



Analysis of EFL student-teacher discourse during collaborative board game play

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KEY POINTS

Background: Analysis of classroom discourse between learners and teachers has revealed power asymmetry in many learning situations.

Aim: Investigate the discourse and power dynamics of an EFL lesson where the instructor played a collaborative boardgame alongside two learners.

Methods: Sinclair and Coulthard's model of classroom discourse was used, primarily at the level of move, act, and exchange to analyse a transcript of a lesson.

Results: Instructor dominance of the discourse was found. Sinclair and Coulthard's model was useful for revealing this, however the nontraditional use of a board game introduced several areas where the model fit was less strong.

Conclusion: The study highlights the tendency toward teacher dominance of discourse. The results suggest that this dominance might be shifted by letting students play and teach a game that the instructor doesn't know. Sinclair and Coulthard's model provides a framework for comparing even nontraditional pedagogical situations.

TWEET Synopsis

Analyzing the discourse of a game-based EFL lesson revealed teacher dominance, even during a collaborative board-game. Awareness of the Initiation-Response-Follow-up (IRF) sequence and how game turn structure interacts with talk may help make the most of these types of lessons.

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1. Introduction

This study explores the interactions between a teacher and two pupils in a game-based English language lesson using Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975/1992) framework for analyzing classroom discourse. Their model, despite being originally developed fifty years ago and based in a different context, demonstrates its relevance in illuminating the power dynamics at play in managing communication in a pedagogical setting. I will first review the most relevant literature to the analysis and context, then examine the fit of the model to the data collected. Finally, I will address the usefulness of the model for understanding classroom communication.

2. Literature review

This section will first review play in the context of classroom learning and the tensions that emerge therein between learners and teachers. Then a brief review of the literature on classroom discourse will follow. Finally a more fine-grained review of how classroom discourse has been studied in and around games and play will conclude the section.

2.1 Mediating learning through play

Play has been closely associated with learning for decades (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Some scholars suggest that to play is to learn (Singer et al., 2006). Playful use of language has been theorized as a potent means of language learning (Cook, 2000). Of course in early childhood education especially, free play in the classroom and on the playground are a prominent aspect of school. Some teachers (and students) also seek to integrate play into classroom learning. Indeed, research has shown that for younger learners, learning outcomes from play can be better when teachers guide it (Skene et al., 2022).

Playful educational theorists have recently highlighted conditions that enable meaningful guided learning through play, even beyond primary school settings. From the perspective of assessment design, Kim and Saplan (2024) identify needs for freedom and autonomy, a sense of safety, flexibility, and growth-mindset among others. From the perspective of curriculum and learning environment design, York (2023) and deHann & York (2025, pp. 85–87), lay out a framework called "SPACE", an acronym which unpacks as, Safe, Participation, Agency, Critical, and Experiences. Each aspect can be further broken down into sets of concepts. Safe includes learning from failure, inclusive, competence, and supportive. Participation includes society, community, choice, self-direction, culture. Agency includes autonomy, freedom, dialogue, and interaction. Critical includes challenge, reflective, interdisciplinary, purposeful. Experiences includes relatedness, identity, relevant, meaningful. Taken together, these frameworks call for teachers to accommodate learner needs while giving opportunities to participate in play. Specifically, learners need to be free to make choices, critically observe the results, and adapt their approach if they like. The choices and results must also be somewhat free from real-world consequences. To give learners space to play then, implies providing opportunities and conscientiously managing, but not overcontrolling the learning process.

Yet, many of these needs and conditions for learning through play are at odds with the circumstances learners often find themselves, especially in formal learning contexts. How are teachers to balance their needs to structure lessons to meet learning targets and keep to a schedule when to learn through play means to relinquish that control and give students choice? As Mardel et al. (2023, p. 20) suggest, the lesson or curriculum can be dynamic, such that at times freedom is given to explore through play, and then structure reintroduced, and the lesson reoriented to the learning objectives. There are numerous approaches that teachers and curriculum designers have taken to navigate this tension in the power dynamics of pedagogical situations while actively incorporating play or playful activities as a means of learning.

One approach to improving targeted learning outcomes is to integrate the learning into the game design. The product of this approach is what are often called learning games, educational games, or serious games. Interestingly, while these games do seem to improve learning outcomes, they have been seen to fail at increasing motivation (Wouters et al., 2013). It might be argued that offloading the responsibility for teaching onto the materials reduces teacher engagement and thereby reduces

student motivation as well. To this point, Wouters et al. (2013) found that one primary positive moderator of the effects studied was supplementary instruction by the teacher. Alternatively, many of these serious games might just not be fun. Furthermore, finding and providing the specific game needed for any given aspect of a curriculum may be a challenge for teachers and curriculum designers.

Another approach to mitigating the problem is to take elements of games which have been shown to increase engagement, like badges, competitive leaderboards, awards, and points, and wrap otherwise normal classroom activities in these game-like trappings. This approach is termed gamification (Deterding et al., 2011). Gamification of learning has been shown to increase cognitive, motivational, and behavioural learning outcomes, but the motivational and behavioral outcomes were not necessarily stable over time (Sailer & Homner, 2020). The increased engagement with the targeted material is brought about by means of shiny, distracting, game-like elements, very much akin to sugar-coating a bitter medicine. This approach undermines learner autonomy (York et al., 2022) in an insidious way by exploiting human psychology much in the same way that corporate marketing and social-media platforms do.

Some teachers and researchers have reacted to the deceptive approach of gamification (York et al., 2022) and even to setting the primary focus on learning as opposed to teaching as in game-based learning (York et al., 2021). Unlike these approaches, ludic language pedagogy explicitly considers the role of the teacher in learning with play (deHaan & York, 2025). Teachers can integrate pedagogy and ludic practices through established pedagogical methodologies like task-based language teaching, project-based learning, or the pedagogy of multiliteracies (Spano et al., 2021); teaching materials like worksheets and explainer slides; and mediation of learning before, during, and after gameplay (deHaan, 2023; York & deHaan, 2021). Further, they can actively build their classrooms into “playgrounds” (deHaan & York, 2025, pp. 89–110). This idea of a playground goes beyond the physical environment to contrast with classrooms that serve as factories, shaping learners into products of the educational process towards a predetermined role in society, which is perhaps the underlying cause of power disparity.

I have attempted to show the tensions present in learning and teaching situations involving play. These tensions arise because of differing needs between learners, teachers, and stakeholders and goals that are sometimes at odds. Even well-intentioned approaches suffer pitfalls in design, and in the classroom much uncertainty remains due to the dynamic nature of interaction within a lesson. The following section will attempt to illustrate how this interaction further affects learner and teacher power and agency.

2.2 Classroom Discourse

The communication that goes on within a classroom has attracted considerable scholarly attention since at least the 1970s (Mchoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975/1992; and see reviews by Gardner, 2019; Hall and Walsh, 2002; Skidmore, 2016), much of this building on research about everyday communication (Sacks et al., 1974) and the work of Halliday (1961). Studies have investigated such aspects as its extent, quality, structure, and its relation to learning opportunities, learning outcomes, socialization of learners, and also the roles and relationships of those involved.

In their study, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975/1992) – henceforth S&C – developed a model describing the structure of language used in classroom lessons. The model breaks a lesson down into a hierarchy of elements, beginning with transactions, composed of a bounded series of exchanges between speakers, the moves within those exchanges, and the specific communicative acts constituting those moves. In the levels below transactions, they found eleven categories of teaching exchanges which include some combination of opening, answering, and follow-up moves, and a distinct boundary exchange composed of framing and focusing moves. Finally, they described twenty-two distinct acts occurring in their data. Table 1 expands Skidmore's (2016) summary of the model to include the varieties of teaching exchanges described by S&C.

One particularly influential aspect of S&C was the identification of the structure of the teacher elicit exchange, which some have claimed to be a typical pattern of pedagogical communication (Gardner, 2019; Lyle, 2008). This structure, consisting of a teacher's opening or initiating move, a learner's reply, and a follow-up by the teacher, is often referred to as an IRF sequence. This sequence has been

criticized as limiting learners' involvement and thereby learning opportunities (Lyle, 2008; Walsh, 2002). They argue that the asymmetry in power due to teachers' institutionally granted authority (Zuengler, 2011) and positioning as transmitters of knowledge lead to teachers using the follow-up move to shut down learners' participation and instead maintain the speaking turn (Hall and Walsh, 2002). However, as Hall (2022) notes, this role is not necessarily static, and teachers also use the follow-up move to manage learning by judging what the learners know and where to direct their attention. Others have also defended the IRF when the follow-up move is used to further engage learners (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Zhu et al., 2025). Learners, though, are not always passive, but learn to exploit known patterns of interaction, sometimes selfishly (Zuengler, 2011) or exert agency through playful use of language to shift roles, playing at being the teacher or offering chastising evaluations (Waring, 2013).

Table 1 A system for analyzing classroom discourse (adapted from Skidmore, 2016)

Item	Types
Lesson	(Unspecified)
Transaction	Informing, directing, eliciting
Exchange	Boundary, teaching (Teacher inform, teacher direct, teacher elicit, pupil elicit, pupil inform, check, re-initiation after no response, re-initiation after incorrect response, listing, reinforce, and repeat)
Move	Opening, answering, follow-up, framing, focusing
Act	Marker, starter, elicitation, check, directive, informative, prompt, clue, cue, bid, nomination, acknowledge, reply, react, comment, accept, evaluate, silent stress, meta-statement, conclusion, loop, aside

2.3 Interaction during game play

Where language play may enable learners' agency in the dynamic classroom discourse, formalized play through games may also provide opportunities for learners to enact more agentive roles than traditional teacher-centered learning environments. Formal games, being an inherently rule-bound form of play, preallocate the expected turn structure of interaction (Hofstetter, 2021). Thus, whereas the classroom situates the teacher as the one in charge of dealing out rights to speak and take turns, games offer an alternative structure, usually oriented toward the rule-dictated *game turns*. How players use their right to speak may depend on their knowledge of the game (Kobayashi et al., 2014), linguistic ability (Smith, 2006), personality, and the composition of the group of players (Shih et al., 2022). A teacher-like expert-novice role relationship often emerges, even among peers, in both learning to play and playing the games (Xu et al., 2011), especially in the case of educational games. Some educators have explored these interactional relationships (Luk, 2013; Reed, 2024) in attempt to exploit potential affordances such as peer scaffolding and increased participation of some learners in peer groups who are reluctant to engage in teacher-student interactions (Poole et al., 2019; Reid, 2024; H. Smith, 2006; H. J. Smith, 2007). Fewer studies, if any, have explored the interaction between teachers and students playing board games together, as was the situation studied in this study. However, as discussed above, teacher participation in classroom discourse has been theorized as potentially unbalancing power and limiting student agency. This study aimed to explore the extent to which this happened.

3. Context

The context of the lesson analyzed in this study is one of my own extracurricular, private English tutoring lessons in rural Japan. The learners were both female high school students who had attended such English lessons with me since they were in elementary school. I believe we have rapport (Hamilton, 2021) and a generally positive teacher-pupil relationship, although that is based on my perspective as their teacher and my communication with their parents.

They had both passed the EIKEN grade 2 test, which is roughly at the CEFR B1+ level (*Research | EIKEN | Eiken Foundation of Japan*, n.d.). Although much of our lesson work was test-oriented, we also had done a variety of other communicative activities. We often used recordings in class to review speaking, so the experience of being recorded was not especially novel for anyone involved, although this was the first time we recorded an entire lesson.

For this particular lesson, the students chose a collaborative board game from a selection of several options, discussed the rules, played the game, reflected on the experience, and then examined the vocabulary and language appearing on the game components in more detail. The game we played, *Forbidden Island* (Leacock, 2010), is an adventure board game requiring collaboration for a group victory. The game prescribes a turn structure for each individual player:

1. Take up to 3 actions.
2. Draw 2 Treasure deck cards.
3. Draw Flood cards equal to the Water level.

Rules extract (Leacock, 2010, p. 4)

The rules encourage cooperation and do not prohibit players from discussing their decisions with each other. There is no hidden information between the players themselves, so all the players can completely share their knowledge.

4. Methodology

The two-hour lesson was recorded using a laptop web camera and built-in microphone. The learners were consulted in advance, and consent for recording and use of the transcript was received. The recording was transcribed using Subtitle Edit (Olsson, 2014/2024). A preliminary transcription was created using the "Audio to text (Whisper)" feature, which implements automatic speech recognition. "Purfview's Faster Whisper" engine was used with the medium model and Japanese language chosen, which accommodated both English and Japanese speech. Upon review, I found that the settings achieved a relatively accurate result. Nevertheless, it contained inaccuracies in language and timing and did not produce annotations of speaker or non-verbal discourse like gestures and eye contact. Thus, this transcription was edited for accuracy and to annotate as many of those features as possible. Nonverbal activity was surrounded with less than "<" and greater than ">" characters, and overlapping speech was indicated with a left open bracket "[". Time codes were adjusted to reflect the speech included. Japanese language was left untranslated, but translations and transliterations have been provided in extracts below. Names were replaced with pseudonyms or "Teacher".

The camera angle did not always capture the students' actions, as they were often out of the frame. Furthermore, the microphone seemed to miss a number of utterances. Where identified, these were labeled "(inaudible)" or "(incomprehensible)". These technical issues could have relatively serious implications for the accuracy of the transcript, however the teacher's speech and non-verbal actions were in the direct line of the camera and microphone and seem to have been picked up sufficiently. This provided considerable support in identifying instances of speech missed by the microphone, because the teacher's reactions were visible.

The close review of the transcript permitted familiarization with the data and enabled selection of parts of the transcript to further analyze. Ultimately, a sample of different parts of the lesson including seemingly different types of discourse were chosen. The chosen parts of the transcript were then analyzed using Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975/1992) model of classroom discourse.

Segmenting the transcript into the ranks of discourse described by S&C, primarily exchange, move, and act, involved careful comparison of the described structures of those elements with the recording and text of the transcript. At the lowest level, acts are described based on their function in the discourse, the intonation with which they are delivered, and examples of how they are realized in terms of lexis. Notably, some acts were given novel labels (request for clarification, echo, agree, narrate), as they did not neatly fit the categories given in S&C. These will be discussed more in the following section. At the second-lowest level of the model, moves are described based on their function and structure in terms of combinations of particular types of acts. In many cases the structure of a move

may or may not include some acts. Finally, exchanges are described based on their function and their structure made up of combinations of particular types of moves. Higher levels of the model did not play a major role in the current analysis.

5. Discussion of analysis

Much of the literature on classroom discourse describes formal mandatory school classroom environments (Hall & Walsh, 2002; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975/1992; Zhu et al., 2025; Zuengler, 2011), which typically have larger class sizes than the two students in this study. Since the setting of S&C differed, one aspect of this study was determining how useful the model was for describing and understanding discourse in this particular small-scale, extracurricular context. Further, in this particular lesson the use of a board game introduced a less often described discourse situation.

5.1 Model fit

Much of the lesson consisted of the teacher (me) talking and the students' minimal responses. Thus, in terms of proportion of the time spent talking, a large majority easily fit S&C as teacher inform exchanges. These exchanges are those the teacher initiates by sharing some information with the students, the students may or may not respond, and there is no feedback (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975/1992, p. 26). However, some parts of the lesson did not fit as easily, and these in particular will be discussed below. While there were many interesting peculiarities in the discourse, I have selected what I think are the most noteworthy for discussion.

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First, I will show how some of the discourse fit well with the categories of act, move, and exchange. In Extract 1, the teacher marks a boundary in the discourse and focuses the learners' attention to the materials, then begins to explain the process of setting up the game. The learners acknowledge the informative move with minimal responses. Unlike the situation S&C (1975/1992, p. 16) describe, where a large number of students required strict protocols of nomination and bidding, the small scale of two learners sitting beside the teacher in this context permits a more direct back-and-forth including answering moves from both learners. In fact, it seems that the default in this situation was that both students responded. As seen in Extract 2, when one student does not answer, this prompts an elicitation and further re-initiations by the teacher.

Extract 1

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Boundary)					
00:08:40:04 - 00:08:41:12	Teacher:	Alright,	marker and silent stress	head	Framing
		so	marker	signal	Focusing
00:08:43:05 - 00:08:46:02	Teacher:	First, we can look at the back, get a general idea.	metastatement	head	
Exchange (Boundary)					

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
00:08:47:01 - 00:08:52:09	Teacher:	We'll put these tiles in a shape like an island. <points to box art>	informative	head	Opening
	Ana:	Mm mm.	acknowledge	head	Answering
	Honoka:	Mm mm.	acknowledge	head	Answering

Next, Extract 2 shows how the data mostly fit the model as described, though with some difficulties. First, the teacher begins an informative exchange and uses a starter, assuming the students' knowledge of a movie character, but upon receiving an unexpected negative reply, he reformulates as an elicitation with a clue incorporating the students L1, Japanese. This is met with an elaborated reply. This sequence exactly mirrors the pattern of third turn repeats in meaning-and-fluency contexts identified by Park (2014) in teacher-student interactions. This shows how the turn-taking patterns align with the epistemic status between teachers and students, that is who knows what and who knows they know it.

The teacher accepts the reply with a re-formulated recast of the student's incomplete utterance, and then quickly re-initiates with a request for confirmation. This act is not represented in S&C, which expects a prompt, clue, or nomination. An elicit could stand in its place, to which the students confirm in reply that they are in fact not very familiar with the character. This is met with a paralinguistic evaluative sigh, to which the students laugh, presumably recognizing the teacher's displeasure with the situation. This laughter may be a reaction caused by social discomfort or uncertainty, but likely emerged as a result of playful student-teacher rapport. This paralinguistic laughter is arguably part of the discourse as well, however it is hard to incorporate into the model, as a reaction does not fit in the move or exchange structure described. The context of S&C may have been humorless, but this exchange demonstrates humor resulting in part from teacher-student rapport (Hamilton, 2021). The teacher then goes on to inform the students of their missing cultural knowledge and the L1 gloss for relevant new vocabulary as well.

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Extract 2 *Transliterations of Japanese text given in "[]".*

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Teacher Inform)					
00:05:40:00 – 00:05:45:07	Teacher:	So,	marker	signal	Opening
		you know Indiana Jones	marker	pre-head	
	Honoka:	うーん [negative reply]	reply	head	Answering
Exchange (Teacher Elicit)					
	Teacher:	You don't know?	elicit	head	Opening

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
		インディージョーンズ？[indii joonzu]	clue	post-head	
00:05:45:11 – 00:05:48:04	Ana:	I've heard	reply	head	Answering
	Teacher:	You've- You've heard of it,	accept	pre-h	Follow-up
Exchange (Re-initiation)					
	Teacher:	but you've never watched?	request for confirmation / elicit	head	Opening
	Ana:	Uhh yes.	reply	head	Answering
00:05:49:07 – 00:05:53:11	Teacher:	<sigh>	evaluate	head	Follow-up
	Honoka and Ana:	<laugh>	react		
Exchange (Teacher Inform)					
	Teacher:	So	marker	signal	Opening
		Indy Jones is an archaeologist	informative	head	
Exchange (Teacher Inform)					
	Teacher:	Archaeologist means 考古学者 [kokogakusha].	informative	head	Opening
	Honoka:	Mm mm.	acknowledge	head	Answering
	Ana:	Mmm.	acknowledge	head	Answering

As mentioned above, much of the lesson involved the teacher explaining the rules of the game, and accordingly fit the structure of a long series of teacher inform exchanges, many with no reply at all. In the following section, I will introduce and discuss some parts of the lesson that were not as easy to fit to the model.

5.2 Echoing

There are several instances of the learners echoing, or repeating, part of the teacher's utterance. While S&C (1975/1992, p. 27) suggest that it would be "cheeky" for students to offer feedback after the teacher's response to their elicitation, it is otherwise difficult to accommodate the act of echoing in Extract 3. The feedback need not necessarily be evaluative though, rather it is merely an acknowledgment of the teacher's answer.

Extract 3

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Pupil Elicit)					

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
00:26:09:06 - 00:26:11:03	Honoka:	This card is water? <looks at Teacher>	elicit	head	Opening
00:26:11:07 - 00:26:12:07	Teacher:	Yes, it's flooded now.	reply comment	head post-head	Answering
00:26:12:11 - 00:26:16:07	Honoka:	Flooded now.	echo / acknowledge	head	Follow-up

The following exchanges in Extracts 4, 5, and 6 all support classifying echos as acknowledgments. In the next exchange the echoed part fits neatly as an acknowledgment of the teacher's directive, preliminary to the reaction.

Extract 4

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Teacher Direct)					
00:35:08:14 - 00:35:15:09	Teacher:	Uhh.	marker	signal	Opening
	Teacher:	So remember,	directive	head	
	Honoka:	Mm.	acknowledge	pre-head	Answering
	Teacher:	In this turn, it doesn't, it doesn't matter	starter	pre-head	Opening continued
00:35:15:14 - 00:35:22:15	Teacher:	but remember your special ability	directive	head	
	Honoka:	My special ability	acknowledge / echo	pre-head	Answering
		<looks at card>	react	head	

Extract 5 shows the student echoing the teacher's correction in a re-initiation of a teacher elicit exchange. In this case the correction is echoed twice. The model does not neatly accommodate this double echoing, however it makes sense that the first repetition is an acceptance of the correction, and the second is a verbalization of the student's realization or understanding of the correction. A similar account of such verbalization has been discussed as private speech, a process that may play a role in learner's internalization of knowledge (Smith, 2007).

Extract 5

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Teacher Elicit)					
00:35:36:15 - 00:35:38:04	Teacher:	So What do you need to do?	marker elicit	signal head	Opening
00:35:38:09 - 00:35:44:08	Honoka:	Ah, I have to throw away two cards.	marker reply	signal head	Answering
Exchange (Re-initiation ii.)					
00:35:44:10 - 00:35:46:05	Teacher:	Uh One card.	marker comment / correction	signal post-head	Follow-up
	Honoka:	One card. Ah, one card.	echo acknowledge	pre-head head	Answering

In the next exchange in Extract 6 the echo invites feedback with questioning intonation, and is followed-up by a confirmation by the teacher, and while this fits the structure of a teacher's directive exchange the fit seems poor when considering the situation. The student's echoing is a verbalization of their own refocusing of attention to a new phase rather than reacting or replying to a directive.

Extract 6

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Teacher Direct)					
00:26:47:00 - 00:26:48:01	Teacher:	You have two more actions.	directive	head	Opening
00:26:48:06 - 00:26:49:06	Honoka:	Ah, two more?	marker echo / acknowledge	signal head	Answering
00:26:49:10 - 00:26:50:10	Teacher:	Yes.	evaluate	head	Follow-up

Murphey (2001) discusses this type of repetition in naturally occurring discourse as well as in pedagogical interventions. Anecdotally, I have seen the technique used in the local context of Japanese junior high schools as described by Hamada (2016, 2019, 2022). It is possible that the student had been instructed in this technique in other English lessons and learned to make use of it.

5.3 Game turns and narration

Another peculiarity of this lesson was the great many instances of narration of game actions. The players often state what they are doing with relation to the game components, such as drawing or discarding cards. In other cases, the players state what their in-game character is doing such as "shoring up" flooded areas. The former type of narration is not dissimilar to what a science teacher might do while walking students through a procedure. These moments of on-going commentary appear in social game play as well, but more often in planning or reflection (Hofstetter, 2021; Xu et al., 2011). The difference may be related to the setting as a language lesson, where the teacher's narration served to model and provide linguistic resources to the learners, much as a science teacher would. The following consecutive exchanges in Extract 7 show both varieties.

Another peculiarity of this lesson was the great many instances of narration of game actions. The players often state what they are doing with relation to the game components, such as drawing or discarding cards.

Those performed by the instructor fit the teacher inform exchange structure (S&C, 1975/1992, p. 26) in that they do not require a response. When the students narrate their actions, however, the structure of the discourse is more ambiguous. As discussed before, game rules preallocate the current player rights to both speaking and play (Hofstetter, 2021). However, the pedagogical setting creates a tension because the teacher is also assumed to have ongoing rights to speak and manage the learning in the lesson (S&C, 1975/1992, p. 16). Although alternative interpretations are possible, it seems that the teacher maintains his dominant role even during the players' turns by directing game play and evaluating the students' decisions. The resulting discourse thus resembles scaffolded teaching with the teacher guiding the learners with clues through a series of re-initiations following a directive.

Extract 7

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Teacher Inform / Narrate)					
	Teacher:	So	marker	signal	Opening
		I will shore up one, <flips tile> two, <flips tile>, three <flips tile> tiles	informative / narrate	head	
Exchange (Teacher Inform / Narrate)					
00:28:05:09 - 00:28:06:09	Teacher:	And I draw <draws cards>	informative / narrate	head	Opening

In the exchanges in Extract 8, the declaration of the turn and gesture to the learner serve to nominate and direct the student to carry out the required actions and attempt to "solve the problem" of the current game situation. Although Ana's first reply was inaudible, based on the non-verbal action and teacher's follow-ups, it is likely that Ana was proposing a potential action and seeking approval. The teacher accepts the idea, and replies with a conditional evaluation. The student acknowledges

understanding of the teacher's evaluation in mid-speech, and the teacher continues the follow-up.

Extract 8

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Boundary)					
00:39:36:15 - 00:39:39:01	Teacher:	Alright,	marker and silent stress	head	Framing
Exchange (Teacher Direct)					
		Now its Ana's turn.	directive	head	Opening
		<gestures to Ana>	nominate	select	
00:39:52:04 - 00:39:57:05	Ana:	(inaudible) <points to token and looks at Teacher>	reply	head	Answering
	Teacher:	Okay	accept	pre-head	Follow-up
		but you can't until you're <points to tiles> here, here, [here or here	evaluate	head	
	Ana:	[Ahh	acknowledge	head	Answering
00:39:57:09 - 00:39:58:11	Teacher:	So first you need to move.	comment	post-head	Follow-up continued

Continued in Extract 9, the nominated student fails to respond in a timely manner, prompting the teacher to re-initiate with a clue. Ana responds unsatisfactorily, prompting the teacher to re-initiate with more clues suggesting better game actions.

Extract 9

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Re-initiation)					
00:40:06:08 - 00:40:08:15	Teacher:	You can move anywhere one time.	clue	post-head	Opening
00:40:12:14 - 00:40:16:07	Ana:	(inaudible)	reply	head	Answering
Exchange (Re-initiation)					
	Teacher:	Because of your special ability <points to Ana's card>	clue	post-head	Opening
	Ana:	<reads card>	react	head	Answering
00:40:16:08 - 00:40:23:03	Ana:	Mm.	acknowledge	post-head	

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Re-initiation)					
	Teacher:	You can move [anywhere for one action, one time.	clue	post-head	Opening
	Ana:	[Ah, Okay	acknowledge	pre-head	Answering
00:40:31:04 - 00:40:33:03	Ana:	Shore up <points to tiles> this card and this card	reply / narrate	head	

These continue until the teacher accepts the proposed actions without reservation in Extract 10.

Extract 10

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Re-initiation)					
00:40:36:04 - 00:40:40:14	Teacher:	Do you think it's better to move here <points to tile>	clue	post-head	Opening
	Ana and Honoka:	Mmm.	acknowledge	pre-head	Answering
	Teacher:	Or here? <points to tile>	clue	post-head	Opening continued
00:40:40:14 - 00:40:50:06	Honoka:	Mmm mm mm.	reply	head	Answering continued
	Ana:	Ahh. <moves token> I move this card	acknowledge react reply / narrate	pre-head head post-head	Answering continued
	Teacher:	Mmhmm	accept	pre-head	Follow-up
Exchange (Continued Action Narration)					
00:40:50:07 - 00:40:52:09	Ana:	And shore up [this	reply / narrate	head	Answering
	Teacher:	[Yep	accept	pre-head	Follow-up

In Extract 11, the teacher, managing the game progression, then gives the cumulative action count and in doing so directs the learner to take their third and final game action, which is evaluated positively by both the teacher and the other student. In a larger class or a non-game situation, another learner agreeing with the teacher's evaluation might come off as cheeky indeed, as S&C suggest. However, in this setting it was quite natural as an evaluation of a game action in a cooperative game, where all members were supposed to be contributing their opinion. In fact, it seems that this is an instance of

the learner expressing, albeit minimally, their opinion and agency in the discourse, despite the teacher's dominance. While there were other instances of the learners expressing their opinions about game choices or decisions, most were elicited by the teacher, whereas this one case shows the learner breaking the typical exchange structure.

Extract 11

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Teacher Direct)					
00:40:53:11 - 00:40:57:00	Teacher:	Two actions.	directive	post-head	Opening
	Ana:	<flips tile> and shore up this tile.	react reply / narrate	head post-head	Answering
00:40:57:02 - 00:40:58:01	Teacher:	Sounds like a good idea.	evaluate	head	Follow-up
00:40:58:02 - 00:41:01:11	Honoka:	Mmm mmm mm.	evaluate / agree	head	Follow-up

Having concluded the action phase of her turn, the teacher delineates a boundary with a focusing move in Extract 12. He then proceeds to make another evaluation of the situation. Strictly speaking, a follow-up evaluation does not fit here according to the model, however in terms of the game, a re-assessment of the situation following her three game actions is not out of place.

Extract 12

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Boundary)					
	Teacher:	Three actions.	conclusion	head	Focusing
		Yeah,	marker	signal	Follow-up
		I think that's safe	evaluation	head	

This interpretation of the teacher's declarations of game turns and phases as directives positions the teacher as the initiator of all of the exchanges in the game turn above and driver of the discourse. The context of a lesson, if nothing else, precludes equal status in the discourse between the learners and the teacher. Compounding that though, are the facts that the game rules and components were written in the learners' L2 and the teacher's L1 and that this was the learners' first time playing the game. These three factors create a considerable gap in the distribution of power in the interaction, limiting the learner's agency to drive the discourse through initiating moves.

The context of a lesson, if nothing else, precludes equal status in the discourse between the learners and the teacher.

As shown in the above sections, the data generally fits the model as provided by S&C. However, the small scale language learning context introduces some elements of repetition or echoing which does not always fit the model. The teacher domination of discourse is easily matched to the IRF sequence and re-initiations of it, but the use of a board game introduced some ambiguity in interpretation and moments of poor model fit. This ambiguity might be teased apart by further research analyzing the playing of games known by the students but not the teacher.

6. Usefulness for understanding classroom communication

The usefulness of any analysis will depend on the motivation for its undertaking and applicability to other contexts. In my case, as part of my professional development as a teacher, it affords a critical perspective into my practice. This use of reflective analysis has been highlighted as important for teacher education to avoid the potential negative impacts of misusing IRF sequences (Hall, 2022; Walsh, 2002; Zuengler, 2011) and to understand how the context of each turn impacts learning (Cancino, 2015). More than a simple reflective review or a quantitative view of interaction as in (Zhu et al., 2025), the model of discourse used for this analysis provided a window into the nature of turn-taking, context of interaction, and power balance between the students and the teacher.

In the lesson analyzed, the role of the teacher's talk involved structuring the activities, explaining directions, introducing new language, mediating or scaffolding the learners' understanding, suggesting game strategy, and giving feedback. One of the stated goals in the lesson was to practice English used in asking for and giving suggestions and advice (See Appendix from 00:02:04:11 to 00:02:29:13). While the teacher provided models of both acts (e.g. Extract 10), the learners did not often share their own opinion. Furthermore, in some cases where they might have asked for advice, it was offered without elicitation by the teacher (e.g. Extracts 4 and 10).

One reason for this tendency to dominate the interaction was the teacher's apparent hesitancy in relinquishing the floor to the learners even when allocated to them by the game structure and orientation, as in Extract 13. Interestingly, this reluctance occurs while attempting to encourage exactly the behavior that the act of giving it may be obstructing (Walsh, 2002). While the communicative responsibilities of the teacher were considerable, providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) among them, it can also be valuable for the learners to have sufficient opportunities to produce linguistic output (Swain, 1985, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 1995). Through this analysis I am now aware of the discrepancy in goal and actual outcome. As a result, in future activities it will be important to remember to purposely hold back and allow the learners more time to attempt the stated goal of requesting and providing advice, and generally engaging with the board game more agentically. A few concrete techniques to accomplish this might include having students read instructions before playing and setting aside time for questions rather than explaining everything during the lesson, identify specific points in the game when requests for and offers of advice are likely to arise, taking special care to refrain from initiating exchanges during these times, and using a visual reference for turn actions instead of verbally guiding students through each turn.

One reason for this tendency to dominate the interaction was the teacher's apparent hesitancy in relinquishing the floor to the learners even when allocated to them by the game structure and orientation

Extract 13 *Translations of Japanese given in brackets “[]”*

Time Code	Speaker	Transcription	Act Class	Move Structure	Move Class
Exchange (Boundary)					
00:25:34:00 - 00:25:35:07	Teacher:	Alright,	marker	head	Framing
Exchange (Teacher Direct)					
		so,	marker	signal	Opening
		it's your turn	starter	pre-head	
00:25:35:12 - 00:25:41:10	Teacher:	You can take up to three actions.	directive	head	
	Honoka:	Three actions... ahh	echo	pre-head	Answering
Exchange (Re-initiation i.)					
00:25:41:11 - 00:25:44:01	Teacher:	And remember, you can ask for advice.	clue	starter	Opening
Exchange (Re-initiation i.)					
00:25:45:04 - 00:25:47:10	Teacher:	And we can talk about what you want to do.	clue	starter	Opening
00:26:01:00 - 00:26:06:04	Honoka:	じゃ [Okay then,] I choose move.	marker reply	signal head	Answering
	Teacher:	Mmhmm	accept	head	Evaluate

The analysis showed that most of the learner talk in the lesson occurred in answering moves. However, the initiations performed during the game were often more to do with the game rules and strategy than they were with the linguistic content of the lesson. By changing the lesson structure such that the learners are made to take this leadership role involving directing and teaching the game, the roles in interaction may be shifted (Luk, 2013; Reed, 2024). Considering this along with the structure of turn-taking suggested in social board game play (Hofstetter, 2021) the use of cooperative board games in language lessons may be a means of introducing learner agency into communication in small scale language classes, where it is otherwise teacher-dominated. To do so, however, requires careful consideration of the overlapping factors that impact power (as)symmetry in interaction including knowledge of the game and language of the game rules and components.

The usefulness of reflective analysis of a lesson and potential affordances of formal games for providing learners with agency through participation has been stated. The specific value of S&C's model of classroom discourse might still be compared to other means of investigation. Cancino (2015) argues that for uncovering learning opportunities conversation analysis is a superior method because it does not rely on a priori categories, but instead permits a more inductive approach to analyzing the context of learning in interaction. This may be true, especially where teachers are absent, as the categories of acts in particular provided by S&C sometimes seemed inadequate to account for the learner's replies and follow-ups including laughter, echoing of speech, narration of actions, requests for clarification, and agreement. What S&C's model provides though, is a means of comparison to other classroom situations, particularly in how the teacher makes use of their authority to manage the interaction and whether they are effectively exploiting the third move in IRF sequences to maximize the pedagogical impact of their position. As York et al. (2021) argue, by focusing on the

pedagogical role of the teacher, the findings of studies of using games in learning become transferable from one context to another, and S&C's model offers a useful tool enabling this comparison.

TEACHING TIP

Give learners space to speak when playing board games together

- 1.) Let learners read the rules first.
- 2.) Let them ask questions next.
- 3.) Identify game situations requiring target language patterns.
- 4.) Be quiet when those situations arise.
- 5.) Refer to a visual aid rather than talk through game turn structures.
- 6.) Let the learners be the game master (Reed, 2024) and focus on mediating language instead.

7. Conclusion

In this study I used Sinclair and Coulthard's framework to reflectively explore my own lesson. In doing so I was able to evaluate my own position and impact as a teacher against the goals I stated and found them somewhat inadequate. The long history and wide use of the model for researching classroom discourse further provides a broad frame of reference for comparison and discussion. The model may not fully describe the dynamics of longer series of discourse as Wu (1998) points out. Furthermore, the categories may be inadequate for describing some aspects of less traditional teaching settings, in this case, discourse features such as laughter, echoing, agreement, and narration during collaborative gameplay. The authors, in their defense, acknowledged the descriptive nature of the categories and tentative nature of higher levels such as transaction. Thus, partial use of the model, as is often done by numerous studies focusing only on the IRF sequence, or how Luk (2013) for example, used the model only at the level of acts, and even modified these, seems both valid and constructive.

For pedagogy, the results were elucidating and, for me personally, disappointing. The reason being, my deficiencies as a teacher were laid bare. However, without reflection and self-criticism, improving future lessons would be slow at best. What I learned, and I believe I can contribute to ludic language pedagogy, is that without care, typical patterns of teacher dominance can easily occur even when using ludic materials such as collaborative board games. Even when given agency in the sense of choice of game to play and, theoretically at least, actions to take within the gameplay itself, the teacher can restrict agency through dominating the spoken interaction. Accounting for this is critical for securing learners' maximum space to play.

Declaration of conflicting interests

It should be clearly stated that this classroom research was performed by the teacher (me), and that the student participants had been my pupils for a decade or more. While an earnest attempt at neutrality and impartiality in analysis was made, these relationships may well have influenced my judgments.

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Appendix: Transcript

The full lesson transcript, with student names replaced with Pseudonyms is available in the Ludic Language Pedagogy Compendium.

1. lesson-transcript.srt
2. lesson-transcript.txt