). Indeed, in the classroom, teachers talk most of the time, initiate most exchanges through display questions, and control both content and procedure interaction (Westgate & Hughes, 1997). Among various language patterns of classroom discourse, the three-part exchange structure, or IRF, is perhaps the most ubiquitous discourse format anywhere in the world (Hall & Walsh, 2002). This default option was regarded as typical of the traditional teacher-centred discourse pattern (Mehan, 1979). However, in the recent reconceptualisation of the IRF pattern, some researchers (see Hall & Walsh, 2002, for a review; also Wells, 1993) have confirmed that this teacher-controlled pattern of interaction provides students with opportunities for learning and cognition not only in first-language classrooms but also in second- or foreign-language classrooms. According to Hall and Walsh, whether IRF patterns provide learning opportunities for students and mediate students’ learning process or not largely depends on how the *F* parts (or the third turn of the triadic discourse) are formulated. These include student response affirmations, reformulations, and requests for justification, clarification or elaboration, because they “serve to promote student involvement, highlight key concepts and ideas, and build a shared base of knowledge, and more generally, evoke feelings of inclusivity” (Hall & Walsh, 2002, p. 196).

In line with this observation, I will focus my analyses on whether the teacher-fronted IRFs in Chinese language classrooms constructed or reduced students’ opportunities for learning by describing their local contexts and analysing sequential organisations of the interactions. Teacher–student interactive exchanges, such as IRF, can lead students to become highly involved in the negotiation of meaning, linguistic form and rules for classroom behaviour during class activities.

Data and methodology

Data

As a part of the Core Research Programme at the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP),² we had built a computer corpus of Chinese language classroom data containing about 120 hours of transcribed data from 28 units of Primary 5 and Secondary 3 classes. The data of this article are drawn from two Primary 5 classes from the EM2 stream.³ While these two classes followed the same curriculum and used the same textbook and evaluation procedure, there were considerable variations in actual teaching practices between the two teachers. They both had more than 8 years of experience teaching Chinese to students in Singapore schools. Both teachers used a variety of activities in their classrooms, such as IRF, monologue, student demonstrations, group work and text analyses (Liu & Zhao, in press). Due to the space constraints of this article, the present analysis focuses only on the IRF patterns between the teacher and students in the initiation phases of two units.

The excerpts analysed here reflect my interest in the initiation of a unit, typically conducted as a practical and regular task of Primary 5 Chinese instruction. In my classroom observations and repeated reading of the transcripts, I found that there

is a particular organisation pattern or similarity that is identifiable across different units and classroom contexts. In other words, nearly all the teachers observed introduced a new unit typically by an “initiation phase” or a “unit opener” where certain background knowledge or information relevant to a new exemplar text was discussed or introduced. The initiation phase (or phases) is realised through different social organisations, such as teacher-fronted monologue, IRF, and student demonstrations. Two of these initiation phases are examined in the subsequent analyses of two excerpts. These two excerpts reflect two different ways in which the two teachers in question used triadic dialogues in their instruction.

The analyses that follow are by no means a comprehensive examination of teacher–student interactions in Singaporean Chinese classrooms. Rather, these are “telling cases” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239) of how teachers could construct or reduce students’ learning opportunities in their IRF interactions. Readers are encouraged to treat the presented data and analyses not simply as typical cases of how teachers started their new units but as demonstrations of what we can find in teachers’ use of these initiation phases, by inquiring into whether the teachers created or reduced opportunities for student learning in the sequential organisation of classroom talk. More specifically, I address the following research questions:

- In what ways do teachers, through their choice of language and their control of content and procedure, create or reduce opportunities for learning?
- How can teachers, by varying the IRF pattern of interaction in the classroom, increase opportunities for student involvement?
- What evidence is there that teachers neglect students’ contributions in order to maintain authority but reduce opportunities for student learning?

Method

While there are many theoretical and methodological suggestions as to how to study and describe classroom interaction (see Green & Dixon, 2002, for a review of classroom discourse studies), the present analysis takes a conversation analysis approach, paying close attention to whether the teacher-fronted IRF constructed or reduced students’ opportunities for learning by describing their local contexts and their interpretations of what went on. One way to describe and analyse how teachers and students produce and make sense of their verbal actions is through sequential analysis. Developed by conversation analysts (e.g. Sacks, 1992), sequential organisations refer to *units* and *structures* of language use. Central to conversation analysis is the concept of turn-taking, which can be described as a set of rules with ordered options. These options operate on a turn-taking basis as a locally and sequentially managed system. This system enables speakers to maintain conversation in temporally evolving and sequentially regular ways. A turn is constructed with turn-constructive units that are mapped onto syntactic, lexical and pragmatic units. Each next turn displays how the speaker of the turn understands the previous turn; what it means, what it calls for, and/or what work it is doing. That is to say, the next turn is one of the basic means through which speakers display their understanding of the prior turn their talk is tied to.

Thus, looking into the sequential contexts allows us to uncover the interactional work of understanding: how certain knowledge or concepts are occasioned and made sense of by the students in the very course of interaction. Because I examine triadic dialogues produced by the teacher and students, understanding is understood as a local and interactional act or turn. Also, an analysis of the sequential units or structures enables

us to explore whether teachers use these units or structures, such as student turns, teacher's evaluation, and reformulation, either systematically to provide opportunities for student learning or to disengage student learning.

In what follows, I analyse two excerpts of classroom interaction where variations of the IRF pattern are identified. I describe what they did within the evolving sequence of talk and analyse how the teachers asked questions, how the students made sense of them, and how the teachers dealt with the students' contributions. We transcribed the data by using the software Transcriber, following its transcribing convention. An approximate English translation for each turn is provided immediately below each turn, and the salient paralinguistic features are marked with conversation analysis (CA) conventions (see Appendix). Ethnographic notes are provided before each excerpt in brackets to describe the contexts where the interactions took place.

Providing learning opportunities

From my classroom observations and the data transcribed, I found that some teachers consistently create opportunities for learner involvement because their organisation of activities, use of language, and pedagogic purpose are well integrated. Due to space constraints, I centre my analysis around only two excerpts: in the first, the teacher facilitated maximum learner involvement by constructing a context in which learners were maximally involved; in the second, the teacher appeared to reduce student involvement. It should be noted that the intention is not to evaluate the instructional skill of the individual teachers, but merely to comment on the differences in opportunities for learning created by teacher-fronted initiation-response-feedback (IRF) interactions. In the excerpt that follows, there is clear evidence that the teacher, by matching pedagogic and linguistic goals and by encouraging students to produce longer utterances, facilitates and promotes students' involvement and language use.

Excerpt 1

(There are 40 students in this class. At the beginning of the observed unit, the teacher organises 12 students into two groups and lines them up on both sides of the classroom for a demonstration. One group consists of six boys and the other six girls. The teacher gives a sentence each to the first student of both groups and asks them to quietly relay the sentence orally as quickly as possible to the next student in their group until it reaches the last student in the line. Hardly has the activity finished than the following interaction ensues. All the names are pseudonyms.)

- 1 老师: 好了吗? 好, 停! 现在我们听阳饶讲, 他听到的那句话是什么?
好 Yangrao, 告诉大家。大声一点!
- T: Are you ready? All right, stop! Now let's listen to Yangrao.
What did he hear? Well, Yangrao, tell all of us what you heard!
Speak loudly!
- 2 Yangrao: (...) 回家找到一个人。
S1: (...) Went back home and found a person.
- 3 学生们: 哈哈... \$\$
Ss: Ha, ha, ... \$\$

- 4 老师: 好停! 停! 现在Yangrao 讲的是, 他听到的 那句话是, 回家找到一个人。
Xinran, 你讲, 你那句话是什么?
T: Good! Stop! Stop! Now what Yangrao said is: what he heard is
“went back home and found a person”. Xinran, you say what your
sentence is.
- 5 Xinran: 丁家打了一口井, 得了一个人。
S2: Ding’s family dug a well, and therefore got an extra man(power).
- 6 老师: 好! Xinran 讲, 那句话是 (...),
丁家打了一口井, 得了一个人。(...) 到, 到 Yangrao
这边是, 回家找到一个人。很好! 谢谢你。(...) 女生, 女生,
你听到的是什么? % %, 来!
T: Good! Xinran said, that sentence is (...) “Ding’s family dug a well, and
therefore got an extra man(power).” (...) when it comes to Yangrao, it has
become “went back home and found a person”. Very good, thank you. (...)
Girls, Girls, what did you hear? % %, Come on!
- 7 学生: 在别人的背后讲别人的坏话, 真了不得!
S: To speak something bad behind others is really terrific!
- 8 老师: 在别人的背后讲别人的坏话, 真了不得! 哈, \$\$..., 真了不得! 好,
Shiye 讲, 你那句话说的是什么?
T: To speak something bad behind others is really terrific! Ha, \$\$...,
really terrific! Well, Shiye, what is your sentence?
- 9 Shiye: 在别人的背后说别人的坏话是要不得的。% %
在别人的背后说别人的坏话是要不得的。
S3: To speak something bad behind others cannot be tolerated. % % To speak
something bad behind others cannot be tolerated.
...
- 12 老师: 哦, 好, 注意听! (...) 我想请同学来告诉我,
为什么我的那两句话到最后 (...) 不一样了
T: Oh, well, listen carefully! (...) I’d like you to tell me, why were the two
sentences I gave to you changed (...) in the end?
- 13 学生: [% %有变化 ... % % 嘘...]
S: [% % changed % % shi...]
学生: [% %给了他自由% %]
S: [% % given him freedom % %]
学生: [% %乱说的% %]
S: [% % said without purpose % %]
- 14 老师: 好。举手说! 来, ShiYong 说。
T: Good. Put up your hand! Come on, ShiYong, say it!
- 15 ShiYong: % % Can not. [E]
S4: % % Can not. [E]
- 16 老师: 说华语!
T: Speak Chinese!
- 17 学生: 见到他, 他讲, 他讲, (...) 讲 两个字, % %, then, then [E].
后来不讲了。听不清 (...) then [E] 猜
S: (When I) see him, he said, he said (...) said two words, % %, then,
then [E], afterwards stopped talking. Could not hear clearly (...) then [E] guess

- 18 老师: 很好, 听不清 (...) 所以你是猜的, ... 女生们说一说, 为什么会到最后和我刚才说的那句话不一样了? %% 想一想
- T: Very good, you did not hear clearly (...) so you have guessed it... How about the girls? Can you tell us why what was said has been changed in the end? %% Think it over...
- 19 学生: 我没听清楚, 然后我想可能是 %%
- S: I did not hear clearly, then I thought it may be %%
- 20 老师: 很好, (...) 你没有听清楚她说的话, 对不对? 所以你说的是自己想出来的。还有吗? 来
- T: Very good, (...) You did not hear clearly what she said, did you? So what you said is what you imagined. Anything else? Come on!
- 21 学生: 我 (...) 没空讲; 他 (...), 他 (...), 我问他, 他也不好讲, then [E] (...), 没空讲哦。我, (...) 我, (...) 答了找到一个人呢。
- S: I (...) had no time to say; he (...), he (...), when I asked him, he did not speak it properly, then [E] (...) had no time to say. I, (...) I, (...) answered "found a person".
- 22 学生们 哈哈\$\$
- Ss: Ha, ha \$\$
- 23 老师: 好! 现在, 我想问你的就是, 这, 这些话在我们传的过程当中, 你认为是发生了什么? (...) 中间发生了什么? (...) 变化。
- T: Good! Now, what I'd like to ask you is: what do you think has happened in the process of our language communication? (...) What changes (...) happened during the process?
- ...

The exemplar text of this unit was a Chinese folk story with the theme: "hearsays are not reliable and therefore cannot be tolerated". Given that the teacher's major stated aim of this phase (from the interview of the teacher) was "to help students better understand the text before looking into the text" and at the same time "to acquaint students with some new words and idiomatic expressions that they were required to learn through the text in focus according to the curriculum" (e.g. "传闻 *hearsay or rumour*" in text, "传递 *pass or relay*" in text, "不一样 *changed*" in Turn 12, "得 *got*" in Turn 5, "要不得 *cannot be tolerated*" in Turn 9), her use of the activity, and the subsequent interactions were appropriate to her pedagogic purpose: activity organisation, language use and pedagogic purpose coincided. The teacher used the activity to engage the students in a language game that was directly relevant to the exemplar text and reinforced the aim of promoting the students' understanding of the text. Appropriate and repeated use of the new words and idiomatic expressions in her elicitations, coupled with student responses and feedbacks, created an atmosphere which was conducive to learning and was likely to promote learner involvement. Feedbacks on the meaning or content rather than its form were also more conducive to communication and appropriate in the setting outlined here.

As noted earlier, teachers who reformulate their elicitations, who seek clarification, who check for confirmation, and who always explicitly acknowledge and encourage student contributions in their third turn (or F part of the IRF pattern) are more likely to maximise student learning potential than those who do not (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Mackey, 2006). In Excerpt 1, instances where the teacher reformulated her elicitations (e.g. Turns 18 & 23) and repeated student contributions (Turns 4, 6, 8 & 10) served to maintain the

natural class discourse flow and keep channels open. This observation is clearly very much in line with well-established findings concerning the need for meaning to be negotiated in the language classroom (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Mackey, 2006).

One of the most striking features of the excerpt is the turn-taking structure. Unlike the “standard” IRFs, where student responses and affirmations of student responses are short, the students in this excerpt provided comparatively longer responses (at least a full sentence length) and the teacher affirmed, reformulated, and requested elaboration of the students’ responses to further probe their understanding. For example, when the student’s responses contained grammatical errors and code-switching or the meaning was not very clear (e.g. “后来不讲了。听不清 (...) then [E] 猜 *then stopped talking. Could not hear clearly (...) then [E] guess*” in Turn 17), the teacher did not overtly evaluate or correct these responses. Instead, she acknowledged the students’ contributions (e.g. “很好 *very good*”), and then reformulated these responses (e.g. “听不清 (...) 所以你是猜的 you did not hear clearly (...) so you have guessed it” in Turn 18), providing both the Chinese conjunction (“所以”) for the English code (“*then*”) and the correct sentence structure (“你是猜的 *you have guessed it*”). Here, reformulations (normally termed as “recast” in second-language literature) are responses to erroneous utterances that provide a correct way of expressing the original meaning. In this case, it provides the students with the correct models which are grammatical. As she did so, she directed her talk to all the students, rather than to the student who had responded, and in this way also helped to maintain a natural flow of the pedagogic discourse.

In the next IRF set (Turns 18, 19 & 20), the teacher gave a positive confirmation (“很好”) to the student’s response, and then reformulated the response (“我没听清楚, 然后我想可能是%% *I did not hear clearly, then I thought it may be %%*”) into (“你没有听清楚她说的话, 对不对? 所以你说的是自己想出来的。还有吗? You did not hear clearly what she said, did you? So what you said is what you imagined. Anything else?”). In this case, there was nothing wrong with the student’s response in terms of grammar and meaning (so a “很好 *very good*” confirmation was given), but the requested response to the question (“为什么 *why*”) needed a cause-effect explanation which required more a complicated grammatical and cognitive process. Therefore, the teacher reformulated the response in a temporal order (the two sentences are in sequential order connected by the conjunction “然后 *then*”) into a cause-effect order, setting up a model of a higher level for students to follow or at least to be aware of.

Another striking feature is that as the discourse progressed, the teacher successfully managed student turn-taking either by nominating a specific student to respond to her questions (Turns 1, 4, 7 & 14) or by directing her questions to the whole class (Turns 12 & 20). When an individual student was nominated to answer the question, the teacher always verbally engaged the whole class’s attention to the answer (e.g. “告诉大家 *Tell all of us!*” in Turn 1; “我想请同学来告诉我 I’d like you to tell me” in Turn 12) and facilitated the whole class in understanding the intended meaning. More importantly, she provided positive feedback (“好! 很好!”) in nearly every turn of her feedback and reiterated the students’ contributions to engage the students and to help them learn and comprehend the content at hand (e.g. “现在 Yangrao 讲的是, 他听到的那句话是, 回家找到一个人 Now what Yangrao said is: what he heard is ‘went back home and found a person’” in Turn 4; “Xinran 讲, 那句话是 (...), 丁家打了一口井, 得了一个人。 (...) 到, 到 Yanrao 这边是, 回家找到一个人 *Xinran said, that sentence is (...) ‘Ding’s family dug a well, and therefore got an extra man(power).’ (...)* when it comes to Yangrao, it has become ‘went back home and found a person’” in Turn 6).

Another feature is how the teacher allowed wait-time for students to answer questions, which resulted in more students' uptakes and more comprehensible outputs (e.g. Turns 17 & 21). For example, the teacher recognised the students' contributions and tolerated the not-fluent utterance and code-switching. In this case, the students' responses (Turns 17 & 21) to the teacher's questions (Turns 16 & 20) were not fluent – filled with perturbations (“他讲, 他讲, (...) 讲两个字 *he said, he said, (...) said two words* ‘in Turn 17;’ 我, (...) 我, (...)... *I, (...) I, (...)*” in Turn 21), pauses within the turn, code-switching (*then. [E] (...)*), and self-repairs (“他 (...), 他, (...) , 我问他... *he (...), he (...)* when I asked him ...” in Turn 21). Since the students were ready to continue, the teacher did not take over the talk nor indicate any dissatisfaction with the students' performance. Instead, the teacher waited for them to finish their turns and then gave positive assessments (“很好, 听不清 *very good, you did not hear clearly*” ‘in Turn 18;’ “好! 现在, 我想问你的就是 ... *Good! Now, what I'd like to ask you is...*” in Turn 23) even though there were some grammatical problems in their utterances because the propositional contents of the answers provided by the two students were plausible. However, the teacher did not tolerate and quickly intervened when the student code-switched (Turn 15) by a bold directive (“说华语! *Speak Chinese!*” in Turn 16), because the use of English here did not contribute to the students' understanding, and it was likely to derail her pedagogic purpose. Therefore, this teacher confirms the importance of maintaining harmony between language use and pedagogic aim; and the teacher's use of language, consciously or subconsciously, is very much in tune with her specific aim at this stage of the lesson.

Disorder or breakdown of communication is a very common feature in language classrooms (Westgate & Hughes, 1997). Often it occurs because students compete to express their opinions or understanding, do not know a particular word or phrase, or do not know how to express what they want with appropriate words or sentence structures. To pre-empt disorder or breakdown, it is the role of the teacher to intervene and control the turn-taking or to provide necessary direction in the discourse flow. Timing and sensitivity to students' needs are of utmost importance; some teachers intervene too often or too early, or totally dominate the interaction (as shown in Excerpt 2 below). Teacher's feedback involves more than simply error correction or getting the message across. It requires the ability to listen actively and make appropriate use of language. The examples in this excerpt illustrate this important practice very well. When the teacher asked an open question directed at the whole class, (“我想请同学来告诉我, 为什么我的那两句话到最后 (...) 不一样了? *I'd like you to tell me, why were the two sentences I gave to you changed (...) in the end?*” in Turn 12), several students respond simultaneously; overlapped utterances (indicated as [] in Turn 13) occur in the same turn, where different opinions are offered. If it is a small group discussion, it would be not conducive for the teacher to intervene, but in a classroom of 40 students, it would be very likely for the classroom interactions to turn into disorder. So the teacher quickly intervened and controlled the turn-taking by asking students to raise their hands for their turn. The teacher's nomination of turns succeeded in maintaining the interaction order and, at the same time, in engaging students, thus promoting longer and more complex turns.

Throughout much of this excerpt, there is clear evidence that the teacher's turn control, language use and pedagogic purpose were appropriately integrated; and the teacher's use of language and turn control strategy were consistent with her stated goal of promoting text comprehension. Although she always controlled the turn-taking, her verbal behaviour allowed students to engage in a sustained discourse, producing longer responses. As far as the students' contributions were concerned, it is evident from this excerpt that students and teacher were actively engaged in constructing a piece of discourse which revolved around

the pedagogical task at hand. This observation coincides with the teacher's pedagogic goal and reaffirms the need for the teacher to be "in tune" with her aim and use of language as the interaction unfolds. Throughout this excerpt, longer student turns, occasional turn overlaps, latches (where one turn immediately follows another) and laughter (Turns 3, 8, 10 & 22) were all features of the students' active involvement, which adds further weight to the coincidence of IRF and pedagogic purpose. In other words, what is striking from Excerpt 1 is that the context of the classroom was well organised, where the teacher constructed understanding of the task at hand with the students, and the teacher's control was well in tune with her teaching purpose and language use. What is more important, as demonstrated in this excerpt, is the appropriate use of language in relation to the context and task at hand.

Reducing learning opportunities

In the discussion that follows, I present a context in which language use and pedagogic purpose do not coincide, and attempt to suggest reasons for this occurring. On the surface, what follows resembles the IRF sequences we discussed earlier, but upon closer inspection, I find fundamental differences. In Excerpt 2, there is clear evidence that the teacher, by maintaining knowledge authority through asking questions but refusing to acknowledge the students' contributions, disengaged involvement and language use on the part of the students, leading to very limited learning opportunities for the students.

Excerpt 2

(There are 38 students in this class. At the beginning of this observed unit, the teacher does a quick check verbally of who has not done their homework by asking students to raise their hands and asks them to hand in their homework. After the students hand in their homework, the teacher starts the new unit in the following way. All the names are pseudonyms.)

- 1 老师: %% 好, 今天呢, (...) 老师要讲一篇新的课文。同学们请把课文的题目讲一遍。
T: %% Well, today (...) Teacher (I) will talk about a new text. Students (you), read the title once please.
- 2 学生: 花医院。
Ss: Flower Hospital. **All the students read the title loudly.**
- 3 老师: 再来一次。一, 二, 三。
T: Read it again. One, two, three!
- 4 学生: 花医院。
Ss: Flower Hospital. **All the students read the title again loudly.**
- 5 老师: 唉, 我们都知道, 医院是什么地方?
T: Eh, we all know, what a hospital is?
- 6 学生: Hospital.
Ss: Hospital. **Several students answer in English.**
- 7 老师: 英文是 Hospital 那么, 你去医院做什么? 看电影吗? 什么时候你会到医院去?=
T: It is Hospital in English. Then, what are you going to do in hospital? To watch a movie? When will you go to a hospital? =

- 8 学生: =生病=
S1: = got sick =
- 9 老师: =生病的时候啊。你生病的时候, 或者呢, 你 受伤的时候, 有紧急事件的时候啊, 你都会到医院 去。那为什么这间医院那么特别? 它前面有一个花 字, 是不是说这间医院, 啊, 长满了花草树木? 还是这间医院呢, 到处都是花?
- T: = When you are sick! When you are sick, or, when you are injured, when there is an emergency, you will go to the hospital. Then why is this hospital special? There is a character 'flower'; does it mean, oh, there grow a lot of flowers, grass and trees in this hospital? Flowers are everywhere? =
- 10 学生: =到处是花 还有=
S2: = Flowers are everywhere, and =
- 11 老师: =还是它的医院的名字是花? 花, 所以叫做花 医院? 有没有同学可以告诉我?
- T: = or the hospital's name is flower? Flower, so it is called flower hospital? Can any students tell me? =
- 12 学生: =是医院的花, 和=
S3: = is the hospital's flowers, and =
- 13 老师: =这是一所花医院, 到底为什么这间医院会 称为花医院呢?
- T: = This is a flower hospital, but why is it called flower hospital after all?
- 14 学生: 有个花园=
S4: There is a flower garden =
- 15 老师: =有同学说因为医院里有花园。其实很多医院 都有花园啊! 为什么一定要叫花医院呢?
- T: = Someone said, because there is a flower garden in the hospital. In fact, many hospitals have flower gardens! Why has it to be called flower hospital?
- 16 学生: 很多花。
S5: There are many flowers.
- 17 老师: 还有呢, 乐敏, 说什么?
- T: Anything else? Lemin, what did you say?
- 18 学生: 很多花, 很多草, 很多树, 还有 %=
S: Many flowers, many grasses, many trees % =
- 19 老师: =哦, 哦, 很多同学都说因为医院里有很多 花, 草, 树, 木..., 好, 我们来听一听课文
- T: = Oh, oh, many of you said, because there are many flowers, grasses, trees ... good, let us listen to the text
- ...

There are similarities between this excerpt and the one discussed earlier: both classes are similar in size, composition and level. The teachers' aims are also more or less the same: focusing on helping students better understand the text before looking into the text and, at the same time, acquainting students with some new words and idiomatic expressions that they are required to learn. Moreover, both excerpts may be identified as the initiation phase of a new unit, with subsequent comprehension of the texts concerned. Yet, there are significant differences in the turn-taking mechanisms, length of student turns, and overall quantity and quality of teachers' and students' contributions. While recognising that there are some

variables which make direct comparison difficult – teacher beliefs and teaching styles, different texts in terms of content (the former is a traditional Chinese folk story about morality while the latter is a modern story about a special hospital where flowers are used as a form of treatment), just to mention a few – there are nonetheless substantial differences in teacher choices of language use and turn-taking control which contribute, and even determine, the different discourse patterns. In particular, I would argue that the teacher's choice of language use and turn-taking control in Excerpt 2 restricted student involvement and reduced learning opportunities for students.

One of the striking features of this excerpt is the tight turn control structure and the impoverished evaluation or confirmation. Unlike the IRFs in Excerpt 1 where the students provided comparatively longer responses and the teacher confirmed and reformulated the students' responses to further probe their understandings, in this excerpt, the teacher seemed to ask questions without particular pedagogic purpose and often ignored the students' contributions. The many examples of latching (e.g. Turns 9, 11, 13 & 15, as indicated by =) in this excerpt indicate that this teacher practically did not permit students to offer longer contributions, and her latched turns gave no overt evaluations of the students' responses or contributions. Her many initiations seemed to be rhetorical questions rather than elicitions, merely smoothing over the discourse in an effort to advance her monologue-oriented interaction. In other words, the teacher's questions were not clear to the students. There were several students who offered seemingly appropriate responses or responses which could at least be used for further clarification of the meaning or pedagogic task at hand (e.g. Turns 8, 10, 12, 14 & 16), but the teacher did not give overt positive acknowledgements and did not build upon them to further probe the students' understanding. Instead, she moved on to ask another similar question. Therefore, I assume that she may have done the students a disservice as there were no clarifications and no positive confirmation checks. There is a sense that the students were being asked just to check if they were paying attention rather than being allowed enough space to formulate their understanding.

As shown in Excerpt 2, by not attending to the students' responses that are parts of the IRF, the teacher effectively reduced opportunities for student learning. In the excerpt, the students' responses (e.g. “=生病= = *got sick* =” in Turn 8; “=到处是花, 还有= = *Flowers are everywhere, and* =” in Turn 10; “有个花园= *there is a flower garden* =” in Turn 14) evidently constituted interactional spaces for the negotiation of what was to be learned, where flower gardens are a key concept and illnesses are treated with flower fragrances, but the teacher did not engage them by taking these responses up. These three students (Turn 8, 10 & 12) offered relevant and also appropriate responses to the teacher's questions (“什么时候你会到医院去? = *When will you go to a hospital?* =” in Turn 7; “=是不是说这间医院, ... 到处都是花? *does it mean, ... Flowers are everywhere?*” in Turn 9; “=还是它的医院的名称是花? 花, 所以叫做花医院? *or the hospital's name is flower? Flower, so it is called flower hospital?*” in Turn 11), and intended to continue but received no uptake from the teacher (Turn 11). Instead, she interrupted the student's turn (e.g. Turn 10) and explicitly repeated the same question (“=还是它的医院名称是花?... = *or the hospital's name is flower? ...*” in Turn 11), a question that the student had already answered or denied and intended to elaborate on (e.g. “还有 *and*”). Ignoring this student's contribution, she directed her question to the whole class instead. When another student attempted to answer her question in the next turn (“=是医院的花, 和= = *is the hospital's flowers, and* =” in Turn 12), the teacher did not explicitly acknowledge it but interrupted it again (“=这是一所花医院... = *This is a flower hospital...*” in Turn 13). It seems that all these three students' (1, 2 and 3) responses were interrupted by the teacher without any reason. In other words, in Student

2's and Student 3's speaking turns after the teacher's questions, there was no indication that this stretch of interaction was disjunctive; instead, they intended to elaborate on their understanding with clear signals (“还有 *and*”; “和 *and*”). By not allowing the students to continue, the teacher in effect interactionally disengaged the students' involvement; and by not acknowledging the students' contributions, the students were lost in the interaction. In so doing, I would argue, the teacher thus stopped the students' pursuit of the topic concerning different kinds of interpretations, intentionally or unintentionally, and may have led the class to stop contributing.

Another significant feature of this excerpt is that the teacher's use of language and turn control strategy were inconsistent with her stated goal of promoting text comprehension. Although she asked a series of questions that were relevant to the text (“*A Flower Hospital*”), it seemed that she did not care about the students' responses. Her turn control strategy did not allow the students to engage in a sustained discourse, where the main theme or the background knowledge of the text could be negotiated. As far as the students' contributions were concerned, it is evident from this excerpt that students were deprived of constructing a piece of discourse conducive to learning. This observation again contradicts the teacher's pedagogic goal of helping students better understand the text in focus. Without appropriate evaluation, requests for clarification, or reformulation of student responses, the teacher's questions appeared to lead nowhere, mysterious to the students rather than facilitating any understanding of the text. Therefore, I would argue that the teacher's language use and turn-taking control were not ‘in sync’ with her pedagogic aim as the interaction unfolded. Throughout this excerpt, the dominant turn control, frequent latches (interrupting student responses), and lack of positive acknowledgement of student contributions were all features that provided no space for student participation and did not serve the pedagogic purpose. The point I wish to make here is that positive acknowledgements, reformulation or requests for clarification can be powerful resources for a teacher to use in shaping students' participation and performance in class. In addition, reformulations, requests for elaboration, or even appropriate acknowledgements of students' contributions can lead to a high quality of interaction (as shown in Excerpt 1), when examined in the context of what the teacher and the students do jointly and sequentially. In fact, by building on students' responses, teachers may invite students to collaboratively negotiate the meaning of the text. In particular, it is important that the teacher gives students opportunities for interaction in order for them to achieve sustained oral production. In doing so, he or she may invite and coordinate more meaningful interactions from the class as a whole.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, current pedagogic discourse in Singapore calls for a learner-centred orientation in Chinese language classrooms. This is generally interpreted as a call for more meaningful interactions in classrooms because it is believed that such interactions mediate student learning and provide opportunities for negotiation of meaning (e.g. Hall & Walsh, 2002; Mackey, 2006; Westgate & Hughes, 1997). In this article, the analyses of IRFs in teacher-fronted instruction show that teachers can provide or reduce opportunities for student learning. I argued that whether opportunities are provided for students largely depends on how teachers appropriate their language use, turn-taking strategies, and the manipulation of the third part in IRF interactions (e.g. acknowledgements, reformulations, or requests for elaboration).

As shown in the above analyses, there are at least two versions (of course, there may be more) of IRF patterns that are used, and the different versions produce qualitatively

different language learning opportunities for students in Chinese language classrooms. The fundamental difference lies in the follow-ups to students' contributions. In the IRF pattern of Excerpt 1, the teacher valued student contributions by providing positive acknowledgements and reformulations, and by tolerating students' hesitation. This promoted student involvement and created effective language learning opportunities. On the contrary, the IRF pattern in Excerpt 2 looked similar to that of Excerpt 1 on the surface, but the teacher did not recognise student contributions and used this pattern merely to facilitate teacher control rather than student learning of the lesson's content. Therefore, it is the teacher, not the IRF pattern, that serves as a gatekeeper to learning opportunities.

If we consider language learning as an active process of interaction – a process in which students explore ways to understand and express certain topics or themes, students experiment with new words and sentence patterns, and teachers evaluate student comprehension of certain propositions with the co-construction of the teacher – then the teacher-fronted IRF interactions described (as in Excerpt 1) are not merely teaching activities. They are also learning opportunities. Consequently, improving the quality of these teacher-fronted IRF interactions would mean qualitatively enhancing opportunities for language learning.

From a pedagogic perspective, the analyses in this article show how teacher-fronted IRF interaction can provide mediation and opportunities for student learning, thus helping Chinese language teachers better understand Chinese language classroom interactions. On a theoretical level, it is hoped that this study can contribute to further research by providing insight into how teacher-fronted interactions can be analysed and studied in line with a student-oriented approach to classroom pedagogy. In so doing, we can find more effective ways or classroom interactive patterns to improve Chinese language instruction in Singapore and elsewhere in the world.

Notes

1. 'Teacher-fronted' here refers to a typical classroom environment in Singapore and elsewhere in Asian countries where the teacher almost always stands and gives instruction in front of a class of students, who are seated in rows (the instruction can be in form of monologue, IRF, choral repetition, etc.). Due to the large class size, the teacher's and students' physical positions are fixed, very much like in a small lecture hall, with little space for movement.
2. The Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, has been carrying out a large-scale longitudinal Core Research Programme on Singapore schools since 2004. One of the research activities was focused on coding about 900 classroom lessons in the core curriculum areas of mathematics, science, social studies, English, and the mother tongues (Malay, Tamil and Chinese). The coded data was statistically analysed to identify different patterns and relationships for various purposes. At the same time, these coded lessons were also audio-taped and transcribed to build the Singapore Corpus of Research in Education (Luke, Freebody, Lau, & Gopinathan, 2005).
3. EM1, EM2 and EM3 represent three different streams at the primary school level. The acronym EM1 represents "English and Mandarin are both taught as first languages"; EM2 represents "English is taught as a first language while Mandarin is taught as a second language"; and EM3 refers to "both English and Mandarin are taught as foundational programmes where more emphasis is laid on listening and speaking than on reading and writing". However, "the first or second language" used here is specific to Singapore, different from what is normally defined in the international literature. It is language proficiency level rather than acquisition order-oriented, for Mandarin is spoken predominantly by more than half the cohort at home (see Tan, 2006). This kind of streaming is based on the examination results at the end of the third year of primary school. It should be noted that at the time of writing this paper, EM3 had been merged into EM2, and a module approach is being experimented tried for the 2008 Chinese curriculum reform (for details, refer to the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee, 2004).

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Appendix: Transcription system

The transcription system is adapted from the CRPP transcribing convention. Errors of language use (Chinese version) in the excerpts are not corrected in order to represent the exchanges as they occurred in the classroom. The two excerpts are directly rather than semantically translated into English for reference purpose only.

T:	Teacher
S:	student (not identified)
S1: or S2: etc.	identified student
Ss:	several students at once or the whole class
[do you understand?]	overlap between teacher and student
[I see]:	
= :	latch, turn continues, or one turn follows another without any pause
(...):	pause of one second or less marked by three periods
Capitals:	used for proper nouns, e.g., Yangrao, Xinran
?:	rising intonation, not necessarily a question
!:	indicates that a word is given extra stress
[E]:	code-switching (English spoken)
%%:	background conversation that is inaudible
\$\$:	laughter quality in utterance
...:	trail off
bold type:	transcriber's comments