Elicitations in the Whole Classroom Events: A Comparative Study of High Vs. Low Proficient English Learners

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Abstract

There is an argument that teachers' favoritism toward high-proficient language learners may deprive low-proficient students of learning opportunities and put them at risk of poor learning. This study examines how the modifications that teachers make to Initiation-Response Feedback (IRF) discourse patterns help low- and high-proficient English students have access to opportunities for language learning and how teachers justify their discourse. The participants in this study included three Iranian EFL teachers and their respective English students. Classroom observations stimulated recall interviews, and field notes were used for data collection. The findings showed that they interacted less frequently with the low-proficient English students while they often extended their transactions with the high-proficient English students. Such differences limited the learning opportunities of the less proficient students in the classroom. Modifications were explained under three themes: a) negative self-conceptions of low proficient students; b) quality of interactions with high proficient students; and c) teachers' concern about job security and their teaching performance. The implications of this study for the Iranian context and other similar EFL contexts are detailed.

Introduction

There is a growing concern that students who are low-proficient English learners are less engaged in classrooms due to their lack of language proficiency, are more passive than their high-proficient counterparts, and will be more passive over time (Hermans-Nymark, 2007; Xie, 2010; Verplaetse, 1995). Interaction, however, in classroom events is not just related to the proficiency of the learner. Teachers play a key role in determining the interactive role of language learners (Allahyar et al., 2022; Allahyar, 2015; Verplaetse, 1995; Xie, 2010), especially in whole-classroom events where Initiation-Response Feedback (IRF) exchange is the most dominant discourse pattern that teachers use (Mercer & Dawes, 2014). They even decided on the type of questions to be asked, from whom, and the type of answers to be accepted or rejected (Mortensen, 2008). Teachers are the ones deciding who can contribute to classroom interaction and when (Walsh, 2011). Researchers argue that the quality of the IRF cycle influences students' language learning opportunities in classroom contexts (Thoms, 2012; Xie, 2010). Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, and Prendergast (1997) suggest

that the follow-up move in the IRF can play an important role in pupil participation and engagement. The third move of this exchange may limit or open an opportunity for students to expand their answers (Hall & Walsh, 2002). Research on the functions of the IRF has recommended modifications to the teacher's initiation and feedback moves to improve the IRF cycle.

According to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), learning occurs when teachers scaffold learners in the process of knowledge construction. Scaffolding can occur in classroom discourse (Sharpe, 2006). Scholars have constantly voiced the concern that students with low levels of language proficiency are subject to differential treatment and are disadvantaged compared to those with low levels of proficiency because they have little access to learning opportunities (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Mack, 2012; McNeil, 2010; Rajab, 2013; Xie, 2010). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory argues that action (teaching) should be interpreted in a historical, cultural, and institutional context (Wertsch, 1985, cited in Allahyar, 2015). Through the lens of this theory, teachers' discourse patterns can be the product of different contextual factors, and this may put them at risk of poor learning. Available research shows that teacher discourse patterns are strongly influenced by pedagogical goals (Walsh, 2011) and teacher-student roles in particular classroom cultures (Li, 2018). Liu (2001) and Mohr and Mohr (2007) observed international classes in America and found that teachers avoided interacting with Asian students. This aversion was related to teachers' fear of being embarrassed and intimidated.

Teachers hold lower expectations for low-proficient students and assume that students need to be supported (Mazenod et al., 2019). However, teachers' efforts to support low-proficient students through modification of their talk have received less attention. Available studies have investigated the effects of classroom discourse on students' language achievement (Beyazkurk & Kesner, 2005). Other studies have examined the specific nature of classroom discourse (Khany & Mohammadi, 2016).

To our knowledge, only one quantitative study in the USA has mainly focused on the discourse patterns between native English-speaking science teachers and their high and low-proficient students (Verplaetse, 1995). The result of this study cannot be generalized to students in English in foreign contexts and non-native English teachers. Moreover, this study has focused on students with different ethnic backgrounds in the educational system, where students are grouped based on their prior attainment. In addition, little research examines the influence of contextual factors on ongoing classroom interactions. The present study expands our knowledge about modifications that EFL non-native teachers make to IRF discourse patterns with low- and high-proficient EFL learners. This study focuses on the elicitations that teachers use to further challenge their students to talk.

Research questions

1. How do the modifications that *t*eachers make in IRF discourse patterns help low-proficient and high-proficient English students to have access to opportunities for language learning?
2. How do teachers justify their discourse with low-proficient and high-proficient English students?

It is hoped that understanding the modification in EFL teacher talks in relation to low and high-proficient students will help them reach all students and keep them at an equal distance to learning and facilitate the participation of their low-proficient students. The results of this study have implications for teachers and teacher professional training programs.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed an interpretive qualitative case study approach which is strongly tied to Vygotsky's epistemological premise which argues that reality and our knowledge of the world can only be gained via interpretation. As the case study approach examines a phenomenon in its natural context through many sources (Yin, 2003), this study used the case study approach to examine an in-depth analysis of the IRF exchanges to capture the dynamic features of classroom discourse in authentic situations.

Research setting and sample

The research setting and participants were selected purposively. The setting was a school in the north of Tehran. Like any language school, the duration of the class was 90 minutes. The students ranged from 19 to 30 years old. The school was equipped with a video camera system to improve the educational standard of the school. In addition, classroom observations and interviews were common practices for both teachers and students as the institute held teacher-training programs. The trainees of these programs were required to observe different classes and interview different teachers and students as a part of the teacher-training program. Inclusion criteria for classes were as follows: 1) to be similar in size, in the number of HPG and LPG students, in composition (consisting of males and females), in level (pre-intermediate), and in materials (Top notch books). By controlling the above-mentioned factors, the researcher attempted to be sure that teachers' discourse modification was not influenced by different factors such as gender, classroom size, and course-book.

Participants included three teachers and their high-proficient and low-proficient language learners. The inclusion criteria for teachers were as follows: 1) to be able to afford time for interviews, b) to be knowledgeable and have at least 4 years of experience (this number of years is important to gather in-depth

data) c) to be able to reflect and articulate. Since it was the second term teachers had a class with the same students, they were asked to choose the low and high-proficient students, based on their students' previous achievements including quizzes given by the teachers and the final school test. The background information on the teachers and their classes can be seen in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Background information of the teachers and their classes

Teachers	Gender	Years of Teaching	Teacher Education	Students Levels	Class size
Anita	female	5	B.A in English translation	Pre-intermediate	17
Pari	female	4	M.A in Language teaching	Pre-intermediate	15
Yeganeh	female	4	B.A in Language teaching	Pre-intermediate	15

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, the researcher followed the ethical considerations proposed by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007). To this purpose, as soon as the principal of the language school granted permission for research, all participants received copies of the permission forms and were informed about the video recordings, their participation is entirely voluntary and their privacy and confidentiality will be maintained.

Data Collection Methods

The sources of data were video recordings and field notes from classroom observations, and stimulated recall with teachers. Audio and video recordings supplemented the researchers' observations because recordings offer the researcher more reliable data than what fast notes can provide (Hoepfl, 1997). Recordings and field notes provide detail in the transcriptions and aspects of interaction because nonverbal behaviors and gestures play a vital role in classroom interaction (Sert, 2013).

Observations and Video recordings of the classroom: The researcher observed the classroom for 10 sessions. The researcher attended the class from the beginning of the course (a) to make the students get used to her presence and recorders, and (b) to collect information about the class setting and students (arrangement of the seats or any changes made by the teacher). In the following class visits, the researcher carefully observed and collected data on the gestures and facial expressions of the teachers and focal (HPG and LPG) students. These observational classroom visits were representative of typical class visits. Those classes

where the teachers had a quiz were excluded. Video recordings of the classroom helped the researcher scrutinize the data repeatedly (Hoepfl, 1997).

Field notes: The notes provided more information about interactions and non-verbal behavior and helped the researcher to understand the reason behind teachers 'actions' (Appendix D).

Stimulate recall interviews: Teachers were asked to observe the portions of the video related to scaffolding and explain the reasons behind their actions. This also helped to understand if the teachers' actions in relation to the low-proficient and high-proficient students were affected by contextual factors.

Reliability and validity

While in quantitative research, reliability, and validity are key concepts that are evaluated and handled individually, in qualitative research, reliability, and validity are dependent (Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized that validity can not be ensured if reliability is not addressed. The reliability was ensured by member checking and soliciting teachers' feedback on the data, and full documentation of the study process. To establish trustworthiness, triangulations were done in different ways. Triangulation of methods included video audio recordings, interviews, and observations. The quantitative analysis of the classroom observation was also utilized by the researcher to shed better light on qualitative data (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). Data source triangulation used a range of data sources, including transcripts of classroom interactions, field notes, and stimulated recall interview transcripts. Investigator data from researchers of the study and instructor. The first author analyzed the data but had peer debriefing sessions for interpreting and classifying data with other authors and they also audited the codes.

Data analysis

The data for this study were analyzed through discourse and qualitative content analysis.

Discourse analysis

The lessons were video-recorded, and the interactions between teachers and their singularly specified low-proficient and high-proficient learners were transcribed and coded using an IRF structure. To identify various scaffolding strategies that teachers use to provide the students with opportunities to talk, Verplaetses' Matrix (1995, 2000) was used. Verplaetses modified the version of Sinclair and Coulthard's model.

Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model has been extensively and successfully applied in second and foreign language classrooms (Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007; Hardman et al, 2003; Jiang 2012). The emphasis in Verplaetse's (1995, 2000) coding scheme is solely on instructional exchange. The primary unit of

analysis for Verplaetse (1995) is the "interlocutor-specific (IS) transaction" which refers to a series of inter-actions occurring between a teacher and a specified student." According to Verplaetses, teachers can challenge their students to think and talk more about the topic by issuing more questions (Scaffolding elicitation in Initiation). They can issue questions in reaction to students' incorrect or unsatisfactory (Scaffolding elicitation in Response move). In this study, the researcher also examined the number of elicitations in Initiation moves to see if teachers opened up a new exchange with HPG or LPG after their responses (see Appendix B and C).

Qualitative content analysis

For analyzing stimulated recall interviews, observations, and field notes, qualitative content analysis was used (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis was carried out inductively, meaningful segments of the text were summarized in codes, and irrelevant codes were discarded. Then similar codes were clustered. Clustering codes and developing categories required the researcher to constantly review, discard, and synthesize the data. To avoid bias, the text was simultaneously coded by a colleague, and agreement between the coders was calculated. In doing so, the data were triangulated through different perspectives.

Results

Question 1: How do the modifications that teachers make in IRF discourse patterns help low-proficient and high-proficient English students to have access to opportunities for language learning?

Answers to this question were provided by descriptions of the learning opportunities in the class-rooms and comparing the distributions of elicitations in all moves. In the following section, each teacher's profile and the demographic of her students are presented and then the distributions of elicitations in each move were detailed.

Anita's Profile and the demographics of her students

Anita was born in Shiraz in 1979 and moved to Tehran 8 years ago. She held a BA in English translation at the time of the study and had 5 years of experience. Teaching was her second job. There were 17 students in Anita's classroom. Based on their achievement scores, X, Y, and Z were HPG while A, B, and C were LPG.

Table 1.1: Demographic information of HPG and LPG

HPG				LPG			
No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age
1	X	F	22	1	A	F	24

2	Y	M	25		2	B	F	19
3	Z	F	24		3	C	F	21

Pari's Profile and Demographics of her students

Pari was born in Tehran in 1977 and had been teaching for 4 years. Pari held an MA in English language teaching.

Table 1.2: Demographic information of HPG and LPG

HPG					LPG			
No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age		No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age
1	E	F	19		1	H	F	24
2	F	M	23		2	I	F	19
3	G	F	23		3	J	M	30

Yeganeh was born in Tehran in 1976. She had a BA in English teacher education and she had 4 years of teaching experience.

Table 1.3: Demographic information of HPG and LPG

HPG					LPG			
No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age		No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age
1	M	M	25		1	P	F	26
2	N	M	29		2	Q	M	27
3	O	F	20		3	R	F	24

Elicitations in Anita's classrooms

Though students' voices were heard in this class **t**he classroom discourse was dominated by Anita (Field note)**.** Anita often designated her students' turns. She often walked around the classroom addressing the same question to her students. Usually, the elicitation was in the form of repetition or completion of a phrase or word. Analyzing the teaching exchanges showed that Anita was the only one who often initiated, explained, and answered questions. Therefore, most of the exchanges often began and ended with the teacher and they were longer. As can be seen, the number of elicitations directed at HPG (117) was higher than the ones issued to LPG (n=32) in Anita's classroom.

Table 1.4: Direct elicitations in Anita's classrooms

Class visit	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10

HPG	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion
X	5	3	3	9	5	10	3	5	6	2
Y	3	4	2	1	3	0	7	5	4	3
Z	1	0	5	3	6	5	4	3	0	7
Total	9	7	10	13	14	15	14	13	10	12
LPG	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
A	2	1	2	3	1	0	1	1	0	1
B	2	1	2	1	0	1	1	2	1	2
C	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Total	5	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	2	3

Unsolicited contributions of students were not often allowed in the classroom, there was a low incidence of self-selected turns by HPG and LPG. Anita rarely did elaborate on the answers of her students. Therefore, a sustained line of thought was not often observed in this classroom. The following excerpt which is taken from a reading task shows how Anita treated HPG and LPG in the response moves.

X: What does this word mean? [X is pointing at the word BUFET while keeping eye contact with the teacher]

T: Look at here. [the teacher is holding a book up to draw attention to the picture] What does the picture say?

Y: lounge? [Y is taking a guess]

T: [At first the teacher does not realize this unsolicited turn, then she turns to Y and starts an initiation move reminding Y that he needs to raise his hand]

No. Look. What do you see here? [the teacher is pointing at the objects in the picture]

Y: Tables, people, food.

T: The pronunciation is BUFEY [the teacher is trying to help the Y student guess the word], so what would it be?

Y: oh I understood. A way of serving the food.

As can be seen, the teacher issued three questions to guide Y (from HPG) to guess the meaning of the word. Anita directed scaffolding elicitations to HPG in Response moves. Therefore, HGP had more opportunities to practice the language. However, Anita usually answered LPG right away without challenging them.

C: What is sesame? [C is raising his hand]

T: [the teacher answers promptly without waiting]

       Small seeds that take oil from them, sometimes they have it on bread.

C: Thanks.

From time to time, she challenged her high-proficient students' ideas and followed their answers by elicitations. This way, she maximized the contribution of HPG. However, after the responses from LPG, she often confirmed the answers by saying "yes", "no" or "fine" and showed she was satisfied with the answer. Sometimes, she wrote the incorrect answers on the board and drew the attention of the class, and got feed-back from the others and mainly the high-proficient English students. Anita's evaluation acts in the follow-up moves for LPG were more of a judgment than encouragement. She issued more scaffolding elicitations to HPG (n=49) compared to LPG (n=11) when their answers were incorrect or unsatisfactory. Table 1.5 shows the total number of elicitations issued to HPG and LPG.

Table 1.5: Scaffolding elicitations in Anita's classrooms

Class visit	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
HPG	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion	Elici-ta-tion
X	3	2	2	5	3	4	1	2	3	1
Y	2	4	0	0	0	2	2	1	2	1
Z	0	0	3	0	0	3	6	0	1	1
Total	5	6	5	5	3	9	9	3	6	3
LPG	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
A	0	1	3	2	0	0	1	0	0	0
B	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
C	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Total	1	1	3	2	0	0	2	0	1	1

Elicitations in Pari's classrooms

Pari gave most of the class time to HPG and therefore the class was mainly dominated by this group. The dominancy was created by addressing a large number of elicitations to HPG (n=146), LPG (n= 42).

Table 1.6: Direct elicitations in Pari's classrooms

Class visit	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10

HPG	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation
E	5	4	**5**	**6**	**8**	**7**	5	**3**	4	6
F	8	5	5	2	4	4	5	3	6	5
G	4	7	5	1	4	3	6	5	7	4
Total	17	16	15	9	16	14	16	11	17	15
LPG	**# 1**	**# 2**	**#3**	**#4**	**#5**	**#6**	**#7**	**#8**	**#9**	**#10**
H	0	2	2	3	3	0	1	1	3	3
I	1	0	3	3	0	1	1	2	2	3
J	1	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	0	1
Total	2	2	5	8	3	1	4	5	5	7

Compared to HPG, LPG hardly ever asked Pari any questions. Observations showed that instead of asking Pari, they asked their questions from their friends. Pari often answered LPG's questions right away while she challenged HGP by asking different questions (Field note). She expanded HGP's turns by issuing different questions. This is shown in the following excerpt:

G: Is it good to lose weight fast?

T: Mm, I do not know. What do you think? [the teacher does not answer promptly and challenges the student]

G: I don't think it is really good

T: Why not?

G: Because it may cause health problems

T: How it would be bad for your health? [the teacher encourages the student to be more clear and explain the idea in detail]

G: You may not get enough food; I mean enough vitamins, protein

T: I see you want to say that serious diet put a person at the risk of malnutrition.

Pari usually sustained discussions based on her students' answers. This mainly occurred through interactions with HPG. The expansion of the topic did not usually occur with LPG. Therefore, she involved HPG in longer stretches of interactions. Though she knew the right answers, she pretended that she did not know them and asked HPG to justify their answers. Therefore, in exchange with HPG, she often used scaffolding elicitations (e.g. 'Why is that?', 'How do you say that', 'How do you know it').

T: Oh I see, [teacher is putting on a surprised look]

       how do you think your eating habits are better or worse than used to be?

F: Eating habit is worse than before because many people eat outside.

T: What's wrong with it? Why do you think that it is a bad habit to eat out?

F: Foods outside are not healthy, full of oil.

T: Um, oil is that much unhealthy? [teacher is putting on a surprised look]

F: Yes but not any type of oil. Why oil is really good?

T: Olive oil.

Scaffolding elicitations with LPG consisted of phrases such as "You think it might work?" but they could not provoke a response. Analyzing the data showed that in reaction to LPG's answers, Pari often showed her approval by issuing "accept" (e.g. 'aha', 'right') and "evaluation" (e.g. interesting). However, such evaluations did not encourage them to talk more or did not engender LPG's interactions.

T: Do you have an active or inactive lifestyle? [the teacher first establishes eye contact

       and then asks the question]

LPG: Yes. I am active. I like sports very much.

T: Interesting. [teacher has a kind tone of voice]

As can be seen in Table 1.7, the number of elicitations issued to HPG (n=100) was three times more than the ones issued to LPG (n=29).

Table 1.7: Scaffolding elicitation in Pari's classrooms

Class visit	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
HPG	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation
E	7	6	6	3	7	3	4	1	2	3
F	5	2	4	4	4	5	4	5	3	5
G	0	6	2	8	2	7	8	2	4	3
Total	12	14	12	6	13	15	6	2	9	11
LPG	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
H	0	1	1	2	3	0	2	1	3	1
I	0	2	1	3	0	1	0	1	0	1

| J | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Elicitations in Yeganeh's classrooms

Yeganeh often opened the floor to her students using elicitations. She stepped out of the IRF pattern by recognizing call-out answers and giving a way to her students interrupting each other. In this classroom, students were able to talk freely without raising their hands and asking for Yeganeh's permission. Despite this, analysis of the distribution of elicitations in initiation moves shows that she limited the chances of language use for LPG to a great extent. As can be seen in Table 1.8, HPG received 140 questions while the number for LPG was 60.

Table 1.8: Direct elicitations in Yeganeh's classrooms

Class visit	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
HPG	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation
M	3	4	3	7	6	4	7	3	5	5
N	4	4	4	3	5	4	6	4	5	7
O	3	2	5	5	3	4	6	8	5	6
Total	10	10	12	15	14	12	19	15	15	18
LPG	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
P	2	2	2	3	3	1	2	3	2	3
Q	0	3	3	3	1	1	1	0	2	2
R	1	0	2	0	1	0	2	2	3	2
Total	3	6	7	6	5	2	5	5	7	7

As Yeganeh shared the responsibility for answering questions with all students, the number of scaffolding elicitations in the response move was low. Like the other teachers, the numbers of scaffolding elicitations issued to HPG were higher than the ones issued to their LP counterparts.

Observations showed the lack of follow-up moves could provide more opportunities for HPG and LPG to take the floor and fill up the feedback slot. She asked her students to justify their arguments and explain the reason for disagreement. She did not sustain the same topic with the LGP members as considerably as that with HGP. As can be seen in the following excerpt, Yeganeh continued the transactions with O from HGP for another 4 turns through scaffolding questions.

T: Now I am ready to hear your news, have you done anything interesting?

O: I saw an old movie last night

T: Cool. [teacher is putting on a smile and shows interest to hear the news]

   What was this movie about?

O: It was about a poor family that did have money problems. They could not pay their rent, they have to pay to a grocery shop, Zahra's shoes got lost but the kids did not tell this to their family and the son of the family decided to share the shoes, the boy gets shoes in the morning, the girl gets them in the evening, it is nice a lot of things happen you should see.

T: [teacher is attentively listening] Then what did they do?

O: Teacher, better you see it.

T: I will try. But tell me why did you like it?

S: Because from the beginning of the movie you want to know what happens to these children.

Yeganeh tried to indicate interest in her students' saying to encourage them to talk. While analyzing the data it became apparent that following evaluation acts in F moves, she often reopened the floor for further investigation of the topic with HPG. The total number of scaffolding elicitations for HPG was 213 while this number for LPG was 61.

Table 1.9: Scaffolding elicitations in Yeganeh 's classrooms

Class visit	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
HPG	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation	Elicitation
M	10	8	7	6	10	3	6	1	2	3
N	7	4	7	7	7	5	4	5	3	5
O	2	8	8	8	4	10	8	2	4	0
Total	19	20	22	21	21	18	18	8	9	8
LPG	# 1	# 2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10
P	2	3	4	3	4	0	1	2	3	2
Q	0	4	2	5	3	1	1	0	1	2
R	4	0	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	3
Total	6	7	8	9	9	2	4	3	6	7

Question 2: How do teachers justify their discourse with low-proficient and high-proficient English students?

To answer the second question, the researcher used her observations and field notes and conducted stimulated-recall interviews with teachers of this study. Analyzing the data resulted in three themes.

Theme# 1: Negative self-conceptions of low proficient students

Teachers agreed that LPG students were often uncertain of the answer and afraid of being evaluated or teased by peers. Based on their experience, teachers preferred to avoid interacting with the less proficient students not to make them feel embarrassed when they did not know the answers. Less proficient students' lack of confidence and their concern about wrong answers made teachers limit their interactions with them and not let them grow a negative self-conception.

> *Low-proficient students are often worried about their answers, especially about grammar. They are often afraid of making mistakes and losing their faces if they cannot answer the questions and this may result in negative self-conceptions.*

Observations showed that before opening the floor to LPG, Pari used a check act (e.g. "Have you got anything to say?") to see if the student could answer the questions. She often wanted to ensure that she was not drawing attention to the low-proficient student when she did not know the answer (Field notes). Similarly, Anita handed over the turns to others when LPG did not know the answer (Field notes). Later, in the stimulated recall interviews, Anita said that she was afraid of making their proficient students look stupid. In Yeganeh's classroom, when LPG's answers were incorrect; she avoided any negative words not to draw the others' attention to LPG's mistake. However, all teachers did not hesitate to challenge HPG more when they made a mistake to encourage them to think about the problem (Observations and Field notes). Teachers seemed to cater to individualism. They stated that they put effort into realizing students' needs, capabilities, and interests to tailor their interactions to individual students (Stimulated recall).

Theme# 2: Quality of interactions with high-proficient students

The reason why teachers interacted more with the high-proficient appeared to be associated with their frustration with low-proficient students' lack of motivation. Pari said: "As you see I had to repeat my questions for my weak student and wait till she answered my questions. As she did not answer my question I addressed this question to my better students to make the class more interactive. It seemed by selecting HPG, teachers attempted to establish an interactive class because low-proficient students seemed to be unwilling to participate in the classroom. Compared to their HPG peers, LPG did not often raise their hands for participa-

tion and avoided answering the questions while HPG seemed to be ready for the classroom and did not hesitate to answer the questions by their teachers and peers (Observations and Field notes).

Theme# 3: Teachers' concerns about job security and their teaching performance

Pressure from the school community influenced teacher interactions with low-proficient and high-proficient English students. All three teachers were concerned about their performance which was often evaluated by the number of students who were willing to enroll for the next term. In this regard, Anita said, "Our performance is bad if some students drop out and it is good if they attend the classroom regularly and register for the coming term" (Stimulated recall interview). Pari highlighted that high-proficient English students were more motivated to complete their language programs and often attended the class. Therefore, teachers were more interested in encouraging this group to participate. Similarly, observations and field notes showed that high-proficient people usually took the floor to answer their peers or ask their questions. Anita and Yeganeh agreed that HPG had a higher level of intrinsic motivation and were interested to get English certificates such as IELTS in the future. However, low proficient English students were often pushed by others or their need to attend. This concern might explain why teachers often felt closeness between themselves and high-proficient students and asked them more personal questions.

Discussion

This study was an attempt to expand our knowledge about modifications that EFL non-native teachers make in IRF discourse patterns with low proficient and high proficient EFL learners by addressing two questions: How do the modifications that *t*eachers make in IRF discourse patterns help low proficient and high proficient English students to have access to opportunities for language learning? How do teachers justify their discourse with low-proficient and high-proficient English students? To answer the first question, the researcher gathered the data through classroom observations and used supplementary quantitative analyses, and the data for the second question were collected through stimulated-recall interviews and triangulated with observations and field notes.

Analysis of the data in the light showed that opportunities for learning were not adequately accessible to all students. Teachers often initiated more interactions with high-proficient students than with low-proficient students. High-proficient learners were more privileged than their low-proficient counterparts in terms of opportunities for interactions. The numbers of elicitations issued to high-proficient learners in Initiation-Response and follow-up moves were more than the ones issued to low-proficient learners. Through

negotiation between teachers and students, the functions of scaffolding were achieved (Vygotsky, 1978). However, teachers often sent scaffolding elicitations to high-proficient students and asked them to justify their answers or bring them back to the correct answers or extend their line of thought. Low-proficient students were deprived of extended interactions and analytical inquiry. Low-proficient students were provided with some alternatives and were asked to select the correct answer. The result of this study lent support to previous research that indicates teachers often asked the ones who were, more proficient and responsive (Allahyar et al., 2022; Allahyar, 2015; Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Mack, 2012). This study also was in line with Verplaetse (2000) who found that modifications of native speakers with low proficient students limit their participation in science classrooms.

Modifications were explained by three reasons: a) negative self-conceptions of low proficient students, b) quality of interactions with high proficient students, and c) teachers' concern about job security and their teaching performance. Teachers' perceptions of students' negative self-conceptions encouraged them to shelter the low-proficient students from anxiety and embarrassment. This substantiates previous findings in the literature (Liu, 2001; Mohr & Mohr, 2007). Moreover, this study found that teachers attempted to create an interactive class through more interaction with highly proficient learners. In addition, they were concerned about the policy of the school. They said that their performance was often evaluated by the number of students who wanted to register for the next term. This encouraged them to have more interactions with highly proficient students.

Conclusion and limitations

This study was an attempt to understand how modifications that teachers make in their discourse patterns with high proficiency and low proficiency provide them with language learning opportunities. The results of this study showed that these modifications often limited the language learning opportunities for low-proficient students and deprived this group of students of their active participation and constructing knowledge in whole-class settings. Regardless of this contribution, this study has some limitations. One of the limitations of this study was the size of the study. The sample just included three Iranian EFL teachers and their high and low-proficient students. The focus of this study was on elicitations, future studies can analyze different acts such as direct, check, etc. They can observe the cognitive level of questions or turn-taking system used by teachers to see to what extent teachers may limit learning opportunities. Small group events in which the teachers talked to groups or individuals privately were not analyzed. Data was collected just from one language school institution through 10 class visits. Moreover, this study also just reflected teachers' voices, not any students (High or low proficient), or language institute supervisors.

Implications

Teacher trainers also need to help teachers understand how to help low-proficient students participate rather than being worried about the risk of embarrassment. Teachers need to be informed that the low proficient students need to interact to improve their language proficiency and this cannot occur by excluding them from the class.

Teacher education programs can benefit from teachers' real practices and examining the rationale behind them to promote self-reflection. Teacher trainers can show teachers how to use discourse patterns to assist them with their learning. Teachers' professional growth needs to help teachers engage students in learning rather than make them worried about the number of dropouts.

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Appendix A: Teacher-Stimulated Recall Interview

Instruction: I want to play the video recordings of the observed class meetings to help you remember what happened in each course of time during a class activity. As you are watching the video, I will stop the recording from time to time at some points to reflect on your action and have your comments on what you have done. If you want to say anything at any point, stop me.

Interviewer: In this episode, this student is first nominated to participate. This often occurred during class visits. What is your rationale? or Can you tell me what you were thinking at that point?

Interviewer: How about this episode? You often questioned this student when it came to the grammar section, why?

Interviewer: Can you explain this episode? Why did you first issue the choice questions?

Interviewer: How about this episode? Why did you often check in advance if this student could answer the question before entering any interaction with him? This often occurred during the other class visits with these two students. Why?

Interviewer: How about this episode with this student? you paraphrased your question rather than waiting for a response.

Interviewer: You often ask this student to elaborate, what is your rationale? Can you tell me what you were thinking at that point?

Appendix B: A Guideline to Coding Description

Symbols	Definitions
I	It is teacher initiation move that refers to the teacher's initiation of an interaction
R*	It is student response move that refers to the student's answer to the teacher's question
F	It is teacher follow-up move that refers to the teacher's feedback on the student's response
S:	It is teacher scaffold-initiating move that refers to the immediate initiation of interaction by the teacher his/her student has completed an exchange satisfactorily
el	It is an elicitation act that refers to a question posed by the teacher

Appendix C: A Sample of Observation Transcription (Yeganeh's classroom)

Line	Utterance	Move	ACT
1 2	T: I don't know anything about food, what food is healthy?	I	el
3	P: Um food with low calory	R*	
4	T: Cool, Like what?	R F S S	
5	P: Vegetable, fish	R*	

Appendix D: A Sample of field notes

Instructor:…………………………………………

Observer: …………………………………………

Date and Time:…………………………………

Interaction	Description/Comments
Does the teacher encourage participation? Does the teacher wait after posing the question? Does the teacher wait if she or he does not receive any answer questions? Does the teacher pose another question related to the previous one? Does the teacher recognize self-selection? Does the teacher share the responsibility of providing answers with students? Does the teacher assist the student with their problem?	
Non-verbal behavior	Description/Comments
Does the teacher use any gestures, gaze, or nonverbal behavior? Does the teacher maintain eye contact? Does the teacher show interest in the answer?	
Classroom Characteristics	Description/Comments
How is the physical arrangement of the seats?	