

# Analysing Spoken Discourse in the EFL classroom

Christoph Suter, University of Birmingham, January 2002

## Module Four Assessment Task

SD/01/06

Record one of your (or a colleague's) English classes, and transcribe part of your data. Make an analysis of the transcribed data, using Sinclair and Coulthard's 'IRF' model (exchange, move, and act), similar to that given in *Classroom and Spoken Discourse* Unit 3, Commentary on Activity 6. Present your analysis as Part I of your assignment (50%). Comment on how easy/difficult it was to fit your data to the categories and why any difficulties arose. Present your commentary as Part II of your assignment.

## Contents

Introduction .....	3
Part I      Analysis of the transcribed data	
I.1        The teaching context of the analysed material	
I.1.1      The recorded lesson.....	3
I.1.2      The extracts transcribed and analysed.....	4
I.2        The presentation of the analysis.....	4
I.3        The analysis	
Extract I.....	5
Extract II.....	9
Part II     Commentary	
II.1       The structure of the commentary.....	11
II.2       Transactions.....	11
II.3       Exchanges	
II.3.1     Boundary exchanges.....	11
II.3.2     Teaching exchanges.....	12
II.3.3     Conversational exchanges.....	14
II.4       Some conclusions to be drawn for L2 teaching.....	15
Conclusion .....	17
Transcript	
Extract I.....	18
Extract II.....	20
References .....	22

## **Introduction**

For this essay, a classroom recording has been made of which a total of 10'35" have been transcribed and analysed. In part I, the context of the recording will be described in terms of the learning group and the learners' L2 proficiency level, and the overall structure of the lesson will be set out. Subsequently, the terminological basis of the discourse analysis of the transcribed text will be outlined and the analysis itself will be presented.

Part II of the essay consists of a detailed commentary on the preceding discourse analysis considering the elements of the rank scale on which the system of discourse analysis established by Sinclair and Coulthard is founded. Finally, I shall discuss some features occurring in the analysis in order to draw practical conclusions for L2 teaching.

## **Part I Analysis of the transcribed data**

### **I.1 The teaching context of the analysed material**

#### **I.1.1 The recorded lesson**

The material analysed in this essay was recorded in an evening class of adult learners at the Kaufmännische Berufsschule in Glarus, Switzerland. At the time, the class was working with „Headway pre-intermediate“. The recording obviously took place in December, the teacher alluding to a Santa Clause procession taking place outside the building at the same time.

The learning group was characterised by a rather mixed ability to speak English spontaneously, with learners from different backgrounds, including young professionals updating their foreign language knowledge, a teacher working for a qualification to teach English and learners wishing to prepare themselves for holiday trips in English speaking areas.

The teacher initiated the lesson with an introductory question leading to some worksheet activities to which she then carefully prepared the learners in order to make them work in pairs. This was followed by a checking sequence of pair work results. After that, the program continued with checking of some homework and some grammatical points introduced by the teacher on the basis of the textbook. Throughout the lesson, the teacher kept taking advantage of opportunities to chat casually with the class.

### **I.1.2 The extracts transcribed and analysed**

Two extracts from this lesson were chosen for transcription and analysis: the very first sequence of approximately seven minutes (Extract I in the transcript), and a sequence of about three minutes half an hour later occurring in the course of the checking of pair work results, from which a short teacher's narrative has been excluded (Extract II in the transcript).

Extract I is characterised by tight teacher control once the learners have shown not to be able to exploit the initial question more freely. In order to give the opportunity to speak some longer chunks of English, the teacher has worksheet instructions read out and asks for the respective first answers to worksheet tasks before she organises the class into pairs to continue work.

In extract II, the teacher asks the learners a personal question inspired by an exercise from the worksheet. The following transcribed extract shows traits of classroom language as well as casual conversation and ends with some features of non-verbal language.

### **I.2 The presentation of the analysis**

The system of analysis used in this paper has been adopted from Sinclair and Coulthard (1992, 5ff.), including the abbreviations, and the formatting chosen is similar to the one proposed in the course materials (*Classroom and Spoken discourse* Unit 3, Commentary on Activity 6). The lateral columns contain the teacher's utterances while the middle column shows learners' talk (this is also due to coincidence - there are no examples of learners' opening moves to be found in the data). Exchanges have been numbered for reference.

A small part of the transcribed data has shown to be difficult to fit into the system of analysis for its features of casual conversation rather than classroom language (exchanges 48/49 to 53). These exchanges have been analysed on the basis of categories of analysis for everyday conversation established by Francis and Hunston (1992, 125ff.), and the labelling of these moves and acts has been marked by the use of capital letters.

**I.3 The analysis**

**Extract I**







**Extract II**



## **Part II: Commentary**

### **II.1 The structure of the commentary**

Coulthard (1985) points out that no structure has been discovered yet for the lesson, the element on top of Sinclair and Coulthard's rank scale. The discussion of the transcribed data will thus be initiated by the second rank from the top of the scale, the transaction, and will proceed further down the rank scale to the exchange. Where the transcribed data leaves the ground of classroom language analysable by Sinclair and Coulthard's 'IRF' model because of its features of casual conversation, the discussion will be based on Francis and Hunston's model for the analysis of everyday conversation (Francis and Hunston 1992), as mentioned above.

### **II.2 Transactions**

In the transcript, markers of boundaries in the discourse are realised by just two items: 'ok' and 'all right' (exchanges 6, 14, 25, 32, 37, 41, 46, 54, 56). As a result, framing moves are easily detectable and a total of 11 transactions consisting of the following groups of exchanges can be identified (as boundary exchanges often can not clearly be labelled as preliminary or terminal they have been included in both the preceding and the following transaction):

- i. 1 to 6
- ii. 6 to 14
- iii. 14 to 25
- iv. 25 to 32
- v. 32 to 37
- vi. 37 to 41
- vii. 41 to 42 (incomplete)
- viii. 43 to 46
- ix. 46 to 54
- x. 54 to 56
- xi. 56 to 63 (incomplete)

### **II.3 Exchanges**

#### **II.3.1 Boundary exchanges**

It has been shown above that framing moves are realised exclusively by two heads: 'ok' and 'all right'. There is one more 'ok' to be found in exchange 9 which could also be seen as a boundary marker but

as it is immediately preceded by a framing and a focusing move I decided not to regard it as a marker of a frame but as belonging to the directive 'have a look on the right hand side'.

Exchange 54 ('Ok. It's very special.') faces the problem if it is to be divided into a framing and a focusing move, the latter to be regarded as conclusion, or if, as in my analysis, the second part is a comment. My decision here is based on the lack of the summarising function Sinclair and Coulthard attribute to the conclusion (1992, 21).

Several framing moves are followed by focusing moves realised either by conclusion or metastatement. Two focusing moves are particularly interesting:

- a. this is the idea, and I have a little review page with me today (7)
- b. I'm only asking the men, I assume no... no woman snores. (57)

In example a. the teacher elegantly includes both functions of a focusing move by referring to the preceding chunk of discourse and to the subsequent one. This move could thus also be regarded as two of them.

Example b. is ambiguous for its position in the discourse, several male learners having been asked already and another to be asked subsequently, a fact that made a clear definition of the act impossible - it might be regarded as a conclusion and a metastatement at the same time.

### **II.3.2 Teaching exchanges**

Eliciting exchanges consisting of three moves (i.e. elicitation - answering - follow-up) are not found very often in the data, typical examples for this include exchanges 4, 5, 23, 30, 31, 39. Exchange 61 is interesting in terms of the response being non-linguistic:

- T Does anybody have an answer for snoring? Do you have a trick to stop a person from snoring?  
 L (clicks his tongue twice)  
 T Yeah

The exchanges where the teacher makes pupils read out written instructions from the worksheet are problematic to fit into the model of analysis (e.g. 10 to 12, 16, 28): While the opening move seems to be a straightforward directive, there is a problem with the response, as Sinclair and Coulthard (1992,

19) describe the function of a directive being 'to request a non-linguistic response'. But albeit the response requested is linguistic, it does not consist of language generated by the learner. So one might argue that the teacher is not requesting the learner to say something, but to do something, and that the learner is not answering linguistically but by performing what the teacher has requested him to do<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, the teacher's follow-up evaluates exclusively (and logically) the learner's pronunciation and by no means any linguistic content of his or her utterance. This feedback is the at the same time interpreted by the learner as a directive to repeat what has been corrected, thus a directive opening move to a bound exchange to follow, for instance in exchanges 10 to 12:

- L ...there are ten more logical (pronounced wrongly) laws.  
 T logical laws  
 L logical laws.

More examples of bound exchanges include exchanges 18 to 21, 48, 59 where the teacher reactivates a preceding elicitation by re-initiating. At first, it seemed difficult to apply Sinclair and Coulthard's narrow set of possible head acts to these opening moves (elicitation, directive, informative, check; 1992,7), but if the head is accepted to be absent in a re-initiating move and can be identified in a former one, the application of Sinclair and Coulthard's premiss does not cause any further problems.

Another interesting point to consider is the teacher's opening of the lesson. The very first opening move is realised by an informative (although grammatically a question) which is supported by a visualisation on the board. Then the teacher asks her introductory question to the class which she then modifies until there is an encouraging reaction by a learner. As the nominated learner states not to be able to answer appropriately, the teacher goes on to modify her initial question and to provide more clues to the class in order to make it more comprehensible and answerable for the learners. This has been shown to be teacher behaviour occurring rather frequently in EFL classrooms (Chaudron 1988, 127ff.) and has been taken into consideration by Sinclair and Coulthard, they say that an elicitation immediately followed by another is 'pushed down' to act as a starter'(1992, 15). The surprising result of all this is that the function of the clause uttered by the teacher seems to be determined rather by the learners' reaction than by the teacher's decision.

<sup>1</sup> a similarity to Austin's work might be alluded to here (cited in Coulthard 1985, 13)

### II.3.3 Conversational exchanges

It has already been mentioned that one small part of the transcribed data does not fit into Sinclair and Coulthard's IRF model: A fortunate example of a learner having to say something personal and a teacher exploiting it in a natural, conversational way:

- T Walti, you? (i.e. 'Do you snore?'; bound exchange)
- L Er, seldom.
- T Seldom.
- L When I lie in a ... in a special, er, position then it could be I snore.
- T Do you know what the position is, when...?
- L Yeah, on the, er, when I'm on the back and the ... and the head a little bit, er...
- T What? What's your head? Your head's up? What's your head doing up?
- L With, er, with the pillow... with the pillow and the pillow... the pillow not in the correct position
- T Your head is ... is like this only your lying on your back
- L Like this, yeah.
- T It's a surprise you can breathe ... without snoring. Ok. It's very special.
- (Exchanges 48 to 54)

While the categories for analysing everyday conversation proposed by Francis and Hunston (1992) apply very well to the central part of this short extract (exchanges 50 and 51), the switch from classroom language (i.e. IRF) to casual conversation and back again is particularly interesting. In exchange 48 the teacher just repeats the learner's contribution, but the fact that she does not immediately proceed but waits for a short time is interpreted by the learner as an invitation to continue. I regard the teacher's act here as 'engage', albeit according to Francis and Hunston the function of this act is 'to provide minimal feedback while not interrupting the flow of the other participant's utterance': the actual L2 processing capacity of the learner leads to a considerable slowdown in the conversation. The teacher's short pause can thus be seen as initiating the following exchange and the learner's subsequent informing move enables the teacher to continue with an eliciting move which inquires information (The learner's preceding informing move is supported by non-verbal signs, a fact to be implied with the aid of the teacher's feedback: 'your head's up?').

Interestingly, this strategy used by the teacher to initiate some casual communication is countered later on by a learner's refusal to provide more linguistically exploitable information:

T Do you, Hans, do you snore?

L No.

T No. For sure not.

L Yeah. No.

T For sure not. Are you...

L I'm sure.

(Exchanges 58 to 60)

It has been pointed out by Sinclair and Coulthard that 'grammatical structure is not sufficient to determine which discourse act a particular grammar unit realizes' - and indeed the teacher's acknowledging move (exchange 50) is grammatically a question, but the subsequent opening move ('what's your head doing up?') shows it has not the function of a question here because the position of the learner's head is regarded as shared knowledge and not subject to checking. Exchange 51 Shows a similar structure (inquire - informative - reformulate), but again the feedback takes also the function of an initiation leading the learner to confirming the teacher's statement. The teacher's subsequent transitional move (exchange 53) takes the conversation back to more typical classroom language (according to the IRF model), a new transaction being initiated by a framing move (exchange 54).

#### II.4 Some conclusions to be drawn for L2 teaching

A closer look at the transcribed classroom language analysed in this essay reveals a number of striking features:

- The amount of teacher speech outnumbers the linguistic quantity of learners' contributions by far, a characteristic of teacher-led sequences: Willis (1996, 18) estimates the amount of time for the individual learner to speak the foreign language in teacher-centred lessons at half a minute.
- There seems to be a correlation between the type of question asked by the teacher and the complexity of the language uttered by learners (although the few examples present do not permit to speak of significance): When the teacher asks for information she does not know ('referential questions'), the learners are likely to produce utterances which are longer and more complex than answers to questions to which the teacher already knows the answer ('display questions')<sup>2</sup>, a fact supported by

<sup>2</sup> for a discussion on the issue of question types see Chaudron (1988, 126ff.)

recent research which has been able to show that referential questions as opposed to display questions encourage learners' oral language production (Brown 1994, 167. Chaudron 1988, 173. Nunan 1991, 194). In discourse analysis terminology, 'display questions' would be similar to the act labelled by Sinclair and Coulthard as 'elicitation', and 'referential questions' to Francis and Hunston's act 'inquire'.

- Despite some learners' relatively limited ability to utilise the second language spontaneously, communication breakdown does not occur in conversational sequences but rather when the teacher is trying to elicit information to fit into her planned lesson.
- Even where the transcript shows a conversational character, the teacher is in full control of the discourse, no turn-taking from the learners' side is manifested.

Taking into account these features apparent in the analysed data, a considerable difference between language in teacher-centred classroom work and spoken discourse outside the classroom is apparent. This emphasises the importance of complementary teaching tools to provide opportunities to learn and exercise the skills needed in everyday conversation situations. An interesting approach to harness discourse analysis to help learners meet the demands of oral communication has been put forward by Riggensbach (1999, 53-145).

Over and above that, there might be a possibility for teacher training programmes to include discourse analysis for the benefit of raising trainees' awareness of the gap between oral communication in and outside the classroom as well as the amount of language learners actually produce in an L2 lesson, an approach similar to grammar consciousness-raising activities which might complement some teacher training programme features proposed by Edwards (1996, 103) who recommends trainees to evaluate 'whether the learners ... are being given opportunities for real communication'.

## **Conclusion**

Sinclair and Coulthard's model of discourse analysis suggesting the three categories Initiation - Response - Feedback has shown to be a solid basis for analysing the data recorded and transcribed for this essay. While some scope of interpretation seems to be inherent to the subject, the model still provided clear guidelines for analysis in most of the cases. In the small part of the data where it seemed problematic to apply the 'IRF' model, Francis and Hunston's adapted categories for the analysis of everyday conversation were able to cope with the data.

To effectuate a discourse analysis on the basis of the 'IRF' model has shown to be of personal and professional interest to me from several points of view. It has provided some valuable insights on characteristics of teacher-centred classroom work in general as well as on my own teaching: it made me aware of what actually happens on the level of spoken discourse when I teach and, for example, what my preferred markers of a frame are ('ok', 'right'). While analysing the data, I was surprised at how little individual learners had said in the classroom, a fact which did not match my memory of the lesson. Albeit in the last decades many curricula have emphasised the importance of oral communication, efforts to take spoken discourse as a starting point to methodological approaches have met considerable difficulties, but after all it seems doubtful if teacher-centred forms are likely to be able to overcome the gap between communication in and outside the classroom. Therefore the insights gained from the work on the present essay will hopefully help not to lose sight of goals related to providing learners with opportunities to use language communicatively in the classroom and the need for the development of respective activities.

**Transcript**

**Extract I:** From the beginning of the lesson to 7'20''

- T Why don't you give me what you think about Murphy's law ... Murphy's law ... what do you know about Murphy's law, did you hear this before? Murphy's law? What's that? What's the idea behind Murphy's law? Who heard about Murphy's law before ... only Evie? yeah, Evie?
- L I can't explain
- T Is it? Can you trade it in german? you know ... it sounds familiar, you heard this before, but what it is, we're not clear ... ok. (writes on blackboard) if anything can possibly go wrong, it will. You can translate it into german ... if anything can possibly go wrong, it will. yeah?
- L (translates) wänn's ä möglicheit git as es falsch lauft, dänn lauft's falsch
- T ... dänn lauft's au falsch, yeah. Do you have something similar in german? ... a similar saying? Yes, George?
- L wänn's zweitelet so drittelets
- (laughter)
- T Yeah, that's good. Ok, this is the idea and I have a little review page with me today... on the right side we have variations of Murphy's law ... different situations. Ok, have a look on the right hand side... more logical laws ... and read me the beginning there. Marlis, can you start, please ... on the right hand side in puzzle 18.
- L (reads) it always starts raining as soon as you decide to leave your umbrella at home. in the (inaudible) below there are ten more logical (pronounced wrongly) laws.
- T logical laws
- L logical laws. But the first part of each one is with a wrong second part. For example „you always think of something else to write in a letter as soon as the mecha...
- T mechanic
- L mechanic arrives to repair it“ doesn't make sense. And for each first part find the correct second part. write the numbers with the correct letters.
- T ok, that's right... Frederick! (L comes in) I think it's a parking problem tonight, isn't it, with Santa Clause outside ... ok, let's do one together ... do one together ... read me the first part there, Evie ... „a“ on the left side ...
- L (reads) you always think of something else to write in a letter...
- T ok, who can find the correct ending for that sentence on the right side? Have a look down the list on the right side and what goes with that beginning ... what end goes with the beginning ... have

it? Hans, what do you say?

L ... as soon as you have sealed the envelope

T yeah, can you give me a good translation for „seal“?... the envelope is what ...

L ...with the letter into ...

T uh huh, ok, and when you seal it, when you lick, the envelope ... close it ... it's sealed. ok, that's your job on the right hand side, you connect the beginning and the end of these situations. On the left side you have a shopping list. Can you read me the instructions for the shopping list, George please?

L (reads)First put the missing letters into the words in these pictures, all the missing letters are vowels, a, e, a, o, oo...

T u, yeah, a, e, i, o and u. Who can find me one in that group that you can complete? We're missing only the vowels ... yeah? can you find one, George?

L ink

T ink. So we're missing an...

L i

T an i, right. Alright, now we go to the bottom half on the left side ... the bottom half of the left side... and Walti read me that part in the box, it starts „those ten words“

L (reads) those ten words are in this shopping list, but they are hidden because the list has been folded in half

T folded in half, can you show me that? Folded ... yeah ... folded in half ... and the box on the right side ... just to the right of that ... right ...

L (reads) write the complete shopping list here.

T ok, so we have ink, George said correctly number one is ink, and when we look at the shopping ... oops... on the left side ... what is the correct container for the ink? a carton, a tube, a tin, a bottle, a jar etcetera ... yeah?

L I think a bottle of ink.

T that's right, so you write a bottle of, and on the right side you enter ink. ok? Alright, so find a nice partner ... ( pair work is organised)

**Extract II:** 30'55" to 34'10"

- T Who snores in here? Who snores? Anybody?
- L I don't know...
- T You never had any complaints at home? Nobody snores? Do you snore, Frederick?
- L Yes, I snore.
- T Do you snore?
- L Yes.
- T Yeah? Ok, do you snore, George?
- L I never heard me.
- T Walti, you?
- L Er, seldom.
- T Seldom.
- L When I lie in a ... in a special, er, position then it could be I snore.
- T Do you know what the position is, when...?
- L Yeah, on the, er, when I'm on the back and the ... and the head a little bit, er...
- T (laughs) What? What's your head? Your head's up? What's your head doing up?
- L With, er, with the pillow... with the pillow and the pillow...(laughter) the pillow not in the correct position.
- T Your head is ... is like this only your lying on your back
- L Like this, yeah.
- T It's a surprise you can breathe ... without snoring. Ok. It's very special.  
... (teacher tells about her father's snoring, not transcribed)
- T Do you snore Louis?
- L I don't believe but my wife she say I do
- T She says you do, yeah. Ok. I'm only asking the men, I assume no... no woman snores. Do you, Hans, do you snore?
- L No.
- T No. For sure not.
- L Yeah. No.
- T For sure not. Are you...
- L I'm sure.

- T Does anybody have an answer for snoring? Do you have a trick to stop a person from snoring?
- L (clicks his tongue twice)
- T Yeah, what does this do, Frederick? I heard this the first time this year. (clicks her tongue several times)
- L I don't... I don't now (sic) ...
- T The reason behind ...
- L Because, er, but it work...
- T uh huh, uh huh

## References

- Brown, H. D. (1994) *Teaching by Principles*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Chaudron, C. (1988) *Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coulthard, M. (1985) *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Edwards, C. (1996) 'Learning to learn how to teach: developing expertise through experience'. In Willis, D. and Willis, J. (eds.) *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.
- Francis, G. and Hunston, S. (1992) 'Analysing everyday conversation'. In Coulthard, M. (ed.) *Advances in Spoken Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Nunan, D. (1991) *Language Teaching Methodology*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Riggenbach, H. (1999) *Discourse Analysis in the Language Classroom*. The University of Michigan Press.
- Sinclair, J. and Coulthard, M. (1992) 'Towards an analysis of discourse'. In Coulthard, M. (ed.) *Advances in Spoken Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Willis, J. (1996) *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. Harlow: Pearson.