Classroom discourse in foreign language classrooms: A review of the literature

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Abstract: This article reviews studies that have investigated discourse in foreign language (FL) classroom contexts from the perspective of sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory maintains that language learning and development in a classroom context are intimately tied to the discursive practices by which and through which learners interact with each other and their teacher. Furthermore, the research has shown that teachers play an important role in that the specific types of patterns created in their interactions with students are a fundamental source of learners' competence in the FL. This review raises additional questions that remain to be addressed in future research that will potentially contribute to an evolving understanding of classroom discourse.

Key words: conversation analysis, discourse, initiation-response-feedback/evaluation sequences, interaction, sociocultural theory

Introduction
The ever-changing landscape of teaching pedagogies and research methodologies over the last several decades, coupled with the emergence of the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and concomitant proliferation of theoretical views of foreign language (FL) learning, has significantly broadened the scope of research carried out by applied linguists. One area of research that has received considerable attention in recent years is classroom discourse. Classroom-based research studies define discourse as the oral interaction between teachers and their students and between students themselves that takes place in a classroom context. Some researchers have investigated how learners establish relationships with their peers in classroom contexts via talk-in-interaction (e.g., Hellermann, 2007, 2008), whereas others have examined how learners are socialized into particular language practices via distinct patterns of teacher discourse (e.g., Hall, 1995, 2004, 2010; Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004, among others). A common goal of this research is to establish a connection between different types of classroom talk and FL learning. From a discourse perspective, classroom talk is considered consequential to language learning and development.
This review of the literature summarizes recent work related to investigations of classroom discourse using sociocultural theory as the framework for data analysis and interpretation. The review begins with an overview of a sociocultural view of language learning. The review then presents studies that investigated how teachers shape the communicative context in foreign language classes, with particular attention to literature classrooms. These studies attempted to show how oral interaction has a potential impact on student learning. The review examines closely the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) and initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) interaction patterns typically found in discourse in FL classrooms. IRF and IRE discourse patterns resurfaced in many studies on classroom discourse no matter the specific focus of the study (teacher-student discourse, teacher questions, etc.), and it is therefore one of the main foci of this review. In addition, studies that investigated the discourse of student-student interaction in the FL classroom are highlighted followed by a brief review of studies that looked at the broader, social factors that influence classroom talk. Suggestions for future avenues of research in the area of classroom discourse and foreign language learning conclude the literature review.

Theoretical Framework

Many of the studies on classroom discourse in FL classrooms have made use of a sociocultural perspective on language learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). It is first necessary to briefly highlight some of the major theoretical assumptions inherent in a sociocultural view of language learning and explain how it differs from other SLA perspectives. Historically, many formal linguistic theories, in one way or another, have had as their goal the investigation and identification of the properties that constitute a language system, and, in some cases, how these properties are acquired (e.g., Slobin, 1985). Research carried out via formal linguistic approaches (e.g., Chomsky, 2002; White, 2003) typically involves analyzing language to identify its constitutive parts (e.g., syntax, morphology, phonology, phrasal categories, etc.) to determine how each language component functions and how each one contributes to the way in which one language works and/or differs from another. This kind of formal linguistic research does not take into account the context in which language is used or the linguistic systems by which it is bound and through which context is constituted. Some SLA theoretical work (e.g., Slabakova, 2006; Sorace, 2005) follows in this same vein by defining the nature of language learning as the acquisition of these isolated linguistic properties without taking into consideration the context and distinct ways in which learners acquire this knowledge.

In contrast, sociocultural theory views language as more than a formal system of linguistic properties. The sociocultural perspective maintains that the nature of language is fundamentally social and has its genesis in the interaction between people (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Specifically, language is “inextricably linked to the culturally framed and discursively patterned communicative activities of importance to our groups howsoever these groups are defined” (Hall, 1997, p. 303). In other words, the primary facets of language, as defined by the sociocultural theoretical view, are tied to and are fundamentally shaped by the ways in which individuals interact with others in a variety of communicative contexts. Extending this idea to a FL learning environment, students’ knowledge of the FL is shaped by the ways in which students interact via distinct and recurrent discourse patterns and by other interactional meaning-making systems, such as gestures.

In terms of acquisition, sociocultural theory considers learners’ development of individual competence to originate in the social interactions and relationships that are established via participation in their communicative practices (e.g., carrying out a linguistic task in a classroom context
or interacting with native speakers in a study abroad environment). Eventually, the linguistic means for accomplishing these social practices are appropriated by the learners and become part of their cognitive resources. Much of this appropriation happens via the guidance and assistance of more experienced participants. This guidance in completing tasks and solving problems is referred to as mediation. According to the theory, mediation can be provided by others (other-regulation) or by the self (self-regulation) (Lantolf, 2006; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Poehner, 2008; Vygotsky, 1987). Often, mediation is provided through the use of language and other sign systems, such as charts, graphs, numbers, objects in the immediate environment, etc. Because the majority of mediation that is given and received is linguistic and symbolic in nature, it is referred to as semiotic mediation, such as the talk directed toward others or the talk directed to oneself in the form of private speech (i.e., when a learner vocalizes his or her thoughts, thereby carrying out a dialogue with him- or herself). Mediation is said, therefore, to regulate, shape, and constitute learners’ mental and physical activity and is largely responsible for development, or the ability to accomplish actions on one’s own and recognize and generalize these actions, linguistic or otherwise, across analogous contexts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

In several studies on classroom discourse that were carried out within the sociocultural framework, this mediation, discussed above, was defined as the help of a more capable peer such as a more proficient learner or the teacher (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). In contrast to input and interactionist views (Gass, 1997, 2003; Long, 1996; VanPatten, 2004), where language learning is often depicted as a solitary cognitive endeavor in which the brain processes, analyzes, and stores input data in the form of spoken or written utterances, the sociocultural view considers language learning to be fundamentally social and occurs when learners orally interact with each other, such as when they work through a jigsaw task using language as the primary tool for task completion. Through mediation learners are able to make use of and develop their abilities in the second language in a manner that may not be possible when working alone. This collaboration, or what some have called the co-construction of knowledge (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995), has been shown to occur between learners and their teachers (Donato & Brooks, 2004; Hall, 1995, 1998, 2004, 2010; Thoms, 2011), between two or more learners (Donato, 1994; Lapierre, 1994; Mori, 2002; Platt & Brooks, 2002; Swain, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2002), or via self-directed talk such as private speech (de Guerrero, 1999; McCafferty, 1998; Ohta, 2001).

Within sociocultural theory, oral interaction among participants is a fundamental component of language learning. From this perspective, interaction is not just the facilitator of learning but more fundamentally is the source of both what students learn and how they learn. In other words, oral interaction is both the means and the end (Swain, 1997) in that the language used during an interaction in an FL context is simultaneously both the tool for learning and the object of what is to be learned (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2002).

It is also worth noting that some research on classroom discourse has drawn on the theoretical principles of language socialization (Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990). Language socialization focuses on the ways in which novice members of a community or social group (e.g., children or, in the classroom context, students) develop and use linguistically and culturally appropriate knowledge based on interactions with more knowledgeable persons in the group. Furthermore, language socialization research “integrates discourse and ethnographic methods to capture the social structuring and cultural interpretations of semiotic forms, practices, and ideologies that inform novices’ practical engagement with others” (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011, p. 1). Closely related to the sociocultural view of learning,
Teacher-Student Interaction: IRE/IRF Interaction Patterns

One of the more commonly studied interaction patterns found in the classroom is that of IRE. It is important to note here that in the literature on classroom discourse, some researchers have referred to the ubiquitous triadic dialogue sequence/structure as IRE (Lemke, 1990; Mehan, 1979, 1985, 1998), while others referred to it as initiation-response-feedback or IRF (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Waring, 2009). In many of the aforementioned studies, however, researchers were referring to essentially the same thing: where the third turn produced by the teacher (i.e., either an evaluative or follow-up comment) closes out the interaction before moving on to yet another triadic interaction sequence. Some (Donato & Brooks, 2004; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Thoms, 2011; Wells, 1993) chose to differentiate between the two interaction patterns (i.e., IRE vs. IRF), a distinction that is adopted in this article to highlight the different functions of the third turn in the two interaction sequences.

The IRE pattern is similar to the IRF pattern in that it consists of three parts. However, the main difference between IRE and IRF sequences lies in the third turn. The IRE pattern functions as follows: The teacher initiates the interaction usually by posing a question (I); a student is then typically expected to provide a response to the teacher’s question (R); and the exchange ends with the teacher evaluating the student's response by saying something such as exactly, good point, or no, that's incorrect (E). The teacher therefore is the speaker in the interaction who is usually responsible for carrying out the first (initiation) and third (evaluation) turns of the exchange, while the student is the participant responsible for the second (response) turn in the interaction. Table 1 illustrates how teacher-student interaction typically unfolds within the IRE pattern.

In sum, interactions in the FL classroom serve to socialize students into understanding what counts as the official curriculum as well as inculcate in students ways of acting with (or reacting to) the subject matter being studied (Hall & Walsh, 2002). “Through time and experience in practices with other, more experienced members, the less experienced participants learn to recognize what is taking place, and to anticipate the likely unfolding and typical consequences of the uses of the practices’ resources” (Hall, 1997, p. 302). Therefore, from a sociocultural perspective, acquisition is inextricably tied to the social and linguistic opportunities that are present in the FL classroom context, in so much as these opportunities are perceived by learners as meaningful, valuable, and relevant. As such, teachers play an important role in shaping classroom discourse and affording students with opportunities for meaningful interaction.

SLA research adopting a language socialization perspective analyzes how learners are socialized as language learners in FL classrooms based on oral interactions with the teacher and their peers. For example, learners can take on the role of novice or expert during pair and group work tasks depending on the situation and with whom they are interacting in the FL classroom (Ohta, 1995; Storch, 2002).

In sum, interactions in the FL classroom serve to socialize students into understanding what counts as the official curriculum as well as inculcate in students ways of acting with (or reacting to) the subject matter being studied (Hall & Walsh, 2002). “Through time and experience in practices with other, more experienced members, the less experienced participants learn to recognize what is taking place, and to anticipate the likely unfolding and typical consequences of the uses of the practices’ resources” (Hall, 1997, p. 302). Therefore, from a sociocultural perspective, acquisition is inextricably tied to the social and linguistic opportunities that are present in the FL classroom context, in so much as these opportunities are perceived by learners as meaningful, valuable, and relevant. As such, teachers play an important role in shaping classroom discourse and affording students with opportunities for meaningful interaction.
on classroom discourse in a variety of first and second language classroom contexts (Cazden, 2001; Hall, 1998; Mehan, 1979; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Nystrand, 1997; Wells, 1993). The IRE discourse pattern has been found to limit students from speaking freely about the topic of class discussion and to prevent students from extending and elaborating upon their utterances. Further results have shown that it does not allow for complex ways of thinking and communicating between student and teacher (Barnes, 1992). Others have suggested that the IRE sequence contributes to the asymmetrical discourse patterns typically found in language classrooms by preventing students from managing turn-taking, developing the topic of conversations, or negotiating the direction of instruction (van Lier, 1998). The IRE pattern places the teacher at the center of instructional activities in the language classroom and limits student responses and contributions to discussion. In sum, IRE maximizes teacher talk and minimizes student talk.

Some researchers have examined classroom discourse to investigate the presence of other kinds of interaction patterns between teachers and their students. Nassaji and Wells (2000), while investigating the IRE pattern in English elementary science and literature classrooms in Canada, discovered that subtle changes in the third part of the IRE pattern resulted in an increase in students’ participation in whole-class discussion. The resulting discourse between teacher and student reflected more of a dialogic interaction in contrast to an inquisitive session, such as that established by the IRE pattern. Specifically, Wells (1993) discovered a subtle variation on the IRE pattern in his analyses of classroom discourse—the IRF pattern. As previously noted, the first two parts of the IRF exchange function as they do in the IRE sequence. Again, the teacher initiates the exchange usually by posing a question in the first turn, and then the student responds to the question in the second turn. However, instead of evaluating students’ responses in the third turn, the teacher provides a response that takes the form of non-evaluative feedback. The feedback may include asking students to expand on their response by justifying or clarifying their opinions. Table 2 illustrates how teacher-student interaction typically unfolds within the IRF pattern.

One of Nassaji and Wells’s (2000) conclusions was that the third part of the exchange (i.e., evaluation) in the traditional IRE sequence limits students’ ability to respond to their teacher in a meaningful way during whole-class discussion. On the other hand, if the teacher provides the kind of feedback found in an IRF sequence, students are then allowed more opportunities to participate in the discussion, explain their thinking, and elaborate upon their responses. Nassaji and Wells also suggested that these two triadic exchange patterns found in classrooms are neither wholly good nor bad. Whether or not teachers rely on one pattern over the other is often dependent upon variables such as the nature of the activity, the participants involved in the discussion, or the purpose of the lesson.

### TABLE 1

| Sample IRE Interaction Pattern (Thoms, 2011, p. 330) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I | T: | Entonces, ¿qué pasa con el dueño de la mina? ¿Quién es el dueño de la mina? ¿Quién es? | [So, what happens with the owner of the mine? Who is the owner of the mine? Who is it?] |
| 2 | R | S: | Don Pedro. | [Don Pedro.] |
| 3 | E | T: | ¿Bueno, sí? | [Don Pedro—exactly!] |
| 4 | T: | Entonces, ¿qué pasa con el dueño de la mina? ¿Quién es el dueño de la mina? ¿Quién es? | [So, what happens with the owner of the mine? Who is the owner of the mine? Who is it?] |
| 5 | R | S: | Don Pedro. | [Don Pedro.] |
| 6 | E | T: | Don Pedro—¡exactamente! | [Don Pedro—exactly!] |
such as equality and symmetry are at the heart of negotiation and the joint construction of talk between teacher and students in the language classroom. Many of these same issues are also central components of socioculturally oriented language learning theories and research methodologies of SLA, which seek, among other things, to discover specific points in discourse that represent the genesis of how students attend to a specific grammatical form, idea, or concept in the second language (Mercer, 2004; Toth, 2011). However, as has been noted, teachers’ actions can facilitate or inhibit learners’ participation in classroom discourse.

Teachers’ (In)Actions
A body of research on classroom discourse has focused on the role of teachers in structuring the talk in their classroom, with a specific interest in understanding the effects of teachers’ actions (or inactions) on the learning opportunities created for students in their discourse. Findings have suggested that particular kinds of teacher-fronted activities can limit how much students participate in whole-class discussions (Donato & Brooks, 2004; Hall, 1995, 2004; Thoms, 2008; Waring, 2008). For example, Hall (1995) analyzed the way in which a

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**TABLE 2** Sample IRF Interaction Pattern (Thoms, 2011, p. 331)

While acknowledging that IRE and IRF interaction patterns are widely used in the FL classroom and are therefore the most common ways in which teachers and students interact, some researchers have argued for new pedagogical approaches to engage students in equitable, meaningful ways. Van Lier (1998) indicated that the third follow-up turn in the IRF sequence has the possibility to lead students and teachers to “emancipatory forms of discourse” (p. 168). He suggested that teachers may be able to create discursive patterns of interaction between themselves and students when teachers ask meaningful questions in the follow-up slot of the IRF pattern, as suggested by Nassaji and Wells (2000). Van Lier (1998) argued that the IRF pattern, particularly the follow-up slot, can act as a springboard that promotes shared inquiry rather than a question-and-answer session where student responses are expected or already known by the teacher.

The kind of conversation that evolves out of discourse patterns that engage students on an equal footing with the teacher has the potential to lead to classroom interactions between teacher and students that are more symmetrical in nature (e.g., students may also pose questions, ask for clarification, and probe for more information). Van Lier (1998) indicated that issues such as equality and symmetry are at the heart of negotiation and the joint construction of talk between teacher and students in the language classroom. Many of these same issues are also central components of socioculturally oriented language learning theories and research methodologies of SLA, which seek, among other things, to discover specific points in discourse that represent the genesis of how students attend to a specific grammatical form, idea, or concept in the second language (Mercer, 2004; Toth, 2011). However, as has been noted, teachers’ actions can facilitate or inhibit learners’ participation in classroom discourse.
teacher provided speaking opportunities for his students in a first-year high school Spanish class via whole-class discussions. A unique discursive practice observed in the transcripts, termed *local lexical chaining* (p. 46), involved the teacher asking students a series of unrelated questions in order to review various lexical items. As such, the discourse resulted in a disjointed conversation that focused primarily on reviewing the vocabulary words in the context of a list of unrelated sentences that did not share a unifying theme or context. The questioning pattern of the teacher did not allow for a cohesive conversation, prevented the teacher from asking follow-up questions for elaborating upon statements, and violated pragmatic conventions of conversation.

In a similar study, Hall (2004) observed the discourse between the teacher and her students over a nine-month period in a first-year high school Spanish language class. Hall found that the way the teacher allowed her students to practice speaking was reduced to two activities—“listing and labeling of objects and concepts” and “lexical chaining” (pp. 76–77). These two ways of speaking involved students listing objects, ideas, or vocabulary words whenever prompted by the teacher, activities that involved limited cognitive engagement and linguistic skills. The repeated use of these two speaking activities resulted in low levels of cognitive and linguistic development, as evidenced by students’ abilities at the end of the year. Hall concluded that because of the teacher’s almost exclusive reliance on uninteresting and intellectually limited instructional routines, the students learned very little. Both of Hall’s (1995, 2004) studies underscore the importance of understanding the consequences of talk to language learning and development in the FL classroom.

Findings on the inhibiting nature of such interactional activities are not limited to high school Spanish language courses. Researchers have also focused on college-level, content-based courses to understand how discourse evolves in these specific contexts. For example, in their analysis of whole-class discussions between students and their teacher in an advanced undergraduate Spanish literature classroom, Donato and Brooks (2004) reported that although literary discussions had the potential to allow students to speak at the advanced level of proficiency, the way in which the whole-class talk was structured by the teacher did not allow for this to happen. Specifically, students were not allowed ample opportunities during the course of the whole-class discussions to produce extended, paragraph-length responses, nor did they make use of complex grammatical structures and lexical items. As such, the researchers indicated that a disconnect existed between what students in their study were observed saying and the more complex language or talk one would expect to be used in upper-level FL literature courses. They drew two implications from their study. First, literature discussions should include a variety of interaction patterns that present opportunities for learners to elaborate their responses during whole-class discussions. Second, teachers in these courses should be made aware of the need for varying the way in which they discuss literary works with their students to promote students’ participation in the talk. Although Donato and Brooks’s study sheds light on the nature of classroom discourse in upper-level, content-based courses at the college level, much more research is needed in this area.

While analyzing the transcripts of teacher-student interaction in adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in a community educational program in the United States, Waring (2008) focused on the use of “explicit positive assessment” utterances (p. 577) put forth by the teacher when checking homework with her students in a whole-class setting. The study raises an important point: Teachers often justify or defend the use of evaluative statements in IRE as a way of building a positive and encouraging classroom climate. The author indicated, however, that the explicit positive assessment utterances (e.g., *well*...
done, excellent job) functioned as an evaluation, thus producing an IRE discourse pattern that limited students’ participation in the interaction and the students’ learning opportunities around the topic of correcting homework assignments. Waring concluded that what is seemingly appropriate and typical pedagogical behavior on the part of the teacher (i.e., providing a nurturing, positive response to a learner when going over answers to homework) may not be ideal feedback for the learner in terms of FL acquisition. That is, given the way in which explicit positive assessment utterances limit students’ participation in classroom talk, perhaps providing feedback that extends the conversation with learners in an ESL setting would better facilitate their learning of English. In this way, Waring called into question assumptions about nurturing students through positive evaluation given in the context of pedagogical tasks that ostensibly have the goal of student learning. The essential question is, therefore, how can teachers create a positive and nurturing classroom environment without compromising opportunities for student participation and reducing interactions to the IRE discourse pattern? One way that teachers can promote learners’ participation in classroom discourse while creating a positive discursive space is through thoughtful and meaningful teacher questions, an area that has received much attention.

Teacher Questions and Student Actions

Given that the sociocultural perspective views language learning as a social process where more capable participants provide nonjudgmental assistance to less experienced learners via oral interactions, teacher questions can help establish a nonthreatening communicative context in which these discursive interactions can take place. Research on teacher questions has analyzed how questions can be used as a way to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and students (McCormick & Donato, 2000; Waring, 2009), how native and nonnative teachers of the FL differentiate the types of questions used to engage students in classroom discussion (Consolo, 2000), how small changes in a teacher’s follow-up questions in triadic interaction can affect classroom discourse (Hellermann, 2003, 2005), and how teachers and students share responsibility for co-constructing questions in the openings between IRF sequences (Waring, 2009).

In a study that investigated the classroom discourse of an ESL teacher and her students, McCormick and Donato (2000) analyzed a variety of data sources (e.g., 20 videotaped class meetings, interviews with the teacher, teacher journals) to understand how the teacher’s questions served to scaffold learning in teacher-fronted activities. Specifically, the study sought to demonstrate how teacher questions reflected the six functions of scaffolding originally delineated in Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). In that study, Wood et al. defined scaffolding as the process by which experts assist novices to achieve a goal or solve a problem that the novice could not achieve or solve alone. The authors went on to specify six functions that make up scaffolding: recruitment (i.e., the expert “enlists the problem solver’s interest in and adherence to the requirements of the task” [p. 98]), reduction in degrees of freedom (i.e., the expert makes adjustments to the task to reduce the number of actions needed by the novice to solve the problem), direction maintenance (i.e., the expert keeps the novice on task by motivating the novice to achieve the task objective), marking critical features (i.e., the expert provides cues or “accentuates certain features of the task that are relevant” [p. 98]), frustration control (i.e., the expert encourages the novice whenever the novice makes an error while working on the task), and demonstration (i.e., the expert models solutions to the task).

Based on their findings, McCormick and Donato (2000) suggested that teacher questions should not take on the role of an elicitation device where teachers, who
already know the answer to the questions they ask, elicit students’ knowledge about the content of the discussion. Rather, they advocated that teacher questions be conceptualized as “dynamic discursive tools [used] to build collaboration and to scaffold comprehension and comprehensibility” (p. 197). In this way, teacher questions function as “semiotic tools for achieving goal-directed instructional actions within the context of teacher-student classroom interaction” (p. 198). In addition, the support that questions have the potential to provide creates a nonjudgmental environment in which students perceive that help is available from the teacher and will be offered when they experience difficulty.

Other studies have looked at the way in which native speaker teachers differ from nonnative speaker (NNS) teachers with respect to the kinds of questions they pose during whole-class discussions and the effects of these questions on subsequent student discourse. Consolo (2000), for example, found that NS teachers in an English as a foreign language classroom provided more follow-up moves in IRF sequences when compared to NNS teachers, thereby generating more student discussion. In addition, he identified several other factors that may affect the amount and kind of oral discourse between teacher and student that were not analyzed in his study and need to be investigated further. Some of these include the teaching methodology employed, the text or textbook used, the length of the class session, the overall goals of the teacher (e.g., reviewing information from a larger lecture format or introducing new material), and the varying proficiency levels of students in the same class (i.e., catering to a variety of students whose FL speaking abilities range from Novice to Intermediate High on the ACTFL scale).

More recent work (e.g., Hellermann, 2003, 2005, 2007; Lazaraton, 2004; Waring, 2009) has sought to add to previous research on classroom discourse by providing an even more detailed understanding of participants’ actions within routine classroom interaction patterns. To this end, researchers have relied on conversation analysis (CA). CA is a research methodology that involves a close analysis of verbal and nonverbal interactions in “natural situations” (ten Have, 2007, p. 10). The primary data sources used in CA are the audio and/or video recordings of talk resulting in detailed transcriptions of the oral interaction. Typical transcription conventions used in CA include the documentation of pauses, participants’ intonation, and, in some cases, information that describes participants’ paralinguistic cues (e.g., gestures) while they are participating in the conversation. A primary tenet of CA research methodology is that analyzing interaction is best achieved via a close analysis of the turn-by-turn sequence of talk. This type of analysis allows the researcher to determine how participants mutually construct conversation and how they orient themselves toward the specific instance of talk-in-interaction under examination (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). In other words, a CA perspective assumes that conversation is not merely a series of individual acts. Rather, human oral interaction is “an emergent collectively organized event” (ten Have, 2007, p. 9). CA’s purpose is not to explain why participants interact as they do but to understand and explain how interaction is carried out and accomplished in a specific context.

To illustrate how CA is used to investigate classroom discourse, Lazaraton (2004) employed CA to understand an oral exchange between an NNS ESL teacher and one of her students. The researcher analyzed a particular section of transcription from a whole-class discussion and looked at how an NNS ESL teacher teaching in a university setting responded to a student’s question about whether or not the term cheddar cheese referred to a kind of bread. Lazaraton explained that the purpose of CA “is to discover the systematic properties of the sequential organization of talk and the social practices that are displayed by and embodied in talk-in-interaction” (p. 52).
attention, etc. Her study provides a good explanation and illustration of how CA is used to investigate classroom discourse and, in particular, how talk-in-interaction is developed from the complex organization of discourse moves serving myriad social, affective, and cognitive functions.

Using a conversational analytic approach, Hellermann (2003) analyzed the effects of prosody in a teacher's follow-up/feedback utterance in the third turn of the IRF interaction pattern to understand how it affected classroom discourse. The researcher identified four prosodic resources—pitch contour, pitch level, timing, and rhythm (p. 88)—that were used when the teachers in his study repeated a lexical word originally uttered by a student in the second turn of the IRE pattern. One of the main findings of Hellermann's work was

Table 3 is a segment of the transcript analyzed in her study.

Lazaraton concluded that the NNS ESL teacher (TE in Table 3) provided a rather normal explanation of cheddar cheese for one of her students in the class. She went on to provide a detailed analysis that showed “how ‘meaning making’ and understanding are progressively and collaboratively constructed” (p. 63) among participants in a classroom context. The talk-in-interaction above was built across several mutually supporting and sequential moves on the part of the teacher and student. At particular moments of time in the interaction, these moves raised questions, sought clarification of a lexical item and confirmation of understanding, identified attributes of the word cheddar, pointed out differences in understanding, incorporated gestures to direct attention, etc. Her study provides a good explanation and illustration of how CA is used to investigate classroom discourse and, in particular, how talk-in-interaction is developed from the complex organization of discourse moves serving myriad social, affective, and cognitive functions.
that a teacher’s utterance in the third turn of the IRE pattern (i.e., a repetition of a lexical item stated by the student in the second turn of the pattern) made use of prosodic cues to indicate whether a student’s contribution to classroom talk was either correct or off target. That is, whenever a teacher’s repetition of a lexical item in the third turn of the IRE was said with a high pitch, it indicated that the teacher was questioning the accuracy of the student’s response. In contrast, if the teacher’s third turn follow-up/repetition was uttered in a low pitch, then that signaled that the utterance was correct and talk moved on to a different topic. In addition, Hellermann’s results indicated that the timing of the teacher’s utterance in the third turn also affected how students responded to the ongoing whole-class discussion. When a teacher paused and did not provide an immediate follow-up turn, “students orient[ed] to its absence as a negative assessment and offer[ed] alternate responses” (p. 98). The researcher concluded that in the discourse of the ESL classrooms that he observed, subtle prosodic effects in the teachers’ utterance in the third turn of the triadic exchange either was interpreted by the student as an evaluation (i.e., high pitch intonation) or pushed learners to further explain their contribution to the discussion (pausing after a student response), which, in turn, provided for extended discourse. Hellermann’s close analysis of the prosodic features of the teacher’s feedback sheds light on the subtle signals that can be sent to students by teacher prosody and silences in the third move of triadic discourse.

In another study that provided for a more detailed understanding of the IRE interaction pattern in an ESL classroom, Waring (2009) carried out a single case analysis of talk that evolved between an adult ESL student and her teacher. The researcher indicated that the IRE interaction pattern was omnipresent in the context of the ESL classroom analyzed in her study and that it allowed little space for students to speak and freely interact with others or with the teacher. Waring showed that IRE interaction patterns found in whole-class discussions were typically sequenced together to form discourse clusters (e.g., $\text{IRE} \Rightarrow \text{IRE} \Rightarrow \text{IRE} \Rightarrow \text{IRE}$). In her analysis, the author showed how the silent gaps between the IRE clusters generally allowed for little to no participation on behalf of students due to the fact that they were not “free-for-all” spans of silence but rather were “specific pre- ‘next teacher move’” gaps where the teacher was inherently authorized to speak in the subsequent turn (p. 807). Nonetheless, the researcher went on to illustrate how the student in her study was able to pose a question to the teacher during one of the gaps between IRE clusters. Waring called the student’s question a “pivot question” (pp. 807–808), because it pivoted the talk away from the structured IRE sequence and resulted in a more student-led line of inquiry in the discussion. By opening up talk in this way, the student-generated pivot question (1) created “a space for considering more complex issues” (p. 815), which, in turn, can provide more learning opportunities not only for the student who asked the question but for the other students in the class, and (2) “promotes learning by virtue of the very learner agency it entails” (p. 816).

The findings of the study suggest that the impervious nature of the IRE interaction pattern can be penetrated if students can pose questions to their teacher in the silent gaps between IRE clusters in the discourse. Teachers should therefore be aware of these opportunities for learners during whole-class discussions and allow students the ability to pose questions at these specific points in the discourse as they can lead to valuable learning opportunities for all learners in the classroom.

**Student-Student Interaction**

While the majority of the studies reviewed thus far have focused on teachers’ actions and their effects on student participation in classroom discourse in ESL and FL
classrooms, others (e.g., Huong, 2007; Mori, 2002; Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2004) have examined student-student interaction in the classroom context. Using a conversation analytic framework for the analysis, Mori (2002) closely examined the talk of American learners of Japanese while they interacted with an NS visitor in a Japanese-as-a-FL classroom. She found that, although the goal of the task was to have a conversation with the NS visitor based on the theme of the unit of study and the students’ advanced planning for the discussion, the exchange with the native Japanese speaker resembled an interview; that is, students posed discrete and unrelated questions and the NS provided answers when prompted. Mori’s analysis further revealed that when the students abandoned their previously scripted questions and began to provide spontaneous and unplanned utterances throughout the course of the activity, the question-and-answer interview transformed itself into the desired discussion. Mori's work indicated that specific tasks in the FL classroom might reflect how speakers’ institutionalized understanding of talk within particular speaking activities, such as an interview, can potentially influence how the discourse unfolds more than the amount and kind of students’ pre-task planning and preparation.

Guided by the sociocultural theoretical view of FL learning, Mondada and Pekarek Doehler (2004) closely analyzed the interactions between learners and their teachers in two different French-as-a-FL classroom contexts in Europe. One data set included interactions between teachers and immigrant children (i.e., 10- to 12-year-olds) who were learning French while the other data set consisted of recorded interactions in a French-as-a-FL class in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The authors argued that tasks used in FL classrooms are not fixed entities that are somehow predetermined by a curriculum, program, or lesson plan and do not remain unchanged when carried out by different groups of learners in the same classroom. Rather, their analyses illustrate how tasks are carried out in a “locally and socially distributed way through the actions of the participants involved and through their ongoing interpretations of the instructional setting” (p. 510). In other words, the way in which a task is defined and/or carried out in a FL environment relies heavily upon a number of context-specific factors such as the way in which learners and teachers interact to accomplish the task.

The authors went on to suggest that being a successful learner in any given FL context not only relies on a certain amount of linguistic competence in the FL, but also involves having “socio-institutional competence” (p. 509). Socio-institutional competence involves the ability of learners to understand and adapt to the evolving nature of learning activities in the FL classroom. The authors indicated that “neither tasks nor learning situations have a priori definitions, nor do they trigger a predetermined individual capacity. Rather, they demand that the learner put to work variable resources and adapt them continuously to the local contingencies of the ongoing activities” (p. 514). The study concluded by underscoring the notion that learners are able to gain both types of competencies through the ways in which they are “socialized into the communities of practice in which they use the FL” (p. 510). The pedagogical implication of this research is that FL teachers should seek to create a classroom context in which learners are regularly exposed to a variety of speaking activities that push them to learn how to adapt to the ever-changing nature of talk-in-interaction. Allowing students the ability to interact with each other and the teacher in this way will not only provide them with the opportunity to improve their linguistic ability in the FL, but will also help develop their socio-institutional and interactional skills, both of which are important for social interactions with native or more proficient speakers in discursive contexts beyond the FL classroom.

on how learners, when working together, understand and carry out tasks discursively in the FL classroom. Each study demonstrated that tasks in the FL classroom are interpreted by learners differently and that student-student interaction during small group work can lead to different outcomes among learners. Similarly, Huong (2007) analyzed student-student interactions of university-level Vietnamese students learning English. The researcher observed the way in which learners worked together when a more proficient nonnative English speaker participated in small-group work versus when the NNS was not present. Huong found that the participation of the more proficient English speaker in the small-group work allowed for more English to be used overall and led to an increased use of vocabulary when compared to the small groups, in which all of the speakers were at the same proficiency level. Huong's study underscores the idea that the presence of a more knowledgeable learner in a discussion group influences the quantity and quality of the talk and, as a consequence, has the potential to facilitate language learning of the less proficient learners.

Social Factors Influencing Classroom Discourse

In addition to clarifying the interactions that occur inside the classroom, factors outside of the classroom can also affect how discourse unfolds in the classroom. For example, Ho (2006) examined how social and cultural aspects in Bruneian society (a sultanate near Malaysia) affect the pedagogical decisions made by ESL teachers. In Brunei, ESL teachers are viewed as individuals who are all-knowing and whose role in the classroom is to transmit knowledge. Ho found that teachers who drew on this belief in making decisions about how to structure instructional activities limited interactions with their students to recitation scripts (i.e., IRE interaction patterns), which rarely allowed students opportunities to dialogue with them or with each other in the classroom. The point of this research is that to analyze classroom talk adequately, researchers must take into account sociocultural views about the roles of teachers and students and to situate their analysis of classroom interactions into larger frames of institutional beliefs held by specific social groups.

Similarly, Blommaert, Mullaert, Huysmans, and Dyers (2005) analyzed how English was used in a socioeconomically disadvantaged South African high school setting. The researchers discovered that both learners and teachers shared orthographic, grammatical, and lexical peculiarities and inaccuracies when communicating in English. One of the principal findings indicated that by committing similar errors in English, the teachers were more effective in reaching their diverse, often marginalized groups of learners. That is, given the common socioeconomic backgrounds and similar linguistic preparation and abilities in the FL, teachers in the study were better able to identify with students (and students with their teachers) in the FL classroom. While the study did not explicitly focus on the external social factors shared by the teachers and their students and resulting effects on classroom discourse, it did call attention to the idea that sociocultural variables outside of the classroom can potentially affect the ways in which teachers and students mutually interpret each other, which in turn can lead to a comprehensive understanding of interactions inside the classroom.

Both the Blommaert et al. (2005) and Ho (2006) studies indicate that classroom oral interactions between teacher and students reflect the educational values espoused by the larger sociocultural structure in which the class or particular academic institution exists. However, much more research is needed in this particular area to fully understand how sociocultural forces and societal beliefs about the nature of interaction outside the classroom affect the shape of classroom discourse inside the classroom.
Discussion of Findings on Classroom Discourse

This article has provided a brief review of recent work related to understanding classroom discourse in FL classrooms from a sociocultural perspective on language learning. When taken together, the findings suggest that language learning in a classroom context is closely tied to the discursive practices by which learners interact with each other and their teacher. This article has noted how teachers play an important role in the development of learners’ competence in the FL. In a majority of the studies that have been reviewed, it is the teacher who determines and sanctions which kinds of speaking activities are carried out in the classroom and the kinds of questions that are posed to students. Thus, the structuring of interaction by FL teachers can either facilitate or inhibit interaction between teacher and students and among students with each other. However, as the research has shown, subtle changes within IRE and IRF sequences can allow for more extended discourse that affords learners more opportunities to participate in whole-class discussion and potentially advance proficiency.

Research on classroom discourse, when based on the sociocultural view of language learning, also suggests that learning to be a proficient FL speaker is fundamentally tied to the interactional activities in the classroom into which learners are socialized. More specifically, the grammatical, lexical, and other critical features of interactional competence take shape and have their origins within these interactions. Finally, broader sociocultural forces outside of the school context can affect how talk unfolds during FL instruction and can help researchers explain why interactions take place in the way they do in classrooms.

Directions for Future Research

Although a great deal of information has been learned about the nature of oral discourse in FL classroom contexts over the past several years, much more empirical work is needed. What follows are potential future research avenues in this area along with sample research questions.

First, given that much of the research on classroom discourse has been carried out in FL classrooms that focus on language-related issues, more research is needed to understand the nature of discourse patterns found in higher-level, content-based courses such as FL literature and culture classrooms. Additional work could also investigate the ongoing development of learners’ linguistic and interactional competencies in these upper-level, content-based FL contexts. This type of research could help shed light on the nature of advanced and superior language proficiency, which, in turn, could help inform FL methodologies for advanced or highly proficient learners in upper-level FL courses. Possible research questions to be explored include: How do highly proficient learners participate in class discussions with their teachers and peers? What are the features of discussions in upper-level, content-based classrooms where many of the learners may be highly proficient? Similarly, how do teachers structure class discussion when working with highly proficient learners?

Second, the majority of the studies reported here have examined the discourse patterns characteristic of FL classrooms. However, virtually none have dealt with the question of how teachers can be prepared to engage their learners in the types of discursive interactions necessary for advancing student proficiency. Future studies might investigate the following questions: How can language educators prepare teachers to become aware of discourse patterns in their classrooms? What types of professional development opportunities are needed to transform teacher discourse, for example, to help teachers incorporate less evaluative and more meaningful and discourse-sustaining feedback to students? Can teachers who use the IRE pattern be mentored or coached to integrate IRF into their classroom discourse? If yes, what are the most effective ways to coach teachers on their
discourse practices? These questions are essential and beg to be addressed if educators are to make progress in changing the IRE discourse pattern that, according to the research, appears to be so pervasive and prevalent in FL classrooms.

Third, much of the work on classroom discourse has been carried out in ESL language learning contexts while fewer studies have looked at FL classrooms. As such, future projects that look at FL classroom contexts would help fill this research void and enable better understanding of the nature of talk in FL language and literature classrooms. In addition, the paucity of research that investigates broader sociocultural factors present in a community and the resulting effects on how teachers and students interact with each other inside the classroom means that more work is necessary that makes a connection between larger societal influences and classroom talk. While some work on language socialization issues have begun to address these kinds of issues (e.g., Duff, 2002), much more effort is needed in this area. Questions to be investigated regarding this area could include the following: Do students’ socioeconomic factors affect how they use language and/or engage in class discussion in the classroom? Does the ethnic background of learners in a particular community affect how students interact with other students and with the teacher during whole-class discussions inside the classroom?

Fourth, the little research that exists on discourse found in language classrooms other than English has focused on the ubiquitous FL courses, such as Spanish and French. Thus, more work is needed to understand the discourse dynamics in classrooms of less commonly taught languages (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Japanese) and their effects upon learning. Given the difficulty of learning less commonly taught languages for students whose first language is English, at what point in the sequence of coursework can teachers and learners carry out a whole-class discussion? What are reasonable expectations regarding student participation in whole-class discussions in these FL classrooms? Are there culturally specific speaking conventions that are inherent in, for example, Japanese conversational routines that affect how discussion evolves in a Japanese-as-a-FL classroom?

Fifth, another possible project could entail an empirical investigation of the relationship between whole-class discussions among learners and their teacher and the second language reading comprehension of learners in second language literature courses. Specifically, little empirical evidence exists that analyzes the ways in which whole-class discussions facilitate learners’ comprehension (i.e., literal understanding of the events, characters, etc., and textual interpretations) of second language literary texts. What is the role of whole-class discussions in second language reading comprehension? Do learners understand literary texts better when participating in class discussions with their peers and/or teacher? Do whole-class discussions facilitate learners’ understanding of a text at an abstract/symbolic level?

Sixth, the majority of the studies reviewed here and in the FL classroom discourse literature overall have almost exclusively analyzed contexts in which adults are participating in the discussion. Few studies investigate classroom discourse issues where young learners (e.g., those in primary or middle school contexts) and their teachers engage in classroom discussions in the FL. What are the characteristics of whole-class discussion in second language reading comprehension? Do learners understand literary texts better when participating in class discussions with their peers and/or teacher? Do whole-class discussions facilitate learners’ understanding of a text at an abstract/symbolic level?
patterns (e.g., IRE or IRF patterns), by posing different types of questions to students, via a variety of questions, etc. While some demographic information about the teacher is provided in many studies, few have focused on the teacher’s linguistic abilities in the FL. Specifically, a seventh possible area of future research could include a project that investigates whether or not there is a relationship between a teacher’s level of proficiency in the FL and the kind of classroom discourse that occurs in the course. For example, if a teacher is less proficient in the FL, does this mean that students will participate less or more in whole-class discussion?

Finally, projects that investigate how the use of technology outside of the classroom context can potentially facilitate how learners orally interact inside the classroom may also be worthwhile research endeavors. Given the ubiquitous nature of Web 2.0 tools (e.g., social networking sites or text- and video-based chats) in the everyday lives of many learners, coupled with the fact that these kinds of technological applications can and will continue to shape the ways in which learners interact with each other and their teachers in their regular and academic lives, it may be worth pursuing research that seeks to understand how technology affects discourse both in and out of FL classroom contexts. Do tools such as class wikis or blogs used outside of class enhance in-class discussion? Can the aforementioned tools be used to successfully extend discussion beyond the physical classroom? How are these tools reshaping/re-conceptualizing what constitutes class discussion?

Regardless of future changes in teaching pedagogies and research methodologies, classroom discourse will continue to be an area of inquiry relevant to researchers and practitioners alike. As sociocultural theory continues to inform how educators understand language learning and teaching, the research agenda will also expand in this important area of investigation. My hope is that this review has provided a helpful view of what we know and what we have yet to learn about classroom discourse and the consequences of classroom interaction on student language learning.

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Notes
1. The scope of this review primarily focuses on work on classroom discourse in FL classrooms that has been carried out over the last decade in the United States. However, I have included some studies on classroom discourse that pre-date 2000 along with a few projects that were carried out in non-Western contexts because they are still relevant to this research area. Studies that did not make use of a sociocultural theoretical framework were not included in this review. However, some (Polio & Zyzik, 2009; Zyzik & Polio, 2008) are making valuable contributions to the classroom discourse literature while using interactionist perspectives on second language learning.

2. When referring to sociocultural views in this article, I am referencing both the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1987) and other sociocultural aspects of language learning, such as those found in research related to language socialization concerns. For an overview of various sociocultural perspectives, see Zuengler and Miller (2006).

3. As a reviewer correctly pointed out, van Lier’s (1998) claims are not based on empirical work. However, I feel that his views are respected by many SLA researchers and therefore relevant to any review on classroom discourse.

(a) **unfilled pauses or gaps**—periods of silence timed in tenths of a second by counting “beats” of elapsed time. Micropauses, those of less than 0.2 seconds, are symbolized (;); longer pauses appear as a time within parentheses: (0.5) is five tenths of a second;

(b) **colon (;)**—a lengthened sound or syllable; more colons prolong the stretch;

(c) **punctuation**—markers of intonation rather than clausal structure; a period (.) is falling intonation, a question mark (?) is rising intonation, a comma (,) is continuing intonation. A question mark followed by a comma (,?) represents rising intonation, but is weaker than a (?). An exclamation mark (!) is animated intonation;

(d) **equal sign (=)**—a latched utterance, no interval between utterances;

(e) **brackets ([ ])**—overlapping talk, where utterances start and/or end simultaneously;

(f) **percent signs (%)**—quiet talk;

(g) **arrows (> <)**—the talk speeds up; arrows (< >)—the talk slows down;

(h) **underlining** or **CAPS**—a word or SOUND is emphasized.

References


Wells, G. (1993). Reevaluating the IRF sequence: A proposal for the articulation of theories of activity and discourse for the


