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CLASSROOM DISCOURSE: THE APPLICABILITY OF SINCLAIR AND COULTHARD'S IRF MODEL

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The aim of this paper is to test the applicability of Sinclair and Coulthard's IRF model to the transcribed spoken classroom discourse in one of the university's EFL classrooms with a strong communicative teaching orientation. The analysis reveals that the applicability of the model appears to be insufficient with regard to the categories of its three-part structure in the lesson stage where a teacher tries to s(t)imulate a 'real' talk through frequent referential questions and subquestions. In this case, the classroom interaction takes over some of the elements of the outside discourse, for which the existing model does not provide enough labels. Therefore certain modifications and adaptations of the model to the modern communicative approach to teaching EFL should be considered. However, teachers and students can still benefit from such and similar analyses based on Sinclair and Coulthard's model to obtain an insight into how language in the classroom interaction works, how communication evolves and what functions are performed by different utterances.

Key words: Sinclair and Coulthard's IRF model, applicability, transcribed spoken data, classroom interaction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

To prepare students for successful communication outside the classroom, a certain amount of time is usually devoted to free spoken interaction, such as discussions, usually stimulated by the teacher's questions and subquestions. When recorded and transcribed, such speech can become a useful resource for analysing the English language and interaction, which could in turn help teachers to gain insight into how communication in the classroom evolves and into the various types of pupils' responses (Willis, 1996).

2. THE IRF MODEL

The pioneering and influential approach to the study of spoken discourse (although not the only valid one; see Bower in Malamah – Thomas, 1987) that came to be known as the IRF model was developed at the University of Birmingham by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and later revised by Sinclair and Brazil (1982), who used discourse in school classrooms as a starting point for their research. A school classroom is something of a special situation because individuals have gathered there with the special purpose of learning something, with a teacher controlling the structure of discourse throughout the lesson. This certainly differs from spontaneous everyday discourse outside the classroom and cannot be considered "the real world" (McCarthy, 1991: 19).

In Croatia, considerable contributions in the field of classroom discourse and interaction have been made by Vrhovac (2001, 2005), who discusses the teacher's role in verbal interaction and the important role of questions, feedback and evaluation, and by Čurković-Kalebić (2003, 2005) who discusses the functions of teacher's spoken acts.

The original system of analysis of spoken discourse by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) is based on Halliday's rank scale description of grammar (Coulthard, 1985; Cook, 1989; Willis, 1992; Brazil, 1995). The system consists of five ranks: lesson, transaction, exchange, move and act. All elements in the system appear in the 'consist of' relationship with an exchange being the basic unit of the interaction (Willis, 1992: 112). The lesson is the highest unit of classroom discourse, consisting of one or more transactions. Exchanges combine to make transactions, and moves combine to make exchanges; moves are further made up of acts. Since

exchange, with its moves and acts, is the main focus of the analysis in this paper, it is necessary to explain some concepts and terminology related to the model in more detail.

An exchange is defined as "the basic unit of interaction" (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). Exchanges can be either teaching or boundary exchanges, whereby the teaching ones are realised by opening, answering and follow-up moves, and the boundary exchanges are realised by framing and focusing moves. The function of boundary exchange is to signal the beginning or end of what the teacher considers to be a stage in the lesson. The function of teaching exchange is to signal the individual steps by which the lesson progresses.

There are three types of teaching exchange recognised by Sinclair and Coulthard (in Brazil, 1995): eliciting, informing and directing each of these depends on what the teacher does: asking questions (initiation), providing information (informing) and asking pupils to do something (directing). According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), the most striking feature of the IRF model is that all the eliciting exchanges have the potential of a three-part structure, although a two-part realisation may also occur (in McCarthy, 1991: 16-17; in Coulthard and Brazil, 1992: 66-69). An exchange consists of an Initiating move (from whoever speaks first), of a Responding move (from whoever responds in some way, either by word or action) and, in many cases, of a Follow-up move (in which the initiator comments on the response in some way (Sinclair and Brazil, 1982: 42). The acronym IRF is thus made up of the initial letters of the terms for moves contained within the model. The moves themselves can be further subdivided into acts, which are the smallest units of the discourse, seen also as "discrete communicative functions" (McCarthy and Carter, 1994: 185). 21 discourse acts have been recognised thus far.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1. *The aim of the study*

The aim of this paper was to test the applicability of Sinclair and Coulthard's IRF model to the spoken data recorded and transcribed in an EFL classroom with a strong emphasis on oral skill development. The analysis revealed certain difficulties in applying the model, which are highlighted and discussed as 'problems' in section 3.4. of the paper.

3.2. The data

The class recorded was a part of a special early foreign language teaching programme, where Slovene students were trained at university level to teach English to children aged 7-10. The class comprised 19 female students enrolled into the 2nd year of regular studies at the Faculty of Education in Maribor. The topic of the lesson was Christmas shopping. The recording was 45 minutes long.

3.3. The procedure

Firstly, the lesson was recorded for 45 minutes. All oral speech was then transcribed. A transcription of oral speech is a written record of interaction in which a researcher copies down, verbatim, the utterances of participants (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 62). It can offer valuable insights into how classroom discourse works. Secondly, in the transcription stage all speech was divided into exchanges, moves and acts, as outlined by Brazil (1995: 47). Of 71 exchanges in the lesson, 34 exchanges were of a three-part structure with predominant initiating: eliciting and responding: reply moves, while 32 exchanges consisted of a two-part structure with no follow-up move. In other exchanges only initiating: eliciting moves appeared without any responding and follow-up moves. All the exchanges which do not follow the typical IRF pattern or which were problematic for categorisation were excluded and are discussed in the following section of the paper. Exchanges are numbered (1, 2, 3 etc) for the sake of reference, although they did not appear in that order in the lesson.

3.4. The analysis and problems encountered

The following abbreviations were used in the analysis: T = teacher; S = student; Ss = students; Ib = bound initiation; F = follow-up; R/I = dual function (response and initiation); aS = another student. The numbers 1 2 3 etc. refer to the moves in an exchange

Problem 1

The eliciting exchange in the classroom performs various functions, which mostly differ from those outside it. A question asked outside the classroom mostly refers to the unknown, while the teacher's questions are usually used to check pupils' knowledge. In such cases the function of the third move is to "... let pupil student know how well he/she has

performed" (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992: 24). The labels 'accept', 'evaluate' or 'comment' are appropriate labels for both of the third moves in exchanges (1) and (2).

Exchange 1

- 1 T: A mark? What's a name for that? I
 2 S: A designer label. R
 3 T: **A designer label. Yes. Mhm.** F

Exchange 2

- 1 T: What's a similar word for shaking? I
 2 S: Trembling. R
 3 T: **Trembling. Yes. Well done.** F

However, what mostly happened in this lesson was that teacher's questions were 'referential' (higher order questions), to which the answer was unknown to the teacher. Such questions are often used to encourage students to express their personal attitudes, opinions, knowledge and beliefs (Nunan, 1991: 192-194).

Exchange 3

- 1 T: Good morning. How are you? I
 2 Ss: Sleepy. R

Exchange 4

- 1 T: Sleepy? Why? I
 2 S: Because of the weather. It's so,
 I don't know, so depressive. R
 3 T: **Yes, it's not so fine.** F (accept + acknowledge)

Exchange (3) is a greeting. Coulthard (in Francis and Hunston, 1992) does not see greetings and leave-takings as parts of a specific interaction structure but rather as markers of the beginning and ending of conversations. However, this exchange is treated as part of the structure and was therefore analysed. Since greetings are considered as 'universal in conversation', it is difficult to analyse feedback in exchanges (3) and (4) in terms of the 'evaluate', 'accept', 'comment' acts

(Sacks in Coulthard, 1985: 88). To evaluate one's mood, as a personal state, would be odd. Tsui (1992: 103) provides an illustration (examples *a* and *b*) of a typical classroom display question (to which the answer is known and knowledge therefore checked) with feedback labelled as 'evaluate' or 'accept'.

a) T: What is the time?

P: It's ten o'clock.

T: Well done.

b) A: What's the time?

B: Ten o'clock.

A: That's right.

It appears so far that 'evaluate' cannot be a feedback act in exchange 4. Since in the IRF model 'accept' means that the teacher considers the answer of the student to be correct, this label was used. Brazil (1995: 43) describes its realization with 'yes', 'no', 'good', 'fine' or the repetition of something said by a student. Although F in this case includes 'yes', it seems not to be related to the correctness of the answer but rather to the teacher's agreement with the student's feelings. For that purpose a more appropriate act 'confirm' can be found in Francis and Hunston's (1992: 131) everyday conversation analysis, whose function is to give or assert agreement. Since no such act can be found in Sinclair and Coulthard's model, 'acknowledge' was used, as a label that bears close resemblance to 'confirm'. Of course, it would be possible to label it as a 'comment' on the weather and one's mood; however, comments mostly serve to "exemplify, expand, justify, provide additional information about the head of the move..." (ibid.: 16).

Problem 2

Another problem related to the 'pupil inform exchanges', the structure of which is IF. The problem appears when students want to share their personal experiences, opinions and views, which are difficult to judge in terms of accepting, evaluating and comments. However, a participant still wants some sort of acknowledgement, even a minimal one, to indicate they are being interesting or understood. An

accompanying response to informing, 'acknowledgement', is socially required in conversations, and as such also expected in the classroom. A 'rule of politeness', with which the listener shows he/she is interested in the conversation and in what the other speaker has to say, is carried out either by making some sort of a comment, such as 'I see' or by making a non-verbal response (nodding). Similar examples were found in this lesson. A typical word for signalling interest in the speaker's speech in Slovene is 'aha', which resembles 'mhm', 'mmm' or 'yeah' in English, for which Francis and Hunston (1992: 133) use the label 'engage'. This does not realise any element of a move structure in everyday discourse despite its function of providing minimal feedback while not interrupting the flow of the other participant's utterance. The flow of interaction in this lesson was stimulated through a long series of questions and sub-questions. In such cases 'acknowledge' was used.

Another problem appeared when 'aha' or nodding occurred simultaneously within the speaker's stretch of language, as in exchange (5). In such cases, an additional 'between' category in the exchange could perhaps be useful, such as I **R-F**.

Exchange 5

1 T: "What is your nightmare?"

I

2 S: My nightmare is when a seller is rude. I just can't stand a rude seller.

R-F

3 T: **Aha.** (*spoken simultaneously with the student's initiating move.*)

Problem 3

Another problem was how to apply the IRF structure to the following exchange:

Exchange 6

1 T: A nightmare? Should I call somebody? (*student's first name is called!*)

2 S: *Student's surname is mentioned?*

3 T: *The same surname is repeated, yes.*

4 S: I don't know. Something bad you that dream.

5 T: Yes.

Because the teacher got no response, she repeated the question in a shortened version known as 'ellipsis' with a rising intonation (Cook, 1989: 20). The exchange can be classified as a boundary one, more specifically as Re-Initiation (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992: 29; Brazil, 1995: 45). The structure is as follows: I R F I(b) R F. Tsui (1992: 103), for example, labels the elicitation move realized by the repeated question, as the 'elicit: repeat' subcategory of an elicitation. It is necessary to mention that responses in the eliciting exchanges can either be verbal or non-verbal (for example, remaining quiet in cases where the answer is unknown, as in (6)). In terms of IRF analysis the problem appears in lines 2 and 3. The response given is not in a typical reply form but in the form of another eliciting move realised by the question, which is followed by another response realised by the answer. This answer does not relate to the question 'What a nightmare is' but answers the question by repeating the surname, which is closer to a request for clarification. Only after this 'embedded pair' does the response to the original initiation finally appear. A similar situation can be found in Coulthard (1992: 149):

A: What's the time?	Eliciting	I
B: The time?	Eliciting	Ib
A: Yes	Informing	R/I
B: Four o'clock.	Informing	R

The comparison with the above example suggests exchange (6) has the following structure:

1 T: A nightmare? **Should I call somebody?** (*student's name is called*)! Ib
 2 S: *Student's surname is mentioned?*
 R/I
 3 T: *Student's surname is repeated, yes.*
 4 S: I don't know. Something bad that you dream.
 R
 5 T: Yes. F

Such embedded pairs often appear in everyday conversation and are called 'insertion sequences'. They appear either because the next speaker

does not understand, is unsure or does not want to answer until he/she knows more (Schegloff in Coulthard, 1985: 73).

Jefferson (*ibid.*: 75), on the other hand, uses the term 'side sequence', explaining that a conversation sometimes stops at a certain point with a request for clarification and then continues from where it left off. Another problem in exchange (6) was with labelling the act 'Should I call somebody?' in line 1. The only possible labels for this act were either 'elicit' or 'aside'. However, as it is clear that the teacher did not expect an answer to the question, 'elicit' was not used. What she did with the rhetorical question was probably give herself time to decide which student to call and indicate that students should prepare to be called. Therefore, 'aside' seems a more appropriate label.

Problem 4

The occurrence of a 'nomination' act in line 1 in exchange (7) necessitates some discussion. 'Nomination' is realized by the names of students and its function is to call on or give permission to a student to contribute to the discourse; it can also be realized by the pronoun 'you'. Due to the 'nomination', the analysis of acts in the following exchange was problematic.

Exchange 7

- 1 T: **What about your neighbour?** I (n + check)
 2 S: Not in December because it ... R

This is a two-part structure with I and R. The I slot is filled with the eliciting move. It is clear that there is no verbal nomination. What the teacher did was simply turn to another student - 'the neighbour'. 'Your neighbour' in the question could thus be also considered as 'nomination'. For this reason, double labelling with acts e and n was used. Sinclair and Coulthard (1992: 28) label similar questions with 'check' as an act in the eliciting move, and present the nomination as <n>. One criticism of the Sinclair and Coulthard's system is that it assumes that each utterance has only one function, while an act or a move can perform two functions, as indicated in exchange (7). However, although double labelling is used by Coulthard and Brazil at the level of structure, it is not used at the rank of moves and acts (Francis and Hunston, 1992).

Problem 5

Sometimes teachers withhold a question until they obtain answers from more students. The structure in such cases slightly deviates from the typical three-part IRF structure and is known as 'listing' (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992: 30; Brazil, 1995: 45). The follow-ups in lines 3 and 5 in exchange (8) additionally perform the function of bound initiation (Ib) through the rising intonation, which signals more possible answers/listing of symptoms. Once the teacher has obtained enough answers, she used falling intonation to signal her acceptance of them and positive evaluation in terms of the number of answers. The structure in such exchanges is thus: IRF(Ib)RF(Ib)RF.

Exchange 8

- | | |
|---------------------|-------|
| 1 T: Like what? | I |
| 2 S: Sweating. | R |
| 3 T: Sweating. | F(Ib) |
| 4 aS: You're tired. | R |
| 5 T: You're tired. | F(Ib) |
| 6 aS: Shaking. | R |
| 7 T: Shaking. | F |

Problem 6

In English lessons it often occurs that a response to a certain question stimulates additional discussion and carries discourse in another direction for a while. It may be that a student suddenly remembers something interesting and responds to one of the previously asked questions. When this occurs it is difficult to decide whether this response should be classified as a new exchange or part of a previous exchange. If the latter option prevails, many 'in between' elements appear, as in (9).

Exchange 9

- | | |
|---|-------------|
| 1 T: Why do you like to shop in Europark? | Ib (elicit) |
| 2 S: Because you have many nice shops and restaurants
and you can buy everything in one place... | R (reply) |
| 3 T: Mhm. | F (accept) |
| 4 T: And is also... (<i>the teacher shows with hands</i>)? | I |

5 Ss: Closed.	R
6 T: So, when it is raining you don't have to bother...	F
7 aS: And parking is for free.	I(b)
8 T: Oh, yes. And parking places are for free.	F

The structure in lines 1, 2, 3 is: Ib R F. What is problematic is whether the move in line 7 should be seen as 'inform' or rather as a part of listing since it is a reply to the previous question 'Why (you like to shop there)?' As can be seen in this example, an 'in between' exchange appears. If line 7 is considered a part of listing, the structure would contain too many elements, for example: I R F (**I R F**) Ib F. In that case additional categories would be needed, such as <IRF> or similar. However, regarding the structure, it is easier to treat line 7 as 'inform', which would separate one long exchange into smaller ones. Another problem was related to feedback and the labelling of 'And is also...?' as 'comment' providing additional information to the reply, or as a new eliciting exchange. The same problem was also encountered in exchanges (10) and (11). However, 'laughing' in (11) was labelled as 'comment' because of the additional information given by the teacher.

Exchange 10

- 1 T: Why?
 2 S: There are some shops which are not in Europark.
 3 T: Yes, exactly.

Exchange 11 (following exchange 9)

And you get more ...? (*with hands drawing in the air*)

- 4 Ss: Fresh air.
 5 T: Yes. Fresh air. Especially in busy December.
 6 Ss: *laugh*
 7 T: OK.

Problem 7

When responding, students sometimes find themselves in a position in which they are unable to continue their reply because they cannot find a suitable word and therefore seek the teacher's help. Their

reply continues once they receive an appropriate hint or the word they need, as in (12) and (13).

Exchange 12

1 T: Do you like a busy December?

2 aS: Sometimes.

(Exchange 13)

Is all so ...mmm....

3 T: **Busy?**

4 S: Busy. Yes. And people buy presents...

It is difficult to apply the IRF model to (12). It should perhaps be treated as a bound exchange with the structure: I R Ib R F. However, line 2 can also be treated as an informing exchange separating one exchange into two with the structure in (13) being I R/I R F.

Problem 8

Another problem was related to 'laughing', which is expected as a response when something funny has been expressed. In exchange (14) students probably recognised humour in the commentary provided by the teacher and laughed; whether the teacher expected such a reaction is difficult to say. If laughing here is considered as a kind of response, the original IRF structure is no longer adequate. Its function could only be that of 'engage' (Francis and Hunston, 1992: 133).

Exchange 14

1 T: And you get more... (*with hands drawing in the air*)? I

2 Ss: Fresh air. R

3 T: Yes. Fresh air. Especially in busy December. F

4 Ss: *laugh* R (engage)

Problem 9

The teacher received no response in (15), so she withheld the same question without repeating it, and instead tried to stimulate thought with the directive 'think about this', which can function as a 'prompt' or a 'direct'. In such cases both labels could again be acceptable. If one

directs the other speaker to think about something, the response is usually non-verbal. In this case, however, a verbal response is expected, indicated by the teacher calling a student. What the teacher was actually saying was 'think about this question and answer', which is a 'direct'. On the other hand, it can also be understood as an encouraging act 'Come on, you can answer, if you think about it' praising the students' mental ability.

Exchange 15

1 T: O.K. Where do you usually shop?

2 Ss: *no response*

Exchange 16

1 T: **Now, think about this one.** (*student's name is called*)!

2 S: I don't know. Maybe...

As exchange (15) clearly shows, utterances perform a range of functions in various situations and it is the illocutionary force of the utterance that defines the response.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis in this paper establishes that some problems related to the IRF model's applicability may occur in more communicative classes that give prominence to oral discussions and in this way reflect real discourse outside the classroom. In such discourse the categories and elements of a traditional three-part structure IRF are simply not enough. To adapt to the demands of modern communicative teaching, the model could adopt some of the categories used for everyday conversation. Nevertheless, teachers and students can still benefit from the IRF analysis of classroom speech data to gain an insight into the type of functions performed by utterances and what actually happens when students interact. Such data can be used as a source for further discussions on various aspects of the language and to activate student participation.

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RAZREDNI DISKURS: PRIMJENJIVOST SINCLAIROVOG I COULTHARDOVOG IRF MODELA

Cilj je ovoga rada testirati primjenjivost Sinclairovoga i Coulthardovoga modela IRF na transkribiranome govornom razrednom diskursu u okviru nastave engleskoga kao stranoga jezika na sveučilištu sa snažnom orijentiranošću ka komunikacijskom pristupu poučavanju. Analiza otkriva da se primjenjivost modela čini nedovoljnom s obzirom na kategorije njegove trodijelne strukture u fazi nastavnoga sata u kojoj nastavnik pokušava s(t)imulirati 'pravi' razgovor kroz stalna referencijalna pitanja i potpitanja. U ovome slučaju razredna interakcija preuzima neke elemente vanjskoga diskursa za koji postojeći model ne pruža dovoljno oznaka. Stoga bi trebale biti uzete u obzir izvjesne modifikacije i adaptacije modela modernome komunikacijskom pristupu poučavanja engleskoga kao stranoga jezika. Međutim, nastavnici i učenici još uvijek mogu imati koristi od takvih i sličnih analiza temeljenih na Sinclairovom i Coulthardovom modelu kako bi stekli uvid u to kako jezik u razrednoj interakciji djeluje, kako se komunikacija razvija i koje su funkcije provedene kroz različite iskaze.

Ključne riječi: Sinclairov i Coulthardov model IRF, primjenjivost, transkribirani govorni podaci, razredna interakcija