



## THE IRF EXCHANGE AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL: A STUDY OF ESL CLASSROOMS IN POKUASE TOWNSHIP, GHANA

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### Abstract:

The classroom is a place where teachers and their pupils or students engage in interaction in order to promote effective learning. Such interactions can follow different patterns, and one such pattern is the IRF (initiation-response-feedback) exchange structure, developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975, 1992). This study examines the use of the IRF exchange pattern as a pedagogical tool in the English language classrooms of some Basic Schools in Pokuase, a town in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. It investigates the way teachers and pupils initiate, respond to, and provide feedback for effective language acquisition. In order to achieve this objective, a qualitative case study was adopted to analyze 11 hours and 40 minutes of classroom recordings and 100 minutes of interview data. Results regarding the IRF structure show that the various acts within the initiation move included nomination, directing, and prompting; the acts in the response move were replying and reacting, while the acts within the feedback move were acceptance, praise, criticism, and expansion. This result is an indication that there were more initiation and feedback acts than response acts, suggesting the teachers dominated the use of the exchange pattern, leaving the pupils to only provide responses. Results of the teachers' role indicate that they are engaging in teacher talk as a way of providing explanation, organizing the lesson, and redirecting learners in the interaction. The teachers also provided prompt guidelines by creating conducive environment for the learners to be able to write, read, also provided specific and individual feedback to either correct learners' language input or to encourage them to learn more. Based on the results, it is argued that teachers, especially at the basic level, should endeavour to employ the use of the IRF pattern because it has the potential to contribute a great deal to ESL teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** IRF exchange, pedagogical tool, ESL classrooms, classroom interaction

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## 1. Introduction

This study examines the use of the IRF (initiation-response-feedback) exchange pattern as a pedagogical tool in the English language classrooms of some Basic schools in Pokuase, a town in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Classroom interaction is very useful as an educational strategy to enhance students' learning process. According to Taous (2013), this interaction plays a significant role in the process of learning through which learners are given opportunity to receive the input provided by the teacher. He further notes that learners must understand this input in order to get them actively participating in the classroom task through the provision of the output that the teacher envisages, and the ESL classroom is not an exception. In the opinion of Hall and Walsh (2002), classroom interaction takes on an especially significant role in that it is both the medium through which learning is realized and an object of pedagogical attention. Brown (2001) also argues that interaction is at the heart of communicative competence. Thus, as learners interact with another, they receive input and produce output. Nunan (1991) opines that language is acquired as learners actively engage and interact with each other to communicate in the target language. In addition, social-interactionists see language as a rule-governed cultural activity learned in interaction with others. Again, Ellis (2004) asserts that interactionists view language learning as an outcome of participating in face-to-face interaction, hence, the importance of interaction in the language classroom.

Dagarin (2004) observes that classroom interaction is a two-way process between the participants in the learning process. This process may involve not just the teacher and the pupil, but also between or among pupils. As such, Goronga (2013) observes that it is through classroom interaction that pupils are encouraged to get involved in the teaching and learning process. Apart from this, pupils also become comfortable to talk, rather than just reacting to the teacher's instructions or prompts. In the process of assisting the student in their learning, many factors have been found to affect classroom communication: the job of the teacher, the setting of the learning environment, and social relations (Sinclair, & Brazil, 1982). This is quite phenomenal in the Ghanaian setting since teachers deal with pupils/students of multiple linguistic backgrounds, from diverse socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds and different ethnographic environments. All of these have one influence or the other on the student's rate of acquiring the English language. By implication, the rate at which a student acquires language is dependent on the interaction that takes place between them and the teacher as well as environmental factors. Thus, the major factor that influences the child's language acquisition is the interaction between the teacher and the student in the classroom.

Classroom interactions have usually been conducted with the assumption that the student gains the opportunity to practice the correct usage of the language orally through such interactions and also receives instant feedback from the teacher, facilitating the learning process. To be sure of the contribution of teacher-student classroom interaction,

there is the need for a careful analysis of such interaction. Thus, whether a class follows a traditional style or more recent trends, analyzing classroom discourse is a useful way to understand the structure or pattern of communication between teachers and students. Again, an understanding of classroom interaction can be a valuable tool in preparing the Ghanaian child for real-life language interactions. Analyzing classroom discourse can also show the proportion of teacher-talk to that of 'real' communication by assessing the output that both teachers and students produce (McCarthy, 2002). Finally, Jones (2009) observes that an awareness of the pattern of interaction can improve classroom spoken discourse and pedagogy by encouraging teacher decision-making in the classroom. It has been established that the major features of a classroom interaction can be considered in three parts: a teacher initiates (Initiation, or I), a student responds (Response, or R), and a teacher provides feedback (Feedback, or F). As the names imply, this pattern is simply known as *initiation-response-feedback* or IRF exchange pattern.

Studies (e.g. Li, 2018; Sert, 2019) have shown that interaction between the teacher and the student as a teaching pedagogical tool plays a very significant role as far as the language acquisition process is concerned. However, the extent to which classroom interaction plays a role in the language acquisition process in the ESL classroom in Ghana has not been clearly established. This is because there is no study that examines this phenomenon in the country. Currently, studies that focus on the language classroom report on the use of code-switching (e.g. Tagoe, 2019; Yevudey, 2013) and interruptions and overlaps (e.g. Nyarko, 2020) without any work on the use of IRF, although this is the basic pattern of interaction in any classroom. Meanwhile, such an activity helps determine the nature and extent of the relationship between teachers and students and how it influences L2 acquisition. In addition, Ramirez-Verdugo & Castellano (2021) observe that interactional practices can be applied in the language classroom so as to respond to the goal of L2 teaching and to help improve teaching and learning. Therefore, the current study aims to fill the literature gap by employing a qualitative case study design to reveal the nature of IRF patterning in the ESL classroom in Ghana and to examine the role of teachers in achieving pedagogic goals in the L2 classroom. To achieve these, the questions posed are as follows:

- 1) How is the IRF pattern applied in the ESL classroom in schools in Pokuase?
- 2) What is the role of teachers in the exchange structure?

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next section discusses the three-part exchange structure as used in the classroom. The third section focuses on the methodology adopted for the study, and this is followed with a discussion of the results obtained from the analysis of the data. The final section presents the conclusion of the study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Conceptual framework: Sinclair and Coulthard's Model of classroom discourse

For a teacher to achieve his/her instructional goals, all means are employed to get learners to understand the lesson. As already indicated, the best way of doing so is through classroom interaction. It is significant to realize that learners are able to relate to classrooms that are lively and are learner-centred with meaningful communication. In this sense, Hardman (2016) observes that high quality talk between the teacher and student(s) provides a fertile ground for an active, highly collaborative and cognitively stimulating learning process that leads to improved learning outcomes. Thus, high quality classroom talk is characterized by the use of open and authentic questions and formative feedback whereby student contributions are probed and elaborated on, leading to the three-part exchange structure. The three-part exchange structure therefore serves as a pedagogical tool and enables the teacher to understand the structure of communication between him/her and students. The three-part exchange structure is part of a comprehensive model developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) to investigate the organization of linguistic units above the rank of clause, and to explore the intermediary levels of language between context and phonetic substance. While it was used as a 'starting point' for discourse analysis, it has actually become a stepping stone for the development of other new models of analysing classroom discourse.

McCarthy (2002) observes that British linguists have historically contributed significantly towards maintaining the structural-linguistic criteria for analyzing the bits and pieces of the units in isolation and finally setting up a well-defined sequence of discourse. Among these notables are John Sinclair and Malcolm Coulthard. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) undertook a very useful study at the University of Birmingham and developed it into a model for analyzing teacher-student talk based on a hierarchically structured system of ranks. In their work, they came up with a framework to analyse the English used by teachers and pupils during classroom discourse. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) suggested that pedagogical discourse at the analytical level can be considered in terms of the linguistic levels of sentential analysis and the social and pedagogical level of programmes and courses (Snikdha, 2016). Their system of ranks has a rank scale made up of five ranks. This is illustrated as:

**Lesson → transaction → exchange → move → act**

Each element within the rank builds up the elements of the higher rank, in accordance with the hierarchical structure. That is, several acts make up a move; a build-up of moves results in an exchange; different exchanges form a transaction, with a build-up of transactions making up a lesson. In the present study, the focus is on exchange, the third element within the rank. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) found in their study that classroom language of native speakers combined with the three-part exchange of teacher's initiation, learner's response, and teacher's feedback (IRF).

## 2.2 The initiation, response and feedback (or IRF) approach to teaching

As already indicated, this approach refers to exchange or the interaction that occurs between the teacher and the student in the classroom. Here, there are three different but related moves: the teacher initiates the interaction, usually by asking a question, from the student that elicits a participatory response from the student. The teacher then evaluates the response through a feedback move (Ho, 2007). Other scholars refer to it by some other names such as triadic dialogue (Lemke, 1990) and triadic dialogue genre (Wells, 1999) respectively. Another term that is used to describe this exchange is the initiation-response-evaluation pattern (or IRE), where the F in IRF has been replaced with E. According to Hall and Walsh (2002), the IRE is a “*teacher-led three-part sequence*” (p. 188). In this sequence, the teacher asks a question in the initiation move, allowing a learner to answer in the response move, and then the teacher evaluates the response of the learner. Unlike the IRF exchange, the teacher is seen as an expert knower while the learners assume the role of non-knowers. Here, Thoms (2012) is of the view that the teacher is the one who usually decides how turns should be taken with learners having fewer chances of being active participants.

Because the classroom is not mainly about a knower and non-knowers, the IRE is considered limited in scope. For example, van Compernelle (2015) notes that this structure fails to provide learners with the needed interactive environment resulting from collaborative participation with their teachers. In this sense, van Compernelle only re-echoed what has been found in different studies involving the IRE structure. Results of these studies point to a limitation in the pattern in that, as Simona (2002) argues, learners are not allowed enough time to speak and express themselves beyond a certain point as the teacher mediates, paying little attention to most of what they have to say. Unlike the IRE, the IRF structure does not constrain the learner as such, but rather, is used to perform simple important tasks that inure to both teacher’s and learner’s benefit. For instance, Gibbons (2006) intimates that teachers can use it to ensure learners’ understanding of a particular task. He again states that it can be used to check students’ existing knowledge and share it with the whole class as whatever is discussed is relevant to the entire class.

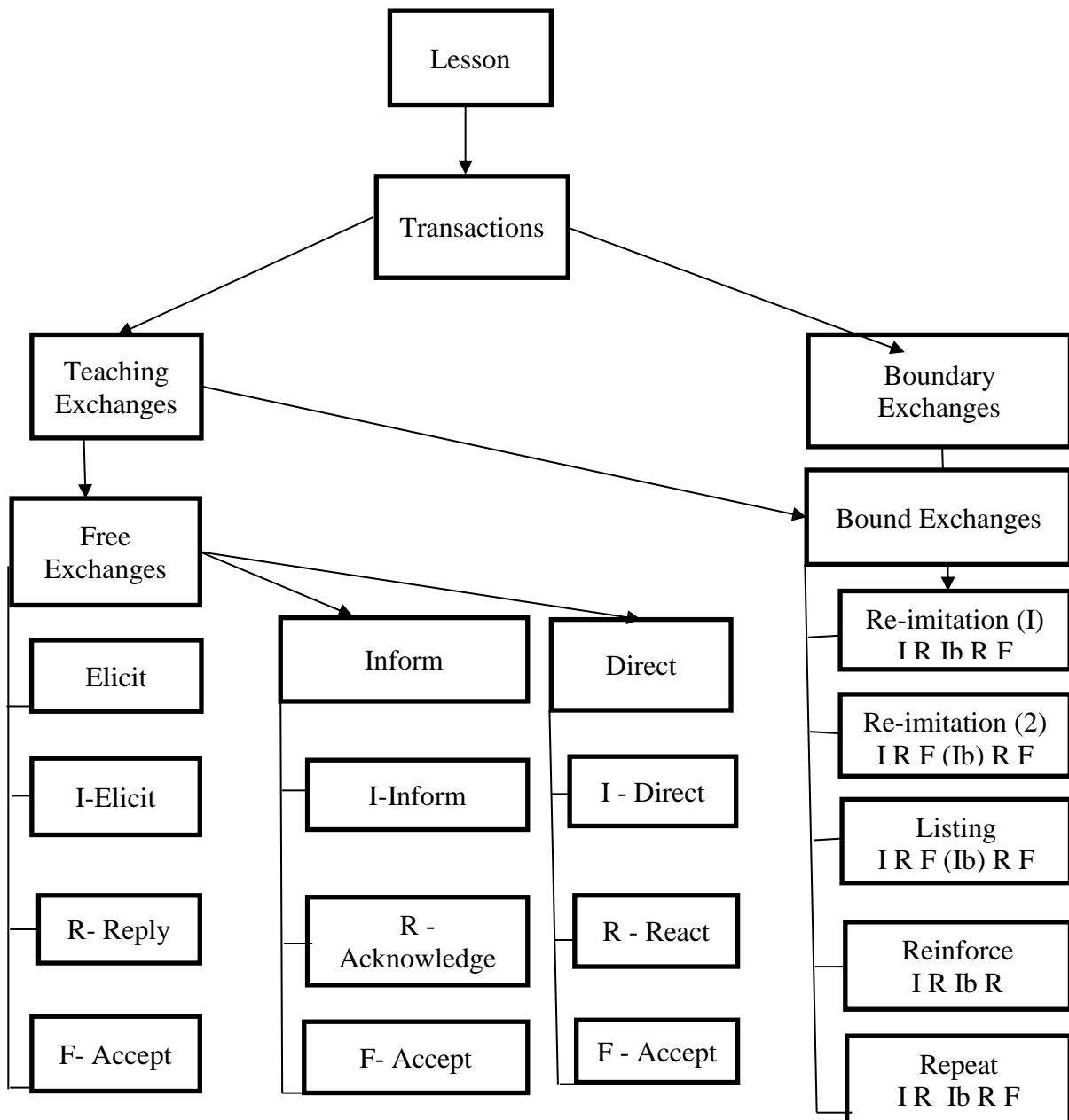
Sinclair and Coulthard (1975, 1992) identify two major classes of exchange: boundary exchanges and teaching exchanges. These exchanges take place to mark either the beginning or the end of a lesson. They can also be used to signify a change of topic with discourse organizers such as ‘right’, ‘alright’, ‘now’, ‘ok’. In this sense, Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) describe teaching exchanges as the individual steps through which the lesson progresses. Also, as Hall and Walsh (2002) observe, practitioners who adopt IRF instead of IRE “*have a more inquiry-based understanding of learning, which values the activities of exploration, hypothesis testing, and problem solving*” (pp. 196-197).

According to Hellermann (2003), and Wells (1993), the key tenets of the IRF are that interaction in the classroom is both hierarchical and sequential. It is hierarchical in that it is the teacher who makes the most moves by initiating the lesson based on the fact that s/he plans and executes what is to be taught while learners receive the knowledge. And, it is sequential in the sense that after the teacher initiates, learners are allowed to

respond to the teacher's initiation. The teacher then provides feedback based to the learners' responses.

Malouf (1995) and Jones (2009) indicate that teaching exchanges are classified as *free or bound*. Free exchanges include activities such as informing, directing, eliciting, and checking while bound exchanges include re-initiation, listing, reinforcement, and repeat.

**Figure 1:** A summary of the functions and notations of the acts



(Adopted from Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975)

Bound teaching exchanges contain a more complex structure as they are attached to the preceding exchange and always initiated by an eliciting move. With respect to exchanges, a summary of the components of the model are illustrated in Figure 1.

Although exchanges are predominately initiated by the teacher, learners can also initiate, elicit, or inform. Malouf (1995) and Jones (2009) have both noted that for better acquisition of a second language, there is the need for the IRF exchange to be employed. In other words, classroom interaction that follows the IRF structure is preferred for effective second language acquisition to take place. After all, the primary aim of learning a language is to communicate for life. Ultimately, classroom interaction is a key to achieve this goal (Tuan & Nhu, 2010). From a broad perspective, one may consider the IRF structure as the basic unit of instruction or the most primary pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. However, Sadker and Sadker (1991) argue that *“the manner in which it is handled would usually bring about how effective or ineffective the instruction which is also determined by how well each of the stages ... is implemented”* (p. 14). This means that teachers need to understand the structure, its usage and benefits before they utilize it in their lessons.

### **3. Material and Methods**

#### **3.1 Research approach and design**

A qualitative case study approach was adopted in order to get a holistic view of the study and clear direction towards achieving the set objectives (Creswell, 2014). It emphasizes the importance of looking at variables in the natural setting in which they are found. Qualitative research seeks to answer the ‘why’, questions but not the ‘how’ question of its topic through the analysis of unstructured information like interviews transcripts and recordings, emails, notes, feedback forms, photos and videos. Scholars who have embarked on research in the classroom have used diverse approaches and methodologies. This approach was therefore adopted to enable the researchers go a little further in the study of classroom interaction.

#### **3.2 Population and sampling**

There are 30 Basic Schools in the research area; of this, 15 are public while 15 are private schools. Because it was not possible to engage every school for the study, 10 schools were selected. The 10 schools were selected using a convenience sampling technique. Before the study commenced, a letter was sent to all the schools for permission. Out of this, only 10 schools showed willingness to participate. The 10 schools were made up of five public schools and five private schools. For the data collected to be representative enough, seven classes were selected from each of the sampled schools for interaction. The classes were Basic 1 to 6 and one Junior High School (JHS) class. Where there was more than one English language teacher in a particular JHS, only one was selected. Thus, the total teacher sample size from the sampled schools was 70; 55 females and 15 males while the pupil sample size was 2352 (1816 from public and 536 from private schools). Table 1 presents the schools and their student population. For the purposes of anonymity, the schools are represented by letters.

**Table 3: Population of schools**

Public		Private		Total
A	338	A	144	482
B	324	B	81	405
C	410	C	56	466
D	501	D	142	643
E	243	E	113	356
<b>Total</b>	<b>1816</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>536</b>	<b>2352</b>

### 3.3 Research instruments and data collection

Before administering the instruments, all the prospective participants were engaged in a brief meeting where the purpose of the study was explained to them. Through this exercise, they were prepared psychologically to strategically prevent any negative attitudes during the course of the research and to pave the way for a smooth study. Again, a high level of mutual respect was exhibited during the data collection process, especially in the interview. During the interview, participants were allowed enough time to think through whatever responses they were giving after which further clarification was sought to responses which were unclear. The instruments used in this research were observation, lesson recording and interview. These instruments were developed to solicit information from the classroom and teachers as far as the three-part exchange is concerned. They were also designed to seek specific information or data on the topic. Samples of each have been included in the appendix.

#### 3.3.1 Recording

One of the instruments used in collecting data from the classroom interaction was audio recording. The recording was done to ascertain how teachers and learners applied the IRF exchange structure, discover various patterns within the IRF structure and the role teachers play within the structure. The data collected through the audio recording were transcribed orthographically and analysed according to the model. Each recording lasted 70 minutes.

#### 3.3.2 Interview

According to Frankel et al (1996), interviewing is an important way for a researcher to check the accuracy of, to verify, or refute the impressions he or she has gained through observation. To buttress this, Fetterman et al (1996) describe interviewing as the most important data collection technique that a qualitative research possesses. An interview gives the participants the opportunity to personally give other detailed information about issues which cannot be captured in the observation but relevant to the study, and offers the opportunity to answer some other specific questions to be asked (Creswell, 2014). In this study, a semi-structured interview guide was conducted with 10 teachers to find out the kind of classroom interaction the teacher and the learners engage in as well as the teachers' role in ensuring that interactions become successful. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Each interview lasted 10 minutes.



### **3.3.3 Observation**

Researchers can obtain data on the physical setting, the human setting, the interactional setting and the programme setting via observation. Observations are useful tools to provide direct information about language, language learning, or the language-learning situation. It is the best data collection technique because it helps the researcher to gain insight into the participants' behaviour in their natural environment. Observation was conducted to find out how the IRF is applied in classroom interaction as well as the role of teachers and learners in the exchange. Each observation lasted 20 minutes.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The recorded data were transcribed orthographically from audio to text. The data were then analysed thematically based on five out of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps in analysing qualitative data. The researchers read through the data severally and became familiar with the data. After the familiarization, the themes that emerged were identified and labelled. This includes how the IRF is applied in the classroom and the various roles of the teachers and learners. The researchers then searched for common patterns in the data that were relevant to the research questions. Themes in relation to both the coded extracts and full data set were checked and cross-checked in accordance with the research objectives. From this step, detailed analysis of each theme that emerged was conducted in order to identify and selected the patterns constituting the final set of themes useful in presenting the findings. The entire analysis was informed by the principles of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The discussions and analysis of the research findings are based on the data collected and the research questions set out to be answered in this work. The chapter is divided into two sections: The first section presents the analysis of the patterns of the IRF exchange structure in the classrooms. Here, the prototypical IRF structure was used while other patterns such as I, IR, and IF were also identified in the interactional discourse. The second and final section focuses on the role of teachers in the use of the IRF structure. The analysis suggests that teachers perform an important role in the application of the IRF to make the ESL class as interactive as possible.

### **4.1 IRF structure patterns**

The number of lessons and the three-part exchanges recorded during the first observation visit (A1 or B1) and second observation visit (A2 or B2) are as indicated in the Tables 1 (for public schools) and 2 (for private schools) respectively.

**Table 1: Number of lessons observed (public schools)**

Subject	Class	Average class size	Interactions per first visit (O1)	Interactions per second visit (O2)	Average number of interactions	Total
Grammar	BS1	45	20	36	28	56
	BS2	52	16	24	20	40
	BS3	47	23	20	21.5	43
	BS4	68	15	18	16.5	33
	BS5	72	13	0	6.5	13
	BS6	84	0	16	8	16
	BS7	66	10	14	12	24
	BS8	94	10	13	11.5	23
	BS9	150	8	14	11	22
Reading	BS1	45	25	45	35	70
	BS2	52	20	38	29	58
	BS3	47	17	29	23	46
	BS4	68	21	43	32	64
	BS5	72	16	41	28.5	57
	BS6	84	26	34	30	60
	BS7	66	13	28	20.5	41
	BS8	94	24	14	19	38
	BS9	150	15	32	23.5	47
Listening/ Speaking Speech work	BS1	45	68	96	82	164
	BS2	52	65	88	76.5	153
	BS3	47	72	83	77.5	155
	BS4	68	66	78	72	144
	BS5	72	0	15	7.5	15
	BS6	84	47	65	56	112
	BS7	66	38	60	49	98
	BS8	94	32	45	38.5	77
	BS9	150	26	0	13	26

**Table 2: Number of lessons observed (private schools)**

Subject	Class	Average class size	Interactions on first visit (O1)	Interactions on second visit (O2)	Average number of interactions	Total
Grammar	BS1	4	82	96	89	178
	BS2	15	58	64	61	122
	BS3	12	65	72	68.5	137
	BS4	8	78	80	79	158
	BS5	22	56	67	61.5	123
	BS6	36	48	0	24	48
	BS7	24	0	14	7	14
	BS8	33	50	53	51.5	103
	BS9	18	72	74	73	146
Reading	BS1	4	65	75	70	140
	BS2	15	50	68	59	118
	BS3	12	57	69	63	126

	BS4	8	72	73	72.5	145	
	BS5	22	54	61	57.5	115	
	BS6	36	46	54	50	100	
	BS7	24	53	58	55.5	111	
	BS8	33	44	54	49	98	
	BS9	18	65	62	63.5	127	
	Listening / Speaking Speech work	BS1	4	68	96	82	164
		BS2	15	65	78	71.5	143
		BS3	12	72	83	77.5	155
BS4		8	66	0	33	66	
BS5		22	0	15	7.5	15	
BS6		36	0	16	8	16	
BS7		24	58	60	59	118	
BS8		33	52	55	53.5	107	
BS9		18	66	70	68	136	

We see from the tables that the number of interactive exchanges that occurred in the public schools appears lower than that of the private schools. This is due to large class sizes found in the public schools. Comparatively, the private schools were able to engage more in the three-part exchange during teaching and learning because they mostly have manageable class sizes. In the public schools, the following averages were noted: Overall average is 31.4 interactions per seventy-minute lesson. Grammar lesson average is 15 interactions per lesson, Reading average is 26.7 interactions per lesson, and Speech Work average is 52.4 interactions per lesson with a range of 0 to 96 interactions per lesson. However, the picture in the private schools is quite different. The averages noted for the exchanges during the various lessons were as follows: Overall average 56.09 interactions per lesson, Grammar average is 57.2 interactions per lesson, Reading average is 60 interactions per lesson and Speech work average is 51.1 interactions per lesson with a range of 0 to 96 interactions per lesson. The various patterns of the IRF structure that occurred in the classroom are discussed as follows:

#### 4.1.1 Initiation

In the classroom, initiation was done by both the teacher and the learners (Sunderland, 2001). In the context of teaching and learning, the teacher initiates the interaction based on the topic for the day's lesson and the communicative objectives to be achieved. The way the topic is introduced and demonstrated for further classroom discussion is what is referred to as initiation. The different types of initiation found in the data are:

##### 4.1.1.1 Nomination

The first element that was revealed in the initiation part of the classroom conversation was the nomination. Most of the teachers often addressed the learners by their names to involve them in the task on hand. Addressing the learners by their names contributed a great deal to make them participate minutely in the discussions and activities. The nomination also made the class learner-centered instead of being teacher-centered. Active

learners felt very motivated to share their opinions when their teachers volunteered them to give comments on the presented ideas. Moreover, the passive learners also became aware of their performance while the teacher addressed them by their names during the activity. An example of nomination found in the data is presented in Extract 1 (All names have been replaced with pseudonyms)

**Extract 1:**

1. *Teacher: well Jonas ..... what is the topic about?*
2. *Jonas: Madam, we are to give directions to our friends from our school to the community hospital*
3. *Teacher: Is he correct Ali?*
4. *Student: Sir, he's correct but I think he should have added after school.*
5. *Teacher: so, what type of essay is it? Adzo.*
6. *Student 1: Sir it is a narrative essay*

In Extract 1, the teacher starts teaching and then gets to a point where he needs a pupil to answer a question. Rather than just asking the question for anyone to raise their hands, he calls out someone's name to provide the answer. In this sense, we say that nomination has taken place or the teacher has *nominated* a pupil. This is seen in lines 1, 3, and 5. From the analysis, it was realized that nomination was quite useful in the upper classes, with role play occurring more frequently in the lower classes, making the class learner-centered. On the other hand, in classes where the teachers did not nominate any learner by their names the learners felt less a part of the class than being involved. In such classes, teaching could easily be described as teacher-centered, since the teachers did most of the talking.

**4.1.1.2 Directing**

The next act noted in the data is directing. While directing the learners, the teachers applied their own teaching strategies based on their experience and assumptions about the learners' level of proficiency and interests. From the analysis, they used directing to give a clear idea about the task to be performed, helped the learners to complete the task by following a chronological plan and to maintain the role of the facilitator and to retain the classroom etiquette. An example is seen in Extract 2.

**Extract 2:**

*Teacher: Open to page 23 of your English language workbook; a substitution table about the Post office. Use the table to create a dialogue about your visit to the Post Office and your experience.*

At a point in the teaching exchange, the teacher decided to stop and evaluate the pupils' level of understanding. To do this, he decided to *direct* them to a specific task from their textbook. With such an act, Macedo contends that directing is when the teacher tells

the students what to do as an opening move in the exchange. The response to this is that students usually do what they are told in a non-verbal act (Macedo, 2000). It was realized that this type worked better for the more experienced teachers. This actually worked very well for teachers in the public schools.

Another example of directing is shown in Extract 3 as follows:

**Extract 3:**

1. *Teacher: All group leaders to raise up their hands; the rest of the class should break into their respective groups at where the group leaders.*
2. *Group leaders stand at vantage points to welcome the members join them.*
3. *Teacher: Each group is to discuss your individual topics*  
*[Group Leaders ensure their groups carry out the assigned task].*

From the extract, we see that directing helped the teachers to conduct the activities and lesson by avoiding any chaotic situations occurring from the misconception about the instructions and also to manage the classroom.

#### **4.1.1.3 Prompting**

Prompts were used by the teachers to ensure the learners complete the assigned task within the given timeframe. This was done to teach the learners to work within the allotted timeframe of an activity and to understand their cognitive abilities by their level of accomplishment of a given task. Additionally, Li (2018) mentions that a teacher prompts students in the IRF cycle to elicit their responses with the aim to highlighting a pedagogical focus. Such an idea is supported by Snikdha (2016) who also observes that prompts usually put reinforcement on directives and elicitation and are commonly used in the middle of an initiating task. Here, the teachers reinforce the fulfillment of the goal to be achieved in the targeted timeline (Dailey, 2010). An example of prompting is shown in Extract 4:

**Extract 4:**

- a. *Student 2: Sir, time?*  
*Teacher: You have five minutes to think. After which, I will call one member from each group to tell the class about their findings. So, everyone has to fully participate in the discussion.*
- b. *Teacher: Now, get back to your previous groups.*
- c. *Teacher: You have fifteen minutes to finish this work. So, hurry up.*

In (a) a student asks about the time because the teacher had given them some time to think about the assignment. With this, the teacher provided the answer. Here, we see that the student has initiated the discourse by eliciting information from the teacher. It is after this elicitation that the teacher provided the answer. The expressions *You have five*

*minutes to think* and *You have fifteen minutes to finish this work* are both prompts that are used by the teacher to get the students to be aware of the time for the tasks.

#### 4.1.2 Response

In classroom interaction, responses can come from both the teacher and the learner depending on the subject of discussion. The analysis revealed that responses from learners were typically shorter than the teachers' questions. Again, responses can be verbal or non-verbal form nodding the head, giving of blank gaze, pointing with hand (Snikda, 2016). Responses can be a denial or acceptance in reference to the question asked. Types of responses found in the classroom are as follows:

##### 4.1.2.1 Replying

In the classrooms, the learners often gave answers to the queries displayed by the teacher and their peers. These types of responses were all linguistic responses and therefore termed as replies. In most cases, responses of the learners comprised of short chunks than the teachers' questions containing long chunks. According to Snikdha, replying is realized by a statement, question or modeless item and non-verbal surrogates as nods. Its function is to provide a linguistic response which is appropriate to the elicitation (Snikda, 2016). Dagarin (2004) also intimates that if the students obtain comprehensible input through interaction with the teacher, they can construct their current knowledge and their understanding by making connection and building their mental schemata. Instances of replying are shown in Extract 5:

##### Extract 5:

- a. *Teacher: Hmm.... Now let's come to our education system in Ghana, have you learnt of any changes coming?*  
*Student f: Yes sir. (Replying)*
- b. *Teacher: Good, could you tell us about it?*  
*Student f: Sir, I hear there is a new curriculum being introduced. (Replying)*  
*Teacher: You are right. Anymore?*
- c. *Student p: Yes, New subjects have been introduced. (Replying) e.g. Our World Our People*

##### 4.1.2.2 Reacting

In some of the lessons, the learners reacted to the teachers' directions and presented ideas. Therefore, reacting were those non-linguistic responses that the learners produced during the classroom discourse. Reacting is realized by a non-linguistic action and its function is to provide the appropriate non-linguistic response defined by the preceding directive (Snikda, 2016). In the opinion of Wells (1993), a student attempts to answer the question by replying to it. For example, this is illustrated in Extract 6:

**Extract 6:**

- a. *Teacher: So, you are saying they can take admission in some other schools where smoking is allowed.*  
*Student m: (nodding her head to indicate a positive reaction)*
- b. *Teacher: So, please move your chairs quietly and re-form your groups.*  
*Learners move their chairs and form circles of five members.*
- c. *Now, pick your vocabulary books and open to page 16.*  
*Students pick their books from their bags and open to the requested page. (In reaction)*

Here, the pupils did not give any verbal responses to the teacher's instruction. They, rather, used non-verbal signals such as head nods (in a), moving chairs (in b), and picking chairs (in c). This clearly shows that in the classroom, one can respond to an initiation not just by speaking always, but also by using non-verbal cues.

#### **4.1.3 Feedback**

The last in the exchange structure is feedback (F), a turn which aims to give feedback to students' responses. The analysis showed that teachers had varied means of evaluating their lessons and giving feedback to the learners. Because, it grants the opportunity for both teacher and student to play their part as instantly as may be necessary, teachers are able to correct students' mistakes instantly. Students are also able to present their difficulties regarding the lesson to the teacher. As already indicated in the previous sections, feedback offers an opportunity for shaping students' oral communicative skills. This eventually goes a long way to enhance their answers to their written exercises (Rustandi & Mubarok, 2017).

Different types of feedback were found in the data: In the public schools, praise formed 9.9% of the total responses. Acceptance, expansion and remediation as well as no response were 55.9%, 16.6%, 7.4%, and 10.2% respectively. Similar results were obtained from the private schools where there was 11.1% praise, 47% acceptance, 18.5% expansion and remediation, 8.8% criticism and 14.5 % no response. The teachers' responses following open-ended questions were much more of the expansion/remediation type than simple acceptance. This finding is consistent with the findings of Sadker and Sadker (1991, p. 25) that a high proportion of display questions will probably be followed by acceptance responses like "OK," and that more challenging questions lead to more remediation responses. The most frequently used phrases and words of praise included: "lovely, that was very good"; "good, that's a hard one!"; "Great!" and "right, what a good example!". The types of feedback found in the data are discussed as follows:

##### **4.1.3.1 Acceptance**

Although acceptance was considered the widely used and most common form of feedback in the IRF model, in the class observation, teachers mostly used praise, criticism and probing of learner's response as a form of follow-up activities. On the heels of this, the teacher used the learner's response to give a confirmation to the student's question

and also give more information that the students need the related material (Noviana & Ardi, 2015). Finally, the teacher can accept the response with feedback or a follow-up by saying *yes*, *no*, *good* or allowing a repetition of the utterance given by the student (Macedo, 2000). For instance, Extract 7 is an illustration from a literature class:

**Extract 7:**

*Teacher: In literature, the place and time for incident is?*

*Student: setting*

*Teacher: good! (p)*

*Teacher: Mercy, how many types of literature do we have?*

*Student: sir, three.*

*Teacher: No (negative feedback)*

*Student2; two*

*Teacher: that's fine!*

From the extract, the teacher initiates a question, a student answers and the teacher gives feedback using words such as *good*, *No*, *that's fine*. The use of *No* shows that the teacher did not like the student's response, while *good* and *that's fine* suggest acceptance of the response.

#### 4.1.3.2 Praise

Teachers make use of this type of feedback usually, by using words or phrases to indicate that a learner's response is satisfactory. In most cases, the common signals are 'good', 'very good', 'yes', 'correct' and 'ok'. From the analysis, it was generally revealed that the teachers' evaluative feedback habitually takes three patterns; (i) the teacher praising the students after providing a correct response; (ii) the teacher repeating the answers offered by the students; and (iii) the teacher accepting answers but recasting them (Elkhouzai, 2016).

An example is found in Extract 8:

**Extract 8:**

- a. *Teacher: Thank you, people, for your efforts to present your parts. (praise) Okay, now, tell me what your experience of making such dialogues is?*

The teacher praises the students for a good job done by using *thank you*. In fact, she lets the students know that they have done well by adding that they have put in great effort in executing the assignment.

#### 4.1.3.3 Criticism

This kind of feedback may be used diversely and sparingly in class. According to Snikdha (2016), it is a relatively rare form of instructor's evaluation which also occurs only 7



percent of instructor's reactions. In Extract 9, a learner is found to be inattentive towards the lesson.

**Extract 9:**

*Teacher: can you give me examples of closing note to end up dialogues?*

*Learner: "quotations and full punctuations"*

*Teacher: Good, then let me help you out with some areas. I see many of you have forgotten to support the dialogues with proper closing note. (Criticism) Remember guys; don't forget to give a closing note before you end up your role play.*

*Student: Okay, mum.*

*Teacher: Oh, I see, you know a lot of them. Great. (Praise); Now, let's come back to our case.*

In the extract, we see that a student responds to the teacher's questions and the teacher also gives her assessment of the answer. However, rather than completely dismissing the student's answer, she decides to first praise him and then let the class know exactly what is missing from his answer. With this, she is also able to give further directives as to what to do next time.

**4.1.3.4 Expansion**

Exchanges which begin with open-ended questions are less likely to include teacher responses of simple acceptance, and much more likely to include expansion/remediation responses, thus soliciting further student involvement. Wood (1992) notes that teachers should use a less controlling type of discourse if they really want to hear what pupils think. He also admonishes that they should do so if they genuinely want to encourage students to ask questions of their own. An instance of expansion is seen in Extract 10:

**Extract 10:**

*Teacher: Adam, mention one effect of drug abuse*

*Adam: Sir, mad*

*Teacher: Yes, you have a good point but you can say it this way; one effect of drug abuse is madness.*

*Teacher: who else will try? Yes Flo.*

*Flo: Sir lose job*

*Teacher: Another good point but we can put it this way; it can bring about loss of job*

Throughout the exchange, the teacher expanded whatever answers the students gave. This is because she realized that every one of them gave an incomplete answer. What is important about this feedback is that the teacher did not just expand the structure, but also drew students' attention to the fact that they always need to produce the correct form of their answers, and not shorten it.

Many researchers have found that it is not always the teacher who initiates, gives response and feedback (e.g. Cockayne, 2010; Raine, 2010). They note that learners can equally initiate, respond to other comments and give feedback as well. In the same vein, sometimes there is no feedback to any response or initiation (Quomi, 2014). Table 3 presents a summary of the different patterns that the IRF can take in the classroom.

**Table 3:** A summary of other exchange patterns

Class of exchange	First sub-class of exchange	Second subclass of exchange	Function of the exchange	Structure of exchange in terms of moves
Boundary	N/A	N/A	to signify the start of a new stage (transaction) in a lesson	(FO) (FO)
Teaching	Free	Teacher inform (Inform)	to convey information to the pupils	I
		Teacher direct (Direct)	to direct pupils to do (but not say) something	IR(F)
		Pupil elicit (P-Elicit)	to elicit a verbal response from the teacher	IR
		Pupil inform (P-Inform)	to convey information to the teacher	IF
		Check (Check)	to discover how well pupils are getting on	IR(F)
	Boundary	Re-initiation (i) (Reinitiation)	to induce a response to a previously unanswered elicitation	I R I <sup>b</sup> R F
		Re-initiation (ii) (Reinitiation)	to induce a correct response to a previously incorrectly answered elicitation	I R F (I <sup>b</sup> ) R F
		Listing (Listing)	to withhold evaluation until two or more responses are received to an elicitation	I R F (I <sup>b</sup> ) R F
		Reinforce (Reinforce)	to induce a (correct) response to a previously issued directive	I R I <sup>b</sup> R
		Repeat (Repeat)	to induce the repetition of an response	I R I <sup>b</sup> R F

#### 4.1.4 I

There are situations where we find an entire structure consisting of an initiation that may or may not be accompanied by a response. This gives us the pattern I(R). The analysis revealed instances of this pattern. With this pattern, the teacher can convey information to learners and vice-versa with no response in the teaching exchange. This is illustrated in Extract 11.

**Extract 11:**

1. *Teacher1: Accra is the capital town of Ghana. (I)*
2. *Teacher2: our topic for today is what I do every Saturday. (I)*
3. *Student: there is a sea in my hometown, so there are a lot of fish there. (I)*

In Extract 11, we see a teacher initiating the discourse in lines 1 and 2, while a student initiates in line 3. The teacher uses his initiation to convey information to the learner and the learner also does same.

**4.1.5 IR (F)**

In this pattern, the teacher elicits non-verbal responses from learners (or directing). For example, Extract 12 is from a composition class where the teacher directs the learners as to what to do in the course of the teaching.

**Extract 12:**

1. *Teacher1: open to your textbook and use the substitution to form sentences on a visit to post office. (I)*
2. *Student: students open without saying anything. (R)*
3. *Teacher2: what type of essay is this? (I)*
4. *Student2: narrative essay. (R)*

In the Extract 17, teacher elicits non-verbal response from the learners. This confirms the assertion that responses may be verbal or non-verbal. In this pattern of exchange, the students generate nothing, but a few simple words to answer the teacher's questions or respond to his/her instructions. They have few chances to practice unless the teacher initiates a question which requires them to give an answer (Qomi, 2004). Also, according to Križan (2008), if one directs the other speaker about something, the response is usually non-verbal. In this case, a verbal response is expected and is indicated by the teacher.

**4.1.6 IR**

In this structure, there is an initiation and a response. This can be used by the learner and the teacher with the aim of eliciting a verbal response from each other in the exchange. An example of this is shown in Extract 13:

**Extract 13:**

- Student: so sir, are there other forms of nouns? (I)*  
*Teacher: yes (R)*  
*Teacher2: is that all? (I)*  
*Student3: I wash my clothes...(R)*

In this exchange, both teacher and students play the role of initiators. In the case of the student, she seeks clarification on the lesson on nouns. In the second exchange, the teacher's initiation seeks to solicit some form of understanding from the students as to determine whether they have really grasped the concept of nouns. In the first exchange, the teacher gives a positive response; an assurance to the learner that lesson on nouns was not exhaustive. In similar vein, the student's response also informs the teacher that they have understood the topic 'nouns'.

#### 4.1.7 IF

This is another form of learner initiation which is aimed at giving information. To each of the initiation, the teacher gives a corresponding feedback. This is similar to what Cockayne (2010) identifies as student informing/conveying information to the teacher. In a composition class in Extract 14, a teacher introduces the lesson and then a student also initiates with a question.

#### Extract 14:

*Teacher: Today we're going to talk about giving directions to people from house using important landmarks.*

*Student1: madam, what are landmarks? (I)*

*Student2: my house is adjacent to **the chief's palace.** (I)*

*Teacher: That's okay! Good one there! (F)*

*Student4: madam, I think we should start from the school to ... (I)*

*Teacher2: well, I think so also... (F)*

From the extract, the learner initiates with a question on what landmarks are, with another giving information on where his house is, while the teacher provides appropriate feedback.

#### 4.1.8 I R F I<sup>b</sup> R R F

This structure induces a response to a previously unanswered elicitation and a re-initiation at a point with a response and feedback. This is shown in Extract 15:

#### Extract 15:

*Teacher: tell me a dream you had last night. (I)*

*Student1: Okay, madam. Last night I had a dream I was urinating outside our compound.  
(R)*

*Student2: (from the back) Wow! That's cool Nat, I can relate... (F)*

*Teacher: Please be quiet. So, what happened next? (I<sup>b</sup>)*

*Student1: I woke up to see.... (R)*

*Teacher: wow! That's a nice experience (F)*

*Teacher2: so who will tell the class what he/she does every Saturday from morning till eve.... (I<sup>b</sup>)*

*Student2: madam, I can do that... (R)*

*Student3: does that mean from the time we stand up from bed? (R)*

*Teacher2: yes, from the time you wake up till the time you get back to bed. (R)*

*Student3: okay, then I will say it.... (F)*

From Extract 15, Teacher initiates exchange, the student responds, another give feedback. In the exchange, the first student is given the opportunity to narrate her dream. This time the teacher is the one who gives the feedback. In the next exchange with the Teacher 2, two students attempted various responses. While student 2 makes a statement to indicate understanding of the teacher's question, student 3's response was in the form of seeking clarification. However, in the course of seeking the clarification, she makes a mistake in her expression which the teacher comes in to correct. Student 3 then gives feedback to the teachers' response. This is in conformity with Nunan (1991), who observes that what mostly happened in this lesson was that the teachers' questions were referential (higher order questions), to which the answers were unknown to the other teacher. Such questions are often used to encourage students to express their personal attitudes, opinions, knowledge and beliefs.

#### **4.1.9 I R F R F**

This pattern seeks to withhold evaluation until two or more responses are received to an elicitation. This is illustrated in Extract 16:

##### **Extract 16:**

*Teacher2: travelling by boat is a nice experience. (I)*

*Student2: I tell you madam! (R)*

*Whole class: Eeeiii, Adam! Since when did you ... (F)*

*Teacher2: never mind Adamu, share your experience with us (R)*

*Student2: well madam..... (F)*

In Extract 16, teacher initiates lesson with a past experience, which corroborated the response given by the student. The student's response attracted probing feedback from the rest of the class. Teacher then responds to students' feedback by encouraging the first respondent to continue. The teacher's response also attracted positive feedback. Ramadhan (2013) proposes that the teacher should realize the importance of the classroom interaction characteristics and to develop their teaching skill and method.

#### **4.2 The role of the teacher in the exchange structure**

In the language classroom, the teachers usually ask the learners to do self-evaluation, arrange peer feedback or discuss some aspects of a previous lesson in order to make the subsequent lessons more learner-centered. Again, they arrange such sessions to check the learners' level of competence after completing the task. The observation revealed that the teacher's role in effectively applying the IRF exchange structure include engaging in

teacher talk, providing prompt guidelines, and providing specific and individual feedback. These are discussed as follows:

#### 4.2.1 Engaging in teacher talk

In classroom interaction, the teacher often controls the topic and the amount of attention that each student receives, and allocates turns (Erikson, 2004). Teacher talk refers to the teacher's usage of language in the classroom discourse. It is an essential tool for teachers in the implementation of the teaching plan and an important source of input for students. This is also consistent with Blanchette (2009), who argues that teachers play a supporting role in classroom teaching by continuously engaging in organizing, explaining, summarizing, reformulating, and redirecting what has been said by themselves and by students. An example of teacher talk takes place between teacher and learner in Extract 17.

#### Extract 17:

*Teacher: What did you do last weekend, Manny?*

*Manny: I went to the beach with my family.*

*Teacher: Really! What was the occasion?*

*Manny: it was my kid brother's birthday.*

*Teacher: what role did you play, Mansa?*

*Manny: I drove the car to and from the beach.*

*Teacher: 'Drove', Manny, 'drove'. It is an irregular verb, remember?*

From the extract, there is an interaction between a teacher and a learner where the teacher is able to reiterate explanation on a tense form through effective talk with the learner. The exchange in Extract 17 shows that teacher talk can be used to achieve different pedagogical objectives.

#### 4.2.2 Providing prompt guidelines

Teachers are the facilitators and planners of lessons, as such, have an upper hand regarding the necessary materials and aids that will enhance their delivery to enable the students grasp the concepts being taught. Teachers assist learners in their effort to read, write, or speak a target language. This is best achieved through the teachers' personal love for the subject and their ability to understand and apply the appropriate pedagogical techniques that could sustain learners' interest in the classroom in order to make head way. Bye (2017) opines that the key to success is to make sure that all teaching and learning components such as the curriculum and the teaching methods, and the assessment tasks, are aligned to each other. Again, Tout (2016) emphasizes the critical role a teacher plays in the classroom. He explains the need for students to be supported and guided in order to learn the necessary skills to achieve the desired outcomes. Responses gathered from some teachers in the interview regarding their approach in giving prompts are shown as follows:

*Interviewer: how do you give prompt guidelines?*

*Teacher 1: I assist the learner in his/her efforts to read, write, speak a target language, draw, or scribble.*

*Teacher2: This is best achieved through the teacher's personal love for the subject and his/her ability to understand and apply the appropriate pedagogical skills.*

*Teacher3: I do that by creating conducive environment in the classroom to help the students roll with along their learning.*

From these remarks, we notice that teachers have various ways of giving prompts to result in better learning outcomes. This is consistent with what Biggs (2011) postulates that the teacher must create a learning environment that facilitates learning.

#### **4.2.3 Providing specific and individual feedback**

With this role, the teacher assesses learners' responses with respect to the learning objectives, identifies their progress, and offers appropriate evaluative comments which are helpful for their success in making the needed progress. As mentioned earlier, Tout (2016) argues that it is vital for the teacher to monitor the progress of their learners and intervene in order for them to successfully achieve the learning outcomes. Thus, if the teacher proceeds without a comment, the implication is that he has given positive feedback (Seedhouse, 2004). Similarly, Walsh (2012) posits that minimal responses in classroom interaction sometimes work as feedback and demonstrate the convergence of pedagogical goals. From the interview, teachers explained how they provide feedback in the exchange structure as follows:

*Interviewer: How do you as classroom teacher provide feedback?*

*Teacher1: I sometimes give positive feedback when the learner answers correctly.*

*In the same vain I do give written corrective feedback in their workbooks to help them come out of their difficulty and get better*

*Teacher4: I criticize them where necessary and praise them as well in their assignments.*

The responses show that teachers provide feedback depending on the need in order for learners to benefit from the teaching and learning processes. This also proves that feedback is very essential in the ELS classroom (Walsh, 2012).

## **5. Conclusion**

We notice from the results that the use of the IRF as a pedagogical tool helps students to take active part in classroom interactive discourse, for example, initiating, responding to, ending dialogues and giving feedback (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1992). Again, the IRF structure is the medium through which learning is realized as an object of pedagogical attention (Hall & Walsh, 2002). We also realize that the exchange enables teacher-learner

or learner-learner interactions. As such, both the teacher and learner can inform, elicit, and evaluate in the structure, making it a non-teacher-dominated exchange (Sunderland, 2001). From these, it can be argued that using the IRF has the potential to contribute a great deal to second language pedagogy by highlighting the conditions for language acquisition. That is, to be an effective second language teacher, the teacher's way of introducing the language to his/her students should be content-based. This is considered to play a major role in the language learning system.

As the results of this study have implications for future research, it is suggested that studies on the impact of the IRF may be conducted in the English language classrooms of other junior high schools in order to fully understand how it affects second language learning. Again, the role of learners may also be explored to help determine their exact contribution in the language learning process. Lastly, studies that make use of interview from learners may also be conducted in order to determine learners' understanding of the exchange structure. Finally, it is recommended that teachers need to create interactional atmosphere in the classroom to facilitate learners' learning. They also need to closely monitor the turn taking sessions to ensure fair participation of all learners. In sum, teachers need to focus on aspects of classroom discourse and the areas of teaching and learning that reflect the needs of their learners and strategize to make them more responsive.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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