From Directive to Facilitative: Interactional Strategies Influencing Student Participation in Online ELT Classroom

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of various teaching strategies on student engagement in an English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom at the university level. Data from a 90-minute online postgraduate course on second language acquisition were gathered using qualitative discourse analysis, through recorded classroom interaction conducted via Zoom. For identifying collaborative, directive, probing, scaffolding, and facilitative interactional strategies, this study used qualitative discourse analysis of a 90-minute online postgraduate class on second language acquisition. Five illustrative examples of interaction were chosen from an online class conducted on Zoom, and discourse analysis was carried out using these examples to identify teacher discourse strategies and their impact on student participation. Autonomy and multidirectional communication were further encouraged via collaborative interactions. Conversely, directive methods resulted in fewer replies and lower levels of participation. Discourse evidence indicates that collaborative and facilitative techniques fostered more extended learner responses and sustained engagement, whereas directive moves discouraged engagement. this study makes a contribution with empirical findings from an EFL context in an Indonesian university setting in providing evidence that student-centered and interactionally responsive approaches to teaching, in particular when using facilitative questioning, scaffolding, probing, and collaborative discourse, have a major positive impact on online English class participation and meaning-making, in contrast to directive teaching approaches which have a constraining effect on online interaction.

Keywords: *teacher approach, student participation, classroom discourse, interactional strategies*

Introduction

Teacher approach is a central construct in English Language Teaching, which refers to the communicative behaviors, interactional styles, and instructional dispositions that teachers employ to shape classroom discourse. It involves how teachers initiate talk, respond to student contributions, and manage meaning-making during lessons. According to Walsh (2011), the approach taken by the teacher fundamentally creates the interactional space wherein learning is jointly constructed, while Harmer (2015) identifies that it is a reflection of the teacher's pedagogical philosophy and influences the classroom atmosphere firsthand. Therefore, teacher approach provides a link between pedagogy and communication since it affects not only the way of delivery of information but also the motivation and participation of students. Previous literature has already shown that students' voluntary activity in learning depends to a large extent upon teachers' conversation choices regarding whether to initiate a conversation and respond to students (Cullen, 2002; Harmer, 2015; Walsh, 2011). Beyond cognitive outcomes,

teacher approach significantly affects learners' socio-emotional experiences. Valuing supportive communication creates a positive climate that lets students know their contributions are valuable and that they should participate with confidence. A dialogic and encouraging approach is known to reduce communication anxiety and enhance learners' willingness to speak (Cullen, 2002). Students build positive attitudes toward learning with stronger intrinsic motivation when the teachers come across as warm, clear, and respectful (Rahma & Irmayani, 2025). This indicates that aside from learning experiences, teachers also have a significant effect on the emotional preparedness of learners for interactions in the classroom. Although significance has already been placed on the roles of motivation and affect, very limited studies have focussed on the actual approaches used by the teachers and how this affects classroom participation in university-based EFL contexts.Effective instructional approaches further build an interactive learning environment that encourages exploration and active participation. For example, open-ended questioning, scaffolding, and formative dialogue allow opportunities for students to express ideas and co-construct understanding and knowledge (Cullen, 2002; Walsh, 2011). These approaches meet the communicative and constructivist approach to learning where the learner plays a critical and meaningful part within classroom communications (Richards, 2006; Walsh, 2011). Encouragement and dialectic talk further increase the agency of the students by allocating greater interactional space to them where they can develop shared meanings with the teacher within the learning classroom environment (Alexander, 2018; Cullen, 2002).

On the other hand, restrictive and teacher-dominated approaches impede meaningful interaction. As instructors heavily lean on closed questions, extended teacher talk, or lack of feedback, discourse becomes monologic instead of dialogic in nature (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Teacher-centered patterns prevail in many Indonesian university EFL classrooms, where students often assume passive roles as information recipients (Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018; Ariska et al., 2024). The presence of such authoritarian tendencies serves to hinder creativity, reduce linguistic risk-taking, limit participation opportunities, and therefore weaken communicative competence and learner confidence.

Student participation, however, is a crucial indicator of successful language learning, reflecting both cognitive engagement and affective involvement. It is only with active participation that collaborative knowledge construction can take place and communicative competence can be developed (Nasir et al., 2019). Despite this global shift toward CLT, the gap between pedagogical ideals and the actual classroom practices continues in Indonesian higher education. Although recent studies have been conducted on teacher talk and questioning techniques (Dewi et al., 2025; Hasanah et al., 2024), little attention has been directed toward how different approaches of teachers, whether facilitative or authoritarian, shape the discourse and student participation in university EFL settings. Addressing this gap, the current study explores how teacher approaches influence student participation in a tertiary-level English classroom. Precisely, it looks at the kinds of approaches teachers employ, how such approaches influence learner interaction, and how students perceive their teachers' approaches to fostering participation.

Method
Study Design
This research adopts an in-depth qualitative design set in a real online classroom to explore how different teacher approaches influence student participation in a postgraduate EFL class. Situated within an interpretivist perspective, qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to analyze natural interactional processes and communicative patterns during real-time classroom discourses. This research design is particularly apt for capturing facilitative, directive, and motivational teacher moves in their actual occurrence within online academic interaction. The current study follows in the footsteps of other Indonesian EFL discourse-oriented studies by Dewi et al. (2025), Rahma & Irmayani (2025), and Nursehag & Amalia (2024) in prioritizing rich, contextualized representations of teacher-student talk in exploring how different instructional approaches shape engagement in an online postgraduate setting. A university class in SLA at a university in Tangerang was selected due to its discussion-oriented nature, hence being a setting that is more apt for observing interactional dynamics.

Sample Population
The participants were one English lecturer and five postgraduate students aged between 22–30 years enrolled during the 2024/2025 academic year. This study employed a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) in selecting a lecturer who had experience in using communicative and student-centered approaches to teaching, relevant to the interactional practices that formed the focus of the study. This small sample size is typical of discourse-based qualitative research, which relies less on numerical representation than on depth of analysis (Sinaga, 2024; Riwayatiningsih, 2024). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, pseudonyms were assigned, and ethical research practice standards were guaranteed for all participants during this research study.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments
Data gathering was conducted using two major methods and tools. One was recording the 90-minute synchronous SLA classroom meeting via Zoom to obtainlive online classroom interaction, such as classroom questioning and feedback discourse and affectionate communication, and students' utterances. Recording the classroom meeting was the central method for discourse analysis and was done to gather concrete classroom interaction data that would be analyzed in its textual form after being transcribed. The second method was to collect field notes while conducting and immediately following the classroom meeting to note the major aspects of classroom interaction that would not have been visible if analysis was solely done via the transcriptions. The latter method was supplementary to the analysis and not an analysis method in its own right.**Data Analysis**

Techniques
Data analysis was supported by an iterative qualitative analytic procedure informed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Data condensation was first achieved by systematically coding discourse excerpts that exemplified specific teacher approaches-facilitative, directive, probing, scaffolding, and collaborative-along with observable student participation patterns such as extended turns, initiative, responsiveness, and engagement. Coded segments were organized into analytic displays to examine relationships between teacher moves and fluctuations in learner participation. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions by interpreting emergent interactional

patterns in light of theory on classroom discourse. Trustworthiness was enhanced by repeatedly checking analytic decisions against the original transcripts and field notes to ensure transparency and consistency in interpretation.

Results

In this chapter, findings from the research are discussed, which were obtained from five discourse excerpts drawn from an online postgraduate SLA (second language acquisition) classroom. Through interactional analysis and thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), distinct patterns emerge as to how different teacher approaches affect levels and dimensions of learner participation. The findings are framed by answering three research questions: (1) what types of teacher approaches are implemented, (2) how those approaches affect learner participation, and (3) how learner engagement is manifested in classroom discourse. Five major interactional themes are distinguished by this analysis: facilitative referential questioning, scaffolding via paraphrasing, probing questions, directive explanations, and collaborative and student-initiated interaction that are correlated with graduated levels and dimensions of learner participation.

Facilitative Referential Questioning

Data 1

T	Can you share how children in your hometown acquire a second language?
L 1	In my childhood, English exposure was low. We only learned simple phrases from songs.
T	So Indonesian was learned mostly from TV and interaction with peers?
L 1	Yes, cartoons and daily communication.

In this referential prompt, the learner is encouraged to draw on their own experience with language rather than providing a prepackaged or spectacular response. Through paraphrasing what the learner has said, what happens is that the teacher encourages them for more, and this creates a moment that turns into a prompt on elaboration as opposed to shutting down what they are saying. In this situation, dialogic teaching is evidenced as this is one type of dialogic teaching that author Walsh (2011) describes as a means that teachers pursue when increasing the conversation and giving a degree of control back to the learners.At the discourse level, there is a transition from the usual IRF format to that of I–R–Expansion. This teacher response to the learner's input functions as an expansion, hence continuing the conversation. This indicates that referential questions are more than just content-getters since they prompt critical involvement and meaning-making. This, therefore, directly responds to RQ1 regarding teacher practices and RQ2 on the effect of teacher practices on student participation.

Scaffolding through paraphrasing and clarification

Data 2

T Did low motivation ever affect your language acquisition?

L1 No, we were excited when we roleplayed as children.

T So the natural environment increased your confidence?

L1 Yes, we used Indonesian freely even with limited vocabulary.

The teacher's use of paraphrasing and clarifying questions serves as interactional scaffolding to support learners' meaning-making processes. The acts of paraphrasing not only check comprehension but also revoice learner contributions in a manner that elicits more cognitive processing. This again supports Cullen's (2002) view that scaffolding extends the thinking of learners by keeping engagement high along with the gradual deepening of conceptual understanding. Following these scaffolded moves, the learners were encouraged to reflect on personal experiences and connect them to theoretical constructs regarding second language acquisition.

From a dialogic perspective, such scaffolding opens up interactional space and facilitates reflective participation. The discourse evidence indicates that these teacher moves supported learners' reflective engagement, as demonstrated by extended responses and the explicit linking of lived experiences to SLA concepts. This interactional pattern illustrates how scaffolding not only enhances participation but also orients learners toward meaningful academic engagement, underscoring the pedagogical value of dialogic, scaffolded classroom interaction.

Probing Questions and Deepened Reflection

Data 3

T At what age did you begin actively speaking Indonesian?

L1 Around grade 10 after joining a competition in Medan.

T Before that, was your Indonesian limited?

L1 Yes, we rarely used it at home.

T What helped you become more confident afterward?

L1 Interacting with peers who spoke Indonesian.

The teacher employed probing questions by making a request for deeper elaboration about linguistic development. The sequence became an IRF-E pattern: Initiation–Response–Feedback–Expansion. An IRF-E pattern promotes extended student turns and encourages reflective thinking. This corresponds to Alexander's concept of dialogic pedagogy, which requires questioning that will encourage critical thought.

This probing made the extended turns and elaborated responses indicate increased cognitive and affective engagement. The interactional pattern reflects heightened involvement, as evidenced by sustained elaboration and continued learner participation.. This extract gives strong evidence that probing questions enhance reflective participation; thus, RQ2 is strongly supported.

Directive Approach and Reduced Participation

Data 4

T	Exposure and aptitude strongly affect acquisition. Did you read any comparison study?
L 1	I read about exposure increasing intake.
T	Yes, exposure is essential. Motivation also accelerates acquisition.
T	People with high motivation progress faster even without formal learning.

This particular instance highlights a shift in interaction style from a codified or freestanding to a directive or pedagogical style. The teacher maintained control of the lesson through a prolonged monotonic explanation and display questions that were solely geared towards validating teacher-provided answer choices. This led to a transformation in the IRF-E sequence of interaction to a different format that essentially minimized learner instantiation. The learner responded in shorter turns, thereby qualifying a reduction in interactional space.

This is consistent with the model of authoritative classroom discourse described by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), where the classroom discourse is highly controlled by the teachers. "Discussing" progressed into "only listening," as evidenced by reduced learner turns, minimal elaboration, and a narrowing of interactional space. Based on the discourse data, the findings support the results on RQ2 and RQ3.

Collaborative, Student-Initiated Participation

Data 5

L 2	In my region, Malay is similar to Indonesian, so acquisition is easier.
L 3	But in my area, exposure is limited, so I learned Indonesian in high school.
T	Interesting, exposure and dialect similarity affect acquisition differently.
L 4	Boarding school increased my exposure significantly.
T	Thank you. Anyone else want to add?

In this extract, the students themselves initiated contributions with no prompting from the teacher. The teacher reacted to these by acknowledging ideas, synthesizing points, and reopening the floor features associated with collaborative discourse. The interaction moved beyond IRF into a jointly constructed dialogue, consistent with Alexander's (2018) view of cooperative discourse. The discourse evidence indicates heightened engagement, as reflected in learner-initiated turns, peer-to-peer contributions, and the teacher's acknowledgment and reopening of interactional space (RQ1–RQ2).

Synthesis Across Extracts

Facilitative, scaffolding, probing, and collaborative strategies by the teacher in these five extracts have considerably extended students' participation by encouraging longer turns, deeper reflection, and higher engagement. On the other hand, directive

strategies were found to constrain participation and reduce learner autonomy.Taken together, the findings suggest that teacher discourse choices in postgraduate SLA classrooms play a decisive role in shaping participation space, answering RQ1–RQ3 directly.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce recent empirical evidence that teachers' approaches significantly shape the nature and degree of student participation in EFL classrooms, especially in online and higher-education settings. The facilitative and dialogic strategies such as referential questioning, scaffolding, probing, and collaborative acknowledgment facilitated longer learner turns, reflective responses, and active meaning-making. Such a finding is consistent with recent studies in Indonesian and Asian EFL contexts that student-centered discourse patterns promote engagement and interaction (e.g., Ariska et al., 2024; Hasanah et al., 2024; Rahma & Irmayani, 2025). In online learning environments, Karafil and İlbay (2023) and Li and Zhang (2024) similarly argue that scaffolding and dialogic questioning contribute to promoting interactional competence and learner autonomy through the provision of supportive interactional space.

This contrasts with the findings of a recent line of research, showing that directive, teacher-dominated discourse is debilitating for student participation. For instance, Dewi et al. (2025) and Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman (2018) explain how classrooms featuring an overuse of teacher control, reliance on display questions, and monologic explication severely constrain space for student participation, leading to a weakening of the communicative exchange. Drawing together the insights afforded by Alexander's (2018) dialogic pedagogy and Walsh's interactional framework, the IRF-E patterns identified here show precisely how facilitative discourse promotes analytic exchange and sustained participation, whereas closed IRF patterns deny agency to learners. In this light, combined, these findings confirm and extend recent research by underscoring how interactionally responsive teaching serves as an important mechanism for promoting meaningful participation in university-level EFL classrooms.The results reveal the restrictive nature of directive teaching. Once the teacher proceeded to explain in a monologic manner and then used display questions, student contributions drastically diminished. This follows the model of Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model of authoritarian classroom discourse, in which teachers control topic and turn-taking. The interactional pattern reflects a passive and less engaging classroom dynamic, demonstrating how directive discourse limits participation.

Finally, collaborative student-initiated discourse contributed to greater autonomy and motivation. When the teacher responded by synthesizing ideas and reopening the floor, interaction became jointly constructed. This is in line with Alexander's (2018) concept of dialogic, co-constructed learning. The discourse evidence indicates heightened affective engagement, as reflected in increased learner-initiated turns, peer responses, and sustained collaborative interaction.

Overall, the findings reveal that communicationally aware teaching strategies lie at the heart of shaping learner participation in postgraduate SLA classrooms: facilitative, scaffolding, probing, and collaborative approaches enhance engagement with and reflection on the subject matter, whereas directive approaches constrain interaction. This research has contributed to an understanding of how teacher discourse moves directly impact learners' cognitive and affective involvement and has reinforced the importance of dialogic pedagogy at university-level English education.

Conclusion

This study examined how differential teacher approaches contributed to shaping learner participation in the context of one online postgraduate SLA class. Based on the analysis of five discourse extracts, the findings show that the teacher's interactional strategies related to differential levels and qualities of engagement by students. The five different teacher approaches identified are facilitative, scaffolding, probing, directive, and collaborative, each paralleled by specific discourse patterns and teacher–learner interactional moves.

From the analysis about RQ1, it could be seen that each of the approaches was created through interactional behaviors such as referential questioning, paraphrasing, probing follow-ups, monologic explanation, and student-initiated turns. These patterns formed the basis for how participation opportunities were constructed or constrained.

In RQ2, the facilitative, scaffolding, probing, and collaborative approaches were shown to widen the space for participation, enabling extensive learner responses, reflective reasoning, and active meaning construction. All such strategies allowed learners to develop ideas more freely and to engage with the topic more deeply. Meanwhile, the directive approach in this context actually narrowed participation by curtailing learner initiative and shifting the interaction toward teacher-fronted talk with shorter student responses.

Regarding RQ3, patterns of participation observed in the discourse suggest that facilitation, scaffolding, and collaborative approaches functioned as supportive and motivating interactional conditions. These strategies assisted the learners in better articulation of their experiences and participation with more confidence. On the other hand, directive approaches functioned as interactionally constraining and less engaging. These results reinforce the importance of interactionally-informed teaching practices for shaping learner participation in online EFL contexts.

The findings therefore support the argument that communicative, dialogic, and learner-centered discursive practices contribute significantly to participation in university-level online English classes. In addition, it promotes the development of a more interactive and inclusive learning environment by encouraging dialogic questioning, implementing scaffolding strategies, and creating opportunities for learner-led talk.

Suggestions

The focus of future research can be on developing a broader range of classes and participant groups, thus enabling an examination of whether similar interactional patterns occur across a range of different online learning contexts. Comparisons between the online and face-to-face classroom may show how modality influences teacher discourse strategies and learner participation. Finally, it is recommended to look at longitudinal research regarding the influence of sustained use of particular teacher approaches on participation development over time. The recommendations for practice are that teachers should become more aware of interactional strategies that will promote active learner participation. Dialogic questioning, scaffolding techniques, and opportunities for student-initiated discourse will promote engagement and deeper learning. A balance between guidance and autonomy in a participatory classroom remains an important issue.

Acknowledgment

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