

HUMANISTICS LANGUAGE TEACHING, FACILITATION, AND CLASSROOM CONVERSATION

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Abstract

Despite the fact that teachers of foreign languages often talk about 'conversation classes', the provision of conversation and instruction is often considered to be mutually exclusive (Seedhouse 1996). However, this paper proposes that humanistic language teaching (HLT) is one way of resolving this paradox. A language instructor has two sources of authority: institutional and linguistic. A facilitator, using humanistic teaching techniques, gives up institutional authority and so 'frees up' the classroom turn-taking system so that the strict initiation-response-feedback (IRF) pattern of most teaching is transformed into a conversational pattern where any participant is potentially a next speaker. Consequently, a conversation can take place in a class. On the other hand, linguistic authority is still exercised in the form of side-sequences which allow the facilitator to provide minimally invasive feedback without affecting the overall orientation to conversational rules of turn-taking.

Keywords: facilitation, humanistic language teaching, identity, conversation, initiation-response-feedback

INTRODUCTION

When compared with conversation in the 'real world', classroom interaction quite literally often borders on the absurd. Dinsmore (1985), for example has drawn a parallel between classroom interaction and Beckett's absurdist dialogue in *Waiting for Godot* and more recently Clifton (2004) has made the link between Ionesco's parody of the classroom in *The Lesson* and interaction in the foreign language classroom. Yet, despite this awareness of the inadequacies of classroom interaction in terms of providing opportunities for 'meaningful interaction', the search for teaching styles that can provide classroom conversation has not been fruitful. The 'communicative' approach which sprang up in the 80s and which is still the dominant paradigm in TEFL, has failed to deliver on its promises of

meaningful interaction. As Thornbury (1996) notes, despite the fact that many language instructors would describe themselves as 'communicative', there is still very little genuine communication or even less conversation in the classroom. One of the main stumbling blocks to providing classroom conversation is the mutually exclusive interactional nature of 'teaching' which is essentially teacher controlled, planned institutional discourse and 'conversation' which is unplanned and which maximises the number of potential next speakers (Sacks *et. al.*, 1974). Thus, as Seedhouse (1996) argues, the provision of both conversation and institutional interaction (instruction) is unattainable: interaction is either institutional or conversational. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that humanistic language learning may be able to resolve this paradox and provide opportunities for classroom conversation. The paper is divided into two parts. In the first section, a definition of HLT is offered, the differences between teacher-student and facilitator-learner identities are discussed and conversation is defined. In the second section, an extract of naturally occurring classroom interaction exemplifying 'traditional' classroom interaction patterns is compared and contrasted with an extract from the same lesson that exemplifies humanistic, facilitative and conversational classroom interaction. Results indicate that a humanistic style of classroom interaction can quasi-simultaneously provide instruction and yet still be conversational.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

HUMANISTICS LANGUAGE TEACHING

Stevick (1998: *passim*) defines humanistic language learning as a method in which the learner is "an object of primary value in a world of meaningful action". To unpack this statement: an object of primary value means that the learner is the driving force of the lesson - the leader rather than the led. Secondly, meaningful action signifies that what the learner says, does, thinks, or feels during the lesson makes a difference to him or her. In order to treat the student as having primacy in a world of meaningful interaction, the instructor must give up some of his/her authority. An instructor has two sources of authority (*cf.* Reynolds, 1990): the institutional authority invested in him/her by his/her social position (being in authority) and authority gained through linguistic knowledge (being an authority). Such authority must be exercised in the classroom in two ways: structuring classroom activities and providing feedback (Stevick 1998, p. 32). The teacher's institutional authority is used to structure the classroom activity and linguistic authority is used to provide feedback on the students' performance. Paradoxically, in HLT an instructor must use his/her

institutional authority to plan for an absence of structure, to provide a 'space' in which the learner can take the initiative and become the primary object in a world of meaningful interaction. Yet, on the other hand, the instructor must retain linguistic authority by providing feedback. If institutional authority is 'let go' and taken up by the learners and if linguistic authority is retained through the provision of feedback, the language instructor becomes a facilitator. As Dufeu (2001) states:

"The facilitator listens to the participant: she takes her cue from what the participant says; it is up to her to go with the participant's expressive needs and not the other way round. In empathy with the participant, the facilitator offers him language made to measure, which starts from where he is and leads him along paths of the foreign language. The facilitator adapts to the rhythm of the participant and to his knowledge. The participant's contact with the foreign language develops in resonance with his being (a pedagogy of things offered, rather than impositions). It's a question of following the participant rather than going ahead of him and then of programming his needs. Each participant picks his own path through the foreign language, at his own pace."

IDENTITIES IN THE CLASSROOM

Underhill (1999) points out there are three kinds of instructor or rather that instructors can operate in three different roles: lecturer, teacher, and facilitator. The lecturer has a knowledge of the subject, the teacher has a knowledge of the subject and is trained in a pedagogic approach and the facilitator has a knowledge of the subject, pedagogic technique and an awareness of the human dimension of classroom interaction. Underhill (1999, p. 126) thus defines a facilitator as:

"By facilitator I mean a teacher in any educational setting who understands the topic, is skilled in the use of current teaching methods and techniques, and who actively studies and pays attention to the psychological learning atmosphere and the inner process of learning on a moment by moment basis, with the aim of enabling learners to take as much responsibility for their learning as they can".

These three identities (lecturer, teacher and facilitator) are not fixed but are occasioned by talk-in-interaction. In other words, following Zimmerman (1998), there are principally two kinds of identity: discursive and situated. Discursive identity is derived from the proximal context of interaction (i.e., turn-by-turn) and gives identities such as questioner, answerer, and so on. These identities are reflexively linked to occasioned situated identities (social identities) such as teacher-student. Thus, by

shifting styles of classroom interaction at a turn-by-turn level it is possible to enact situated identities other than teacher and student. Furthermore, identities that ‘go together’ such as mother-baby, teacher-student, husband-wife exist in what Sacks (1972) describes as standard relational pairs which have obligations and rights in relation to each other. Thus, if one shifts from teacher-student identities to facilitator-learner identities respective discursive rights and obligations also change. Moreover, as Richards (2006) points out, shifting identity is the key to creating conditions for classroom conversation.

PATTERNS OF INTERACTION: CONVERSATION AND THE IRF SEQUENCE

For the purposes of this paper, conversation will be defined following Sacks *et al's* (1974) seminal article on conversational turn-taking. Conversation is, thus, interaction which has no mediation of turn-taking and in which all participants have equal access to the floor. In short, any participant is a potential next speaker. Furthermore, the actions (e.g. shifting topic, correcting, questioning etc.) that can be performed in a turn at talk are not restricted to a person with a particular identity. Conversation, thus, contrasts starkly with typical classroom interaction in which the teacher mediates turns and decides who speaks to whom, when and for how long and it is also the teacher who has the (category-bound) right to evaluate the content of turns. Consequently, in the traditional classroom, as Mchoul (1978, p. 183) notes, “rules allow for and require that formal classroom situations be constructed so as to involve differential participation rights for parties to talk depending on their membership of the social identity-class student-teacher.” Such an unequal distribution of resources that is characteristic of most classrooms can give rise to the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) pattern of interaction whereby the teacher initiates a turn in the form of a question, the student replies and then the teacher evaluates this response. Brazil and Sinclair (1982, p. 45) in their seminal work on teacher talk give the following example of the IRF pattern:

- | | | |
|-----|----------|---|
| (I) | Teacher: | Give me a sentence using an animal’s name as food, please. |
| (R) | Student: | We shall have a beef for supper tonight. |
| (F) | Teacher | Good. That’s almost right but ‘beef’ is uncountable so it’s ‘we shall have beef’, not ‘we shall have a beef’. |

The IRF pattern of classroom interaction gives rise to what Stevick (1998: *passim*) calls an evaluative paradigm whereby the classroom agenda is decided by the teacher and the student’s response to this agenda is

evaluated in the teacher's terms. The student does not have primacy in a world of meaningful interaction but is held in the teacher's web of power. On the other hand, if classroom conversation is achieved the student has more initiative and becomes an object of primacy in the lesson. This is because the local management of talk that conversation entails provides a set of options for turn-taking which obliges students to actively monitor the talk. Since turn-taking in conversation is 'up for grabs' with any participant being a potential next speaker, students have to decide who is going to speak next, at what point in talk speaker change can occur and what constitutes a relevant contribution in the light of a previous turn at talk. In short, students must be more active and show more initiative in the development of classroom activities which have traditionally given the teacher the role of mediating turn allocation. The fact that students have to show more initiative means that they have a greater possibility to direct the lesson and share responsibility for its development. It follows, then, that learners have more space in which to build their own narrative and express their own needs and interests. In this way, the learner becomes "an object of primary value in a world of meaningful action" which enables the learner to be more actively involved in making sense of the world of language that surrounds them.

Summing up: a facilitator gives up his-her institutional authority to control the lesson. This frees up the institutional constraints concerning who can say what to whom and when during a lesson and consequently this allows for the possibility of classroom conversation. Yet, at the same time it still provides opportunities for the facilitator to exercise linguistic authority and provide feedback on the learner's performance (Clifton, 2006). This is shown schematically in figure one below.

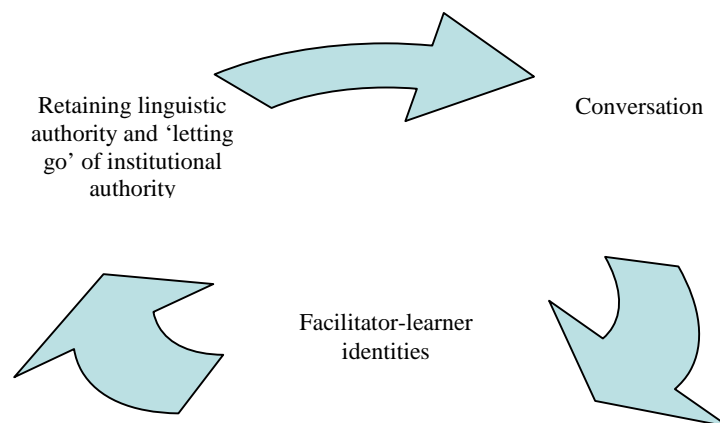


Figure 1: Facilitator-learner interaction

Conversely, as can be seen in figure two below, when the instructor retains both institutional and linguistic authority, teacher-student identities are enacted and the relative discursive rights and obligations talk into being a teacher controlled IRF pattern of interaction.

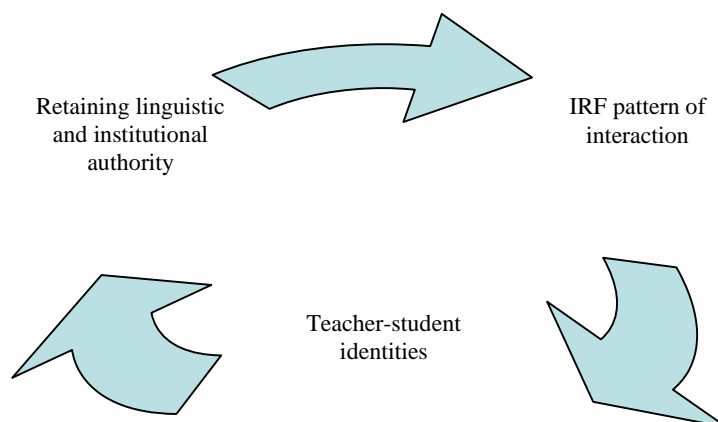


Figure 2: Teacher-student interaction

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysed comes from an audio-recording of one of my own lessons. It was recorded in 1999 as part of a wider project concerning classroom interaction in a language school in the north of France. The transcript comes from a one-to-one lesson with a French businessman who is the owner of several companies in the area. The theme of the lesson is 'negotiating contracts' and it is based on commercially available teaching materials. The material is a classic listening exercise with a pre-listening vocabulary exercise and then a recorded dialogue concerning the negotiation of a contract to hire a team of consultants. At this stage of the lesson the instructor and student are working through the pre-listening activity which takes the form of a classic gap-fill activity in which the student has a selection of words which must be used to fill the gaps in a simplified contract. The analysis is divided into two parts. In the first section, the instructor and student are filling in the gaps and the interaction is dominated by the teacher and takes the form of the IRF pattern in which the teacher retains both institutional and linguistic authority. In the second section, following a simple referential question (i.e., a question to which the instructor does not know the answer), the instructor shifts identity and becomes a facilitator by giving up institutional authority to control the lesson. However, he retains his linguistic authority by providing feedback on the learner's performance.

Extract 1: The IRF pattern, teacher-student identities and the evaluative paradigm

- 1 T the first thing we'll do just to give er: a bit of background before we do the listening (.3) here
- 2 we have a contract (1) a simplified contract we'll just try to match the words (1) with the gaps
- 3 S yeah ((reading aloud from text until the first gap)) the consultant shall conduct and perform
- 4 consultancy work into the area of order processing within the structure and organisation and
- 5 on the premises of the company, the full er: (3) maybe it is liability (1.4)
- 6 T full scope here
- 7 S ((resumes reading from the text)) full scope and content of which will be set out in er: (1)
- 8 clause A ((offering one of the possibilities for the next gap))
- 9 T here I think the word is schedule and earlier schedule is like an annex (1) so when we talked
- 10 earlier we said schedule was like planning which is true but here in a legal sense schedule is a 11 separate piece of paper
- 12 S yeah ((begins reading from the text)) the company shall provide a total (5) remuneration
- 13 ((offering one of the possibilities for the next gap))
- 14 T yeah and do you know the word package?
- 15 S package yes it is er: yeah err: without detail
- 16 T no it is more in the sense of everything included

The initiation move is a slight variation of the classic IRF pattern in which the teacher explicitly initiates the three part sequence by asking a question. In this case the initiation move is a combined effort: the teacher introduces the exercise and the student, recognising this tried and tested form of teaching immediately begins reading from the text. The initiation (question) move in the IRF pattern is set up by the gap in the text which implicitly requires the student to provide a word to fill this gap. When the student arrives at the gap in the text (line 5) he hesitates and after a three second pause he selects '*liability*' which is one of the words provided by the course book. The teacher takes the third move in the sequence and corrects the student by giving the answer that the course book requires.

Similarly, the second IRF sequence in this extract is not explicitly initiated. In line 7, the student knowing the 'rules of the game' begins reading from the text and orients to the question (what word fits in the next gap in the text?) which is implicit in the exercise. Line 8, he selects the option '*clause A*' which is in fact not the required response. In line 9, the

teacher provides the third move in the IRF sequence. He gives the correct answer and provides a brief description of what a schedule is.

In line 12, the student acknowledges this definition ('*yeah*') and, as before, self-selects to continue reading from the text and selects the word '*remuneration*' as a candidate answer to fill the next gap in the text. This word is in fact correct but it is linked to the collocate '*remuneration package*'. The teacher acknowledges the correct response (line 14: '*yeah*') which is the feedback move in the IRF sequence. The teacher then initiates a follow up IRF sequence which is the fourth IRF sequence in a row. The teacher asks, "*do you know the word package?*" The student replies '*yes it is er: yeah err: without detail*'. However, the teacher evaluates this negatively and corrects the student and then in a continuation of the same turn gives a brief explanation of the word package.

In this kind of teacher controlled interaction only the teacher (via the course book) can direct the interaction in any creative way. The student knows what is required of him and simply selects the words and tries to fit them into the gaps in what Rinvoluceri (1999, p. 196) has described as a 'humanly empty' exercise. The student is held in the teacher's web of power and his role in the interaction is limited to providing answers to the display questions (i.e., questions to which the teacher already knows the answer) implicit in the text which are then evaluated by the teacher. The IRF pattern thus fails to treat the student as having primacy in the lesson. In fact, the student is treated as a 'receptacle' for lexical items selected by the course book writers as being 'important'. The identities of teacher and student are created by, and reflexively create, the IRF pattern of interaction which has as its hallmark asymmetrical access to turns: the teacher/course book initiates, the student replies and then is evaluated. The student is doing little more than jumping through hoops set by the teacher and the consequent interaction is a long way from conversation.

Extract 2: Classroom conversation, facilitator-learner identities and humanistic language teaching

In the following extract, which is taken from the same lesson as extract one, the instructor shifts role and becomes the facilitator by giving up his institutional authority to direct the lesson. In lines 1-14, by asking a series of referential questions, the facilitator defers to the learner's superior knowledge of consultancy. This treats the learner as having primacy in a world of meaningful interaction and after several question and answer pairs the learner takes more initiative for the direction of the lesson (line 14 ff.). This leads to an orientation to conversational turn-taking procedures whereby the instructor no longer mediates the turns and nor does he control

and evaluate what is said in the turns. However, there is little point in classroom interaction being the same as interaction outside the classroom. The aim of a lesson is, after all, to accelerate the acquisition of the target language. In the continuation of the extract, the participants orient to conversational turn-taking but the learner explicitly invites the facilitator to exercise his linguistic authority and to provide feedback on his performance. This authority is exercised in the form of side sequences which Jefferson (1972, p. 294) defines as:

“in the course of some on-going activity (for example, a game, a discussion), there are occurrences one might feel are not ‘part’ of that activity but which appear to be in some sense relevant. Such an occurrence constitutes a break in the activity – specifically a ‘break’ in contrast to a ‘termination’; that is, the on-going activity will resume. This could be described as a ‘side-sequence within an on-going sequence’.”

Consequently, following Keppler and Luckmann’s (1991, p. 158) observation that knowledge can be transferred conversationally and that “the ‘teaching’ sequence in ordinary conversation is typically a side-sequence within an ongoing sequence [of conversation]”, the facilitator can quasi-simultaneously provide a space for conversation and for instruction in the form of side sequences which provide feedback to the learner.

- 1 F what’s your opinion of consultants?
- 2 L yeah okay they’re good but er::m (1) it’s dangerous
- 3 F what’s the danger?
- 4 L because it is very expensive and e:r your company is er: (1) the (1) without personality
- 5 F uhu because I believe that in business now they are talking very much about a core a core
- 6 business?
- 7 L yeah
- 8 F and then I think they call it outsourcing
- 9 L is that outsourcing?
- 10 F I believe the trend in business at the moment is to have your core business and anything that’s
- 11 not in your core business you outsource so you have the accountants come in []
- 12 L [yeah yeah]
- 13 F you have er er technical (1) I don’t know the training manager coming in or whatever
- 14 L it is not too bad er: it’s not too bad because you=each consultant is a supplier of new blud?
- 15 blud?
- 16 F blood blood
- 17 L blood and that is the main convenient e:r (3) yeah depends on what you want (2) and depends

- 18 the idea you have about consultant (2) the economy in France you want to open a company a
- 19 consultant specialist in software you have the money you open tomorrow about: a consultant a 20 consultant about er: er: losing er: weight I don't know the word losing weight?
- 21 F well yeah that's the word we use to lose weight yeah sure
- 22 L open weight watchers
- 23 F yeah
- 24 L everything is good but er:: sometimes it would be a right idea to write on the door why you
- 25 could have motivation to become our customer not for the () not for the () but sometimes 26 for our experience but sometimes this sort of shop is opened by people who don't know
- 27 F sure yeah yeah
- 28 L where I was recently and I smile myself walking along the street Luxembourg it was bad street 29 I realise after that I left my car here and it was dangerous I had a meeting not so far but I didn't 30 know where the meeting was er: I was I was

In line 1, the facilitator asks a referential question, *'what's your opinion of consultants?'* The learner is no longer being asked to jump through hoops and to be evaluated by the teacher but instead the learner is treated as the 'knower' or as having primacy in a world (the learner's business world) of meaningful interaction. The learner replies to this question but this time there is no evaluation. The IRF pattern is replaced by a question and answer pattern which develops into a conversation. The facilitator, instead of evaluating the learner's reply, asks a second referential question (*'what's the danger?'*) which again orients to the learner as having primacy in the lesson. In line 5, the facilitator self-selects to ask a third referential question which defers to the learner's competence as a businessman. The learner's reply is then followed by another facilitator-turn in which the notion of outsourcing is introduced. However, the facilitator's definition is questioned by the learner (line 9: *'is that outsourcing?'*). Interestingly, and in contrast to the IRF pattern where the teacher directs the interaction through questions, the question now comes from the learner. In response to the learner's question, the facilitator then goes on to elaborate on his version of outsourcing. Significantly, and in contrast to more formal classroom interaction the learner backchannels agreement (*'yeah yeah'*) as the facilitator produces his turn.

Through the use of referential questions, the facilitator has used his institutional authority to treat the learner as having primacy in a world of meaningful interaction. Orienting to the lack of turn mediation, the learner takes more initiative when he self-selects after the facilitator's turn (line 14) and evaluates the role of consultants. The interaction now moves into a phase where participants orient to conversational turn-taking procedures. However, the facilitator's linguistic authority is still oriented to in the form

of side-sequences. In line 14, the learner stumbles on the pronunciation of the word '*blood*'. He repeats the word twice with rising intonation thus try marking it. In other words, he singles the expression out as being problematic and he invites an instructional side-sequence (Keppler and Luckmann 1991, p. 150). The facilitator responds to this by providing the correct pronunciation. The learner repeats the word with the correct pronunciation and integrates it into his continuing turn. Thus, instruction is provided in a side-sequence which is minimally invasive of the conversation taking place. Once the instruction is carried out, both participants return to the conversation in progress.

A similar case of try marking occurs in line 20. The learner uses the expression '*losing weight*'. He appears to be unsure of the expression as the hesitation markers (er:) before the expression indicate and then he explicitly states that he does not know the word and repeats the expression try marking it with rising intonation. The facilitator responds to this invitation to teach and exercises his linguistic authority by confirming that the learner does indeed have the right expression. The learner then continues his narrative. When the learner arrives at the end of his turn, the facilitator acknowledges receipt and confirms understanding with '*sure yeah yeah*'. Orienting to the fact that in conversation turns are not mediated, the learner then self-selects (line 28) to take more initiative for the lesson and carries out a topic transition and starts to talk about an anecdote concerning a visit to Luxembourg which illustrates his point.

In sum, the facilitator uses referential questions to give up institutional authority to direct the lesson and allows the learner a free hand to develop his views on consultancy. In this way, the identities facilitator-learner, as opposed to teacher-student, are talked into being and this is reflected in the transformation of classroom interaction from the IRF pattern to conversation where either participant is a potential next speaker and what can be done in the turns is not dictated by the identity of the speaker. However, the learner still orients to the facilitator's pedagogic authority and uses try marking to invite the facilitator to provide feedback. Thus, despite the fact that the participants orient to conversational turn-taking procedures, the interaction still has pedagogic validity because it still provides instruction in the form of side-sequences.

CONCLUSION

HLT, through rejecting the 'jugs into mugs' style of transmission teaching and by treating the learner as having primacy in a world of meaningful interaction, effectively changes the 'rules of the game' of classroom interaction. Maintaining both linguistic and institutional authority

to direct the lesson (cf. transcript 1) leads to the IRF pattern of interaction and the evaluative paradigm. However, the instructor can, in this case by using referential questions, transform the pattern of interaction and the identities of the participants. In this way, the institutional authority of the instructor is suspended and the student is given the opportunity to take more initiative in the development of the lesson. Consequently, a classroom conversation in which participants have equal access to the floor can take place. However, at the same time, the facilitator retains linguistic authority and can provide (indeed, is invited to provide via try marking) instruction in the form of side-sequences. In conclusion, HLT is one way of resolving the paradox of providing opportunities for conversation in the classroom yet at the same time providing instruction.

However, it cannot be assumed that HLT is a panacea for problems of interaction in the classroom. Firstly, this paper presents the possibilities of HLT and classroom conversation in perhaps its ideal conditions: a one-to-one lesson. As Sacks *et al.* (1974) point out; conversation is perhaps restricted to small groups. If there are more than three participants there is the possibility of schismatic talk (i.e., two separate conversations going on simultaneously). Therefore, conversation in the classroom, as with any conversation, is perhaps only possibly in small groups and not all teachers may have the luxury of teaching in such 'ideal' conditions. If teachers who are faced with large groups of students are to avoid chaos in their classrooms there is almost certainly a need for some kind of instructor controlled turn mediation. Second, the 'letting go' of institutional authority and the requirement that the learner takes more initiative for learning is not always going to be culturally acceptable. In some learning cultures it is expected that the instructor has clear control of the lesson at all times. Holliday (1994, p. 61 ff.), for example, points out that in Egyptian universities there is a 'cult' of the professor and a desire for lecture style lessons. Such learner expectations sit uncomfortably with teaching styles where the learners are more active. Teaching, after all, is a political act (Brown 1994, pp. 441-2) and as Stevick (1981, p. 294) states, "a would be humanistic teacher who offers freedom and demands independence beyond custom is the natural, predictable victim of punishment at the hands of those who guard custom and feel themselves guarded by it." Finally, despite the fact that HLT is critical of the evaluative paradigm which is inherent in the IRF pattern, this does not mean that the use of the IRF pattern should be totally rejected. Researchers, such as Nassaji and Wells (2000) and Seedhouse (1994, 1996), point out the effectiveness of the IRF pattern in classroom interaction. It is perhaps best to recognise, as Underhill (1999) does, that instructors have a portfolio of identities (lecturer, teacher, and facilitator) and that each identity is created by, and reflexively creates,

different patterns of classroom interaction. The skill is knowing which identity to enact at which stage of the lesson in order to achieve the desired learning aims. The identity of facilitator offers one possibility for classroom interaction that frees up the turn-taking system in the classroom and offers the possibility of classroom conversation. Such a pedagogic resource may, or may not, be appropriate for a particular situation but freeing up the turn-taking system will lead to more learner initiative and to the learner attaining primacy in a world of meaningful interaction rather than being the object of a humanly empty 'jugs into mugs' style of teaching.

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APPENDIX

Transcription conventions

F	facilitator
L	learner
T	teacher
S	student
(2)	approximate length of pause in seconds
[but]	overlapping utterances
?	rising intonation
((writes on..))	description of activity
:	sound stretching
=	latched utterances
()	untranscribable