Feedback and Repair Mechanisms in Selected English Essay Writing Classroom Discourse in Ilorin, Nigeria

Samson Olusola Olatunji*, Nurat Basambo-Salihu and
Benjamin Terzungwe Iorhemen

Abstract

Language classroom discourse is meant to empower learners for acceptable mastery of the skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical reasoning. Nigerian students have, however, been found to perform poorly in essay writing, suggesting deficiencies in classroom interactions. The focus on the Essay Writing aspect of English Language resulted from its overarching importance to every student's success in the whole subject, other school subjects and other life endeavours. Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse underpinned the study that investigated the influence of the social order, relations and identity on the empowerment of students to attain essay writing instructional objectives. Six Senior Secondary Classes II were randomly sampled in Ilorin Metropolis. A classroom discourse analysis protocol was used for data collection. Two Essay Writing lessons were observed for each class for ample data and to verify consistency of practice. A paucity of interactive feedback was observed. Student-self-made and fellow-learner-made repairs were outweighed by teacher-made repairs. A paradigm shift from teacher-dominated product-focused approach to the interactive process-based approach is recommended.

Keywords: *Feedback, student-self-made repair, fellow-learner-made repair, teacher-made repair, evaluation, interaction; correction, language skills*

Introduction

The study was conceived against the backdrop that the essence of language classroom discourse is to equip students with the language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The role of a skilled language teacher is not only to impart knowledge but elicit it. All pedagogic moves and acts should, therefore, be skillfully manipulated to make the learners fully engaged in participation rather than being mere passive receptors of knowledge and thus becoming users of the language skills. The types and quality of classroom interaction among the students on the one hand and between the students and their teacher on

* Corresponding author:
Samson Olusola Olatunji, Linguistic Immersion Centre, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. E-mai: olatunji.so@unilorin.edu.ng

the other significantly determine their success or failure to master the skills of a target language (Domalewska, 2015; Chen, Clarke & Resnick, 2015).

Extant literature, however, abound with evidence of perennial poor performance of Nigerian secondary school students in English essay writing. This is reported to be a major cause of their usual mass failure in the West African Examinations Council's-organised Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations. The importance of English essay writing is hinged on two factors. First, essay writing attracts the highest score when compared with other aspects of the subject. Second, other aspects of English Language examination, and indeed all other school subjects require good writing ability.

The poor writing of students is an indictment of the patterns of classroom discourse that English Language teachers deploy or use during their lessons. It is expected that where the discourse patterns facilitate meaningful interaction among students and their teachers, the students would be empowered to gain mastery of the writing skills. Where the discourse pattern is characterised by monologues and feedback as well as repairs are monopolised by the teacher, the students' ability to write proficiently is jeopardised

There is a paucity of evidence on individual students' classroom talk (Sedova, et al, 2019). This suggests that students' classroom talk is not a common occurrence in many classrooms, especially in the developing world. Notably, the monopoly of classroom talk by teachers in developing countries may not be unconnected with cultural superiority due to age and paucity of language learning facilities that can promote interactive activities in the language classroom.

It is from this background that this study was carried out to obtain primary data on the prevalent discourse patterns in English Language Essay Writing classes in selected secondary schools in Ilorin, Nigeria. It is hoped that this would highlight whatever aspects of the discourse patterns that should be retained and encouraged while pointing out what should be removed. Hopefully, the findings from the study would contribute to the efforts toward promoting pedagogically productive essay-writing discourse patterns in secondary schools.

Theoretical Framework

Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse underpinned this study. The foundation for the theory was laid in 1971 in an article "On the classification and framing of educational knowledge". It has subsequently been applied in several articles (1977, 1986, 1990, and

2005). This theory of rules and roles is found appropriate to this study which investigated the influence of the social order, relations and identity encouraged by English Language teachers on the empowerment of their students to attain English essay writing instructional objectives. Bernstein emphasises the role of the teacher's understanding of pedagogical relationship when making decisions among several options. One of the pieces of evidence of the theory's relevance to essay writing classroom discourse is the fact that other researchers (Rose & Martin, 2012; Mills & Exley, 2014) have applied it to their studies.

In this age of emphasis on dialogic teaching (Kim & Wilkinson, 2019, 70), classroom discourse is expected to have completely risen above teacher-centric monologues. Teachers should no longer be seen as needing to impart but elicit knowledge. The more the students are heard in classroom discourse, the better and more permanent their learning. Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse thus comes as a relevant tool to be applied in investigating how social order plays out in essay writing classrooms and its effects on learning outcomes.

Classroom Discourse in Research
The teacher's role in ensuring that instructional objectives in the classroom are achieved is great (Al-Smadi, & Ab Rashid, 2017). The extent to which the objectives of what a lesson will be achieved depends on the teacher's skills in making their classroom interactive and lively. Without this, students' learning would be superficial and short-lived; the desired relatively permanent change in linguistic behaviour, which is the goal of a language classroom, will not be achieved.

Classroom discourse has, therefore, become a popular research focus because it plays significant roles in students' mastery of subject-matters (Sedova et al, 2019). Learning is a dialogue-mediated social activity. Every participant in classroom discourse, teacher and learner alike, has a thought (individual thinking) to contribute to classroom discourse. Through dialogue, a sort of interaction between collective and individual thinking is fostered (Vrikki, Wheatley, Howe, Hennessy & Mercer, 2019).

Findings from a study carried out on 697 9th-grade Language Arts students in Czech middle schools by Sedova, et al (2019) show that increase in student talk time during classroom interaction results in significant improvement in students' subject-matter mastery. When teachers ask open-ended questions, their students' critical reasoning abilities are positively stretched and challenged to function with improved acumen (Sedova et al, 2019).

Among the significant aspects of classroom discourse that have attracted attention are the feedback and repair mechanisms stimulated by teachers. Teachers are to provide prompt and clear feedback to students when the latter contribute to classroom interaction in the forms of answers to questions or any other form of student talk. Teachers, too, need to have feedback from students in order to identify what to intensify, decrease or change in their teaching styles to maximise classroom resources. It is only in a classroom where students are encouraged to be active participants rather than passive receivers of knowledge that a teacher can expect any feedback from students.

Both children and adults make spontaneous repairs to their contributions in discourse situations (Cazden, Michaels & Tabors, 2017). So, the tendency for spontaneity should not be repressed in a classroom. If otherwise, the discourse can be described as unnatural and unproductive.

Students' critical thinking is enhanced when appropriate measures are put in place to replace teacher domination of discourse with student-initiated and dominated discourses. This is not a near-impossibility as the spectacles portrayed by what is widely practised in many classrooms suggest. Murphy, Greene, Firetto, Hendrick, Li, Montalbano, and Wei (2018) used mini lessons on discourse elements to achieve significant decreases in teacher-initiated discourse elements, and increase students' responsibility and critical-analytic thinking.

Materials and Methods

Discourse lessons in six Senior Secondary Classes II were randomly sampled in Ilorin Metropolis for observation. A classroom discourse analysis protocol was used for data collection. The protocol contains a list of feedback and repairs types identified in literature. The lesson period of forty-five minutes is divided into blocks of five minutes. The pedagogic moves within each sub-period of five minutes were recorded to determine the frequency and length of time each took during a lesson period.

Two essay writing lessons were observed for each class to obtain ample data and to verify the consistency of practice. The observation was done personally by the researchers.

As regards ethical considerations, each teacher's consent to have their classroom sessions observed and audio recorded was obtained. This was because of the need to play back each lesson and have the opportunity to cross-check earlier observations.

Qualitative analysis of teachers and students' contributions was carried out. Also, frequency counts were used to quantify the frequency of types of feedback and repairs that manifested in the lesson periods.

Findings
The Common Types of Feedback Observed
A preponderance of evaluative and corrective rather than interactive feedback was observed. Student-self-made and other-students-made repairs were much fewer than teacher-made repairs. This explains many students' inability to write independently during examinations. They are always reduced to passive listeners that cannot write essays without being supervised.

With evaluative feedback, the teacher accepts or rejects a student's contribution to classroom discourse and may sometimes comment on it. This helps students to have much data on the sources of strengths or weaknesses in their contributions. It also affords students the opportunity to avoid errors found in their evaluated contributions to classroom discourse. Evaluative feedback alone, however, cannot be adequate for effective pedagogy and interactive classroom.

Corrective feedback is the type in which the teacher points out the error in a student's performance and supplies a correct replacement. Some teachers, trying to offer further help, may provide an analysis of the source of the error (Noor, Aman, Mustaffa&Seong, 2010). This, however, still falls below the expected standard for students' lasting learning that can be positively transferred to future learning and task performance. Corrective feedback is damaging rather than edifying (Ellis, 2009).

The following excerpts from one of the lessons observed demonstrate corrective feedback:

Teacher: Between a teacher and a doctor, which is better?
Student A: Teacher
Teacher: Why?
Student A: (No verbal response)
Teacher: Always support your point with facts. A fool can stand up and say teachers are better than doctors. So, what differentiates you from a fool is what?

The foregoing exchange is capable of dampening a student's interest in attempting a lengthy conversation in class. It is noteworthy that there are many negative and counter-productive tendencies inherent in teacher-made feedback. Among them is the propensity for the students to be deliberately or inadvertently inattentive. This is one of the types of

manifestations of resistance in classroom discourse (Tian, 2020). Also, there is the possibility of the teacher's feedback being inadequate because the students are not encouraged to express themselves to the extent of revealing any peculiar cause(s) of the error. The teacher's correction would thus be based on over-generalised knowledge and assumptions rather than the specifics.

It is also pertinent to note the implied labelling of the student as a fool in the teacher's response that "A fool can stand up and say teachers are better than doctors. So, what differentiates you from a fool is what?" Other students, as much as their concerned classmate, can be discouraged from answering questions in the classroom.

If the students are to become independent writers of good essays, a paradigm shift in essay writing classroom discourse from the teacher-dominated product-focused approach to the interactive process-based approach should be encouraged. When teachers encourage student-self-made repairs and fellow-student-made repairs, the interaction fostered among the learners develops their social affective relationships skills and these greatly impact further language learning (Domalewska, 2015; Al-Smadi, & Ab Rashid, 2017). The essence of a language class is not to merely make the learners acquire the knowledge of the language but to also empower them to master how to use the language and this cannot be achieved with the teacher dominating the classroom discourse, and dishing out corrections without allowing the students to contribute to authentic discourse (Popescu, 2011).

The teachers' low expectation as regards feedback from students is obvious in the following excerpts. Their questions were framed in such ways that monosyllables or non-verbal responses would suffice:

Teacher: …so that the person will know what you're talking about and will not have to ask question. Do you understand?
Class: (Chorus) Yes!

Teacher: the picture of that thing you're describing will be painted vividly, clearly in the mind of the person reading your essay. Do you understand?
Class Chorus): Yes!

Teacher: You need to involve all your five senses or at least two of them in writing a descriptive essay. Any question, so far?
Class: (No audible response, the teacher continued the monologue).
Teacher: In an argumentative essay, you want your reader to agree with your thought. You want the reader to agree with what?

Class (Chorus): Your thought
Teacher: the difference is that in a debate, you deliver it orally. You deliver it what?
Class (Chorus): Orally
In an argumentative essay, the first thing is to greet. The first thing is to do what?
Class (Chorus): Greet
Teacher: In the Vocatives, the "C" of "The Chairman" should be what?
Class (Chorus): Capital letter
Teacher: The "P" of "The Panel of Judges"?
Class (Chorus): Capital letter
Teacher: To every argument, there are usually how many sides?
Class (Chorus): Two sides
Teacher: Even if you believe that doctors are better than teachers, the topic still remains the same. Don't change it. Just let your readers know you are opposing the motion. Do you understand that?
Class (Chorus): Yes.
Teacher: It is when you are concluding that you can now change the topic to doctors are better than teachers. Is that taken?
Class (Chorus): Yes

Any feedback like the foregoing lacks the capacity to make students stretch their language skills of listening, speaking and critical thinking. The monotonous patterns of the questions encourage superficial attention and mechanical responses from the students.

The chorused answers from the students cited so far are monosyllabic. Worse still, there were instances of chorused recitations of answers learnt by rote. The following is an example.

Teacher: In the course of your writing, use rhetorical questions. What are rhetorical questions?
Class (Chorus): Questions that don't necessarily require answers! (Note rote learning).
Teacher: Right! Questions that do not demand any answers! If you make use of rhetorical questions, it makes your essay very interesting.

The teacher's feedback to the correct but obviously memorised answer chorused by the students came in the form of one sharp "Right" followed by a repetition of the students' chorused answer. This type of feedback does nothing more than affirming the students' answer. It does not elicit any new thought or help expand or clarify an existing understanding of rhetorical questions. This type of teacher-made feedback is described as convergent by Mapplebeck and Dunlop (2021). It is like a unidirectional gift from the almighty knower (the teacher) to some unknowledgeable

and passive recipients (students). The divergent type of feedback from different participative students could have provided a sort of expanded discourse with abundant linguistic resources (Mapplebeck& Dunlop, 2021).

Teacher feedback mastery is a component of classroom management, which Solheim, Ertesvåg, and Dalhaug Berg (2018) have described as a critical pedagogical skill without which a teacher cannot maximise the potentials of classroom discourse. Teacher feedback is response on performances and it can come in forms of "feed up" when it is goal-oriented or "feed forward" when it provides direction for the next step (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Instances of teacher feedback that performed no feed up or feed forward acts were observed, thus being obviously accidental rather than directed at any instructional goal.

In all of the 12 lessons observed, there was only one instance of student-initiated probe. The teacher, however, gave feedback in a monologue rather than using it as a prompt for a meaningful and insightful discussion and discovery through student-dominated interaction with minimal teacher guidance. The following excerpt illustrates it.

Student B: Are we allowed to write figures or letters to represent numbers in an essay?
Teacher: No. You should not. Just as you should not write figures in continuous writing. Write t-h-r-e-e, not figure 3.

A teacher of language skills who understands that teaching is not about merely telling students facts would have redirected the student's question to the class. There could have been diverse feedbacks. This could have made the discourse interesting. Most importantly, the resultant learning could have been much more certain and permanent than what happens when students are merely given a correct answer to what seems a difficult question.

Feedback is meant to aid formative assessment (Eriksson, Boistrup & Thornberg, 2018). Formative assessment is however an impossibility without appropriate feedback (Mapplebeck & Dunlop, 2021). It is unfortunate that the observed classroom sessions show that the teachers were unaware of this importance and necessity of appropriate feedback. This is not peculiar to the teachers that participated in this study. As observed by Mapplebeck and Dunlop (2021) after 38 hours of lesson observations, interviews with 10 teachers and 84 students, the types of feedback that students find most catalytic to pedagogic success are the least employed by teachers.

Appropriate feedback in classroom contexts sometimes require students to take particular actions rather than speak mere words (William, 2011). The type of feedback that requires more than mere words did not feature in any of the classroom sessions observed. This shows gross underutilisation of the potential benefits of adequate feedback. The following excerpt typifies this pathetic reality:

Teacher: When writing a narrative, you're permitted to use hyperbole. What is hyperbole?
Students: (No response. But a girl raised her hand to show readiness to answer the question)
Teacher: (speaking generally to the class) What are you using your heads to do? I know you don't read at all. You're tired of education! (Then facing the girl whose hand had remained up) Mary (Not real name)! Are you sleeping? '*O ya*,' answer me. (Note the Yoruba-English codemix).

Oral feedback in classrooms usually takes the form of triadic dialogue manifested as initiation-response-feedback (IRF). The teacher performs the initiation in a question form, the student responds and the teacher provides the feedback. All these require skills from both teacher and students before the classroom interaction can flow smoothly and produce great learning. The teacher's feedback in the following, however obviously lacks the skill required to adequately reinforce their response because it does not particularly confirm the response:

Teacher: You must not forget to write a clear conclusion to your essay. The conclusion is very important. A clear conclusion is what?
Class (Chorus): very important!
Teacher: Is that clear? Any question?
Before any verbal response, the teacher moved on.

Repair Mechanisms Observed
Every participant in a discourse context finds himself or herself in situations that require repair. Repairs, or repairs trajectory, according to McHoul (1990), is illustrated as trouble + initiation + correction, meaning there is a fine line between repair and correction. Therefore, both teacher and students sometimes need to have their errors repaired by self or others.

Repairs play important roles in ensuring effective communication. Ardini (2015) thus investigated teacher repair mechanisms in an EFL classroom in Semarang. The focus of this study, however, is not teacher repair but student repair. This is because in a teaching-learning context, students' activities are of utmost importance.

During one of the classes observed, Student A was asked to read a particular page in their textbook. As student A continued reading, the teacher interrupted intermittently, sometimes saying "Wait! Wait!", to explain some points in the reading or correct the reader's mispronunciation of some words, after which the reading continued. These were examples of teacher repair that are of no pedagogic value.

A few instances of student-student repairs were also observed. A student was reading aloud to the class while the others silently read along with their eyes on their copies of the textbook.
Student A (reading): … while arguing your audience.
Class (corrected her in chorus): Urging! Urging!
Student A: (takes the correction by repeating "urging your audience….)

This scenario is a demonstration of how deformed the students' sense of turn-taking had been rendered over time by their teacher's nonchalance to the need to foster appropriate discourse patterns in class and thereby increasing the students' discourse competence. Discourse competence, according to Ardini (2015), is an important component of the communicative competence that an English-as-a-Second/Foreign-Language class aims at achieving in students. In a classroom where decorum is upheld, the other students would not have chorused their repair of their classmate's wrong reading of the word "urging" as "arguing". That the teacher saw the scenario as normal reveals a lot about what she had taught them to see as an ideal discourse pattern. There was thus no opportunity for any diagnosis of the cause of that misreading. The preponderance of chorused responses from the students in all the observed lessons show gross lack of a vital repair.

A scenario occurred in which all forms of interaction that could provide opportunities for feedback and repair were replaced with lengthy note-taking as in the following:

Teacher: Any question?
Students: (no response)

The teacher then started writing notes on argumentative essays on the chalkboard for the students. This type of scenario played out during four of the twelve lesson periods observed. Each of the note-giving sessions lasted not less than twenty minutes of the forty to forty-five minutes of each lesson period. This means for about half of a forty-minute lesson period, there was no discourse. The teacher was engrossed in note-giving and the students were absorbed in note-taking.

Quantitative Analysis

It is necessary to provide some quantitative analysis of the observed discourse features in order to have a comprehensive and, at the same time, concise representation of the discourse type and quality in the observed classroom sessions. This will give a mental picture of the frequency of manifestation of each phenomenon under consideration.

Table 1: Quantitative Summary of Feedback and Repair Types in the Essay Writing Classrooms

Speech Act	Type	Source/Participant	Frequency		Average
Feedback	Evaluative	Teacher	287		100%
		Student	0	287	0%
	Corrective	Teacher	51		100%
		Student	0	51	0%
	Interactive	Teacher	6		100%
		Student	0	06	0%
	Unlabeled	Teacher	18		37.5%
		Student	30	48	62.5%
Repair	Student-self-made		10		17.24%
	Fellow-learner-made		13	58	22.41%
	Teacher-made		35		60.35%
Total				415	100%

Table 1 shows a total of 282 evaluative feedback cases that were observed and all of them came from the teachers. A total of 51 corrective feedback cases occurred and all were carried out by teachers. Only 6 interactive feedback cases were initiated by the teachers in all of the observed classroom discourses. Some instances of feedback are tagged "unlabeled" because they did not conform to any of the feedback types discussed in literature. An example of such feedback is "A fool can stand up and say teachers are better than doctors. So, what differentiates you from a fool is what?" In another example, a student gave an obviously incorrect answer to a question. The teacher's feedback was in form of a caustic stare followed by "Who can answer the question?" Also, classified as unlabeled feedback are instances of students "responding" to their teachers' questions in silence.

It is noteworthy that the instances of feedback during the observed lessons totaled 386 and only 6 (which is 1.55%) was interactive. A preponderance of evaluative and corrective rather than interactive feedback was observed. Student-self-made and fellow-learner-made repairs were outweighed by teacher-made repairs. This mirrors one of the discourse errors responsible for the schools' inability to make efficient writers out of their students. True and unhindered discourse is limited in essay writing classrooms.

A total of 58 repairs were observed, only 23 of which were made by the students (10 self-made and 13 fellow-student-made). This portrays inadequate student activity, a factor that may render the students perpetually teacher-dependent in essay writing endeavours. It is noteworthy that teachers are more culpable in this than their students.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that discourse patterns in the essay writing classrooms observed were mostly teacher-dominated. The students were not adequately tasked to make frequent and lengthy verbal contributions to the pedagogic activities. The power relation, rules and roles advocated in Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse are being violated in the essay writing classrooms. This is evidence of inappropriateness of the teachers' pedagogic choices. Improved discourse patterns would provoke increased student participation. This is the way to enhance the student's capacity for independent essay writing.

Recommendations

1. English Language teacher education programmes should place more emphasis on discourse analysis. The content of the courses should go beyond mere descriptions of possible discourse patterns to emphasise ideal discourse patterns for greater pedagogic results, how such discourse patterns can be engendered, factors that can militate against them and how to mediate such factors.
2. Promotion of teachers, especially English Language teachers, should be based on comprehensive assessment of their competence in classroom activities. This will make them attach more seriousness to their pedagogic moves in their classrooms.
3. Regular refresher courses with emphasis on facilitative classroom discourse patterns should be organised for the teachers to keep abreast with the latest discoveries in the use of appropriate discourse patterns for Essay Writing.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Author Biographies

Samson Olusola Olatunji is a Senior Lecturer in the Linguistic Immersion Centre, University of Ilorin, Nigeria. His research interests are in language classroom dynamics, language policy and practice, as well as computer-assisted language pedagogy. His recent publication is Perceived Influence of Terminology on Behaviour; Examples of Selected English and Yorùbá Terms. In *Terminologies en langues Africaines: pratiques actuelles et perspectives pour la promotion des patrimoines, la science, l'enseignement et les productions spécialisées*, ublished by Université d'Abomey Calavi, Laboratoire de Dynamique de Langues es Culture à Calavi & Faculté des Lettres, Langues, Arts et Communication, Republique de Benin.

Nurat Basambo-Salihu is a lecturer in the Department of English, University of Ilorin, Nigeria. Her research focus includes English Grammatical units and Discourse analysis. Her recent publication is Punctuation: Common Types. In *Fundamentals of the Use of English*. Sola T. Babatunde, Victoria A. Alabi, Taofiq. A. Alabi & Wahab O. Egbewole (Eds). Published by the General Studies Unit, University of Ilorin.

Benjamin Terzungwe Iorhemen is a postgraduate student in the Department of Arts Education, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. His research interests are in language teaching and learning, discourse studies, English grammar as well as psychology. His recent publication is The Opportunities and Challenges of Teaching and Learning English Language in the Covid-19 Era. (Journal of the English Scholars Association of Nigeria; with S. Wasagu).