

Turn-Taking Patterns in Online English Lessons for Young Learners: An IRF-Based Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates the application of the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) model and turn-taking strategies in synchronous online English classes for young learners at an English course in Indonesia. Although widely used to analyze classroom discourse, IRF's role in online teaching, especially for young learners, remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap through a descriptive qualitative design and discourse analysis of a 50-minute Zoom session with one teacher and ten fifth-grade students. Data were transcribed and analyzed using the IRF framework to identify dominant interaction patterns and teacher strategies. Findings revealed that while IRF remained central, many exchanges occurred in fragmented forms (e.g., Initiation–Response or Initiation–Feedback), mainly due to technical issues, time limits, and lack of non-verbal cues. Response (R) moves were most frequent (44%, 74 occurrences), indicating dominant student participation. Initiation (I) accounted for 25% (43 occurrences), reflecting the teacher's prompting role. Feedback (F) was 15% (25 occurrences), suggesting occasional teacher follow-up. Interestingly, Initiation + Feedback (I + F) comprised 16% (27 occurrences), possibly due to time or technical constraints where teacher initiation and feedback merged. Teachers managed turn-taking using name-calling, verbal cues, chat functions, and fair distribution of speaking turns. These helped sustain interaction and engagement despite platform limitations. The study underscores the need to adapt traditional interaction models for online learning and calls for more context-sensitive strategies in virtual EFL classrooms for young learners.

Keywords: IRF; turn-taking; online classroom interaction; young learners; teacher strategic

INTRODUCTION

Oral interaction is an important part of language learning. Through interaction, students can use the target language in real and meaningful communication situations, rather than simply memorizing grammar rules that are detached from context (Lin et al., 2022). When communicating directly, students have the opportunity to practice their speaking and listening skills in accordance with everyday language use (Springer & Collins, 2008). In addition, interaction also helps create mutual understanding, allows for the negotiation of meaning, and provides space for students to play an active role in the learning process (Sert & Balaman, 2018). From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that language development is most effective through social exchange, especially through collaboration between teachers and students. This highlights the importance of dialogic engagement, where knowledge is constructed together through conversation, scaffolding, and feedback. In the classroom, verbal interaction is not only a means of practice, but also the main mechanism that facilitates and mediates learning (Ardi & Noviana, 2015).

One of the important elements in classroom interaction is turn-taking, which is a regular mechanism that regulates who speaks, when they speak, and how speaking turns are divided among participants (Ginting & Dewi, 2023). Effective turn-taking is essential for maintaining orderly communication while facilitating fair participation between teachers and students (Putri et al., 2021). This mechanism not only helps conversations flow smoothly, but also plays a role in shaping classroom dynamics, power relations, and student engagement (Narvacan & Metila, 2022). In educational discourse

analysis, one of the most widely used frameworks for examining turn-taking is the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern introduced by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). This three-stage pattern provides a systematic framework for observing pedagogical interactions: the teacher initiates the conversation with a question or instruction (Initiation), the student provides an answer (Response), and then the teacher assesses, develops, or redirects the student's contribution (Feedback). The IRF pattern not only shows how knowledge is transmitted and evaluated, but also reveals the extent to which students are given the opportunity to participate meaningfully in classroom conversations. Therefore, this pattern is an important tool for understanding how interactions are formed in a learning environment. In line with this, classroom conversations play a major role in language learning because they encourage meaningful communication between teachers and students.

The IRF model remains the focus of classroom interaction studies due to its systematic structure, which helps identify roles and the sequence of interactions. This model is also flexible and allows for spontaneous engagement, thereby supporting the creation of a dynamic learning environment (Estaji & Shojakhanlou, 2023). However, the shift to synchronous online learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has significantly changed interaction patterns. Features such as muted microphones, the use of chat boxes, and the absence of physical cues disrupt the flow of turn-taking that normally occurs in face-to-face classrooms (Narvacan & Metila, 2022). In addition, technical constraints such as unstable internet connections and audio delays further complicate the smooth transition between speakers in online classes (Putri et al., 2021). Based on these developments, this literature review aims to critically examine how IRF patterns and turn-taking are reflected in online English classes for children, highlighting the interaction structures that emerge, the challenges faced, and the implications for teaching practices in digital learning environments.

In recent years, the use of digital technology in education has become increasingly widespread and has changed the way people interact in the classroom, especially in virtual learning environments (Sari, 2020). Unlike face-to-face classes, which are rich in nonverbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, and body movements, online interactions tend to be limited to verbal communication (Wijayanti, 2023). The loss of multimodal cues often makes the turn-taking process less natural, leading to frequent interruptions, overlapping conversations, or overly long pauses (Hermi, 2022). In addition, technical obstacles such as unstable internet connections, delayed sound, and the use of mute or camera off features further complicate the flow of conversation and make it difficult to manage turn-taking in online classes.

This challenge is particularly evident in English language learning for elementary school children, who generally still need clearer guidance and structured interaction support (Pustika, 2021). At this stage of development, children are still in the process of building the social and linguistic competencies needed to engage effectively in conversation, especially when interactions take place through online media (Andini, 2025). Online communication situations, where turn-taking cues are not as visible and feedback is often delayed, pose a particular challenge for them (Waring, 2019). Therefore, maintaining active participation and facilitating meaningful interaction in online English classes for children requires deliberately designed pedagogical strategies and a deeper understanding of how discourse is formed in this context (Fagan, 2018).

Although the IRF framework has been used to analyze face-to-face classroom discourse, especially at the secondary and university levels, its application in online classroom interactions for children has rarely been studied. Most existing research focuses on older students, who generally have better communication skills and a more mature understanding of interaction norms (Ginting & Dewi, 2023; Tjalla et al., 2023). In contrast, elementary school students are still in the early stages of language and cognitive development, requiring more structured, explicit, and supportive forms of interaction, especially in digital environments where many natural cues in conversation are absent or reduced (Earnshaw, 2017). Although there have been some efforts to highlight this issue, research that truly examines how IRF patterns occur in virtual English classes at the elementary school level, particularly

in the context of EFL in Indonesia, is still very limited. However, with the increasing reliance on online learning platforms and the unique challenges children face in learning languages, it is important to understand how teacher-student interactions are organized and manifested in these virtual spaces. A clearer understanding of turn-taking patterns and IRF sequences in online classrooms can help teachers make more appropriate pedagogical decisions so that language learning feels more interactive and responsive.

This gap highlights the need for more in-depth research on interactions in online English classes for elementary school children. In particular, studies conducted in the context of local education, such as elementary schools in Indonesia, are very important so that the learning strategies developed are more suited to the developmental needs of students while utilizing the potential offered by digital platforms. Based on this background, this study aims to investigate classroom interactions in online English learning for elementary school students, with a primary focus on turn-taking patterns. This study has two main focuses. First, it examines how IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) patterns emerge in synchronous online learning and identifies the most dominant turn-taking patterns in teacher-student interactions. Second, it examines how teachers manage and regulate turn-taking in online classrooms, particularly when nonverbal cues that are usually present in face-to-face interactions are not available, as well as what strategies are used to maintain order and equal participation among elementary school students.

By analyzing these interaction patterns, this study seeks to reveal structural tendencies (such as IRF sequences) as well as procedural mechanisms (such as teachers' strategies in regulating turn-taking) that shape classroom discourse in English as a foreign language learning. The results of this study are expected to provide further understanding of how interactions take place in technology-based learning, while contributing to the practice of teaching English in online elementary school classrooms in Indonesia to be more contextual, interactive, and effective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) model by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) has long been used to analyze teacher-student interactions in classroom discourse. In this structure, a teacher initiates an utterance, a student responds, and the teacher provides feedback. This triadic exchange has been observed in various instructional settings, particularly in traditional face-to-face classrooms (Estaji & Shojakhanlou, 2022). The model is praised for its clarity in identifying interaction roles and learning opportunities. However, its application in online learning especially for young learners remains underexplored. Many prior studies have focused on IRF patterns in higher education or secondary school contexts. For example, Prastiningrum (2022) examined IRF in a synchronous online university class and found that referential questions prompted longer student responses, suggesting the potential for student-initiated interaction. Yet, this study involved adult learners and did not consider challenges unique to young learners.

In TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) settings, Septiani and Rahman (2021) discovered that IRF patterns did emerge, but often needed to be repeated or reinitiated due to the children's limited linguistic abilities. Teachers had to scaffold the interaction by using clarification requests and comprehension checks. This highlights the need for more adaptive IRF usage with younger students but does not extend to online modalities. Andini (2021) similarly studied IRF in a second-grade face-to-face classroom and found that although the pattern appeared, students required significant support through guided repairs and elaborated feedback. While her findings support the use of IRF in early language education, the context was still conventional, without the constraints of digital platforms.

In contrast, Wijayanti (2023) addressed turn-taking strategies in an online context, revealing that "Holding the Turn" was the most frequently observed strategy in Zoom-based lectures. The study recorded over 800 instances of turn-taking, primarily controlled by the teacher. Although the research

considered digital features such as the raise hand function, it focused on adult learners in lecture-style settings, thus limiting its relevance to young learner engagement and interactivity. Focusing on TEYL in a virtual environment, (Tjalla et al., 2023) investigated interaction patterns in both spoken and written formats. They identified IR, IRF, and IRFF structures across Zoom and WhatsApp platforms. However, interaction was still largely teacher-dominated, and written communication (via chat) lacked complexity. This points to the need for designing more interactive structures for children that go beyond teacher-led questioning and scripted responses.

A few studies have shown greater student involvement. For example, Saragih et al. (2022) found that in a Grade 8 speaking class, initiation was dominated by students, particularly through simple greetings or opening phrases. However, these findings cannot be directly applied to younger learners, who typically require stronger guidance and clearer interactional cues. Earnshaw (2017) offered insight into the technical challenges of turn-taking in online learning. In her analysis of graduate-level synchronous courses, she found that audio delays, muted microphones, and unstable internet often led to disjointed exchanges. Participants adapted by confirming their turn via chat or checking the sound before speaking. Although the study revealed useful repair strategies and dual-channel communication, it did not involve young learners or language acquisition settings.

The role of feedback within the IRF sequence is another recurring theme. The article from Putri et al (2021) observed that teacher feedback was rare in a high school class, limiting student engagement and comprehension. Hu (2020) echoemilar concerns in college settings, where feedback was typically evaluative rather than elaborative, leading to superficial exchanges. Estaji & Shojakhanlou (2021), however, emphasized that feedback can foster deeper earner engagement when it includes scaffolding and mutuality especially when used intentionally to build student autonomy. Another critical aspect in online young learner classrooms is repair. Andini (2021) and Septiani & Rahman (2021) both stress the importance of teacher-led repetition and comprehension checks. Without these, young learners struggle to follow the flow of interaction, particularly in less structured environments.

Few studies combine all these aspects IRF structure, turn-taking, feedback quality, and repair strategies in a comprehensive analysis of young learners in synchronous online classrooms. Most TEYL-IRF studies have taken place in offline or hybrid contexts, while online discourse studies rarely focus on primary-aged learners. Additionally, while adult online learning research (Earnshaw, 2020; Wijayanti, 2021) highlights technical barriers and strategies, they don't address how cognitive development influences online interaction patterns for children. Therefore, a research gap emerges: How do IRF-based interaction patterns and turn-taking manifest in synchronous online English lessons for young learners, and how do technological tools and teacher strategies shape those patterns? This study addresses that gap by analyzing video-recorded online lessons at the elementary level and examining how teachers initiate, manage, and respond to student turns using the IRF framework. By focusing on real-world practices in a digital primary classroom, this research brings new insights into how to adapt IRF for younger learners in virtual settings—something not fully explored in existing literature.

METHODS

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach combined with classroom discourse analysis to explore and describe turn-taking patterns in an online English classroom, particularly through the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) model. A qualitative method was chosen because it allows for the interpretation of natural interaction, focusing on meaning, structure, and communication flow rather than numerical data. According to Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, (2023), qualitative research aims to understand how individuals experience and respond to specific contexts. In this case, discourse analysis provides a detailed examination of teacher–student interaction during actual classroom instruction. The study was designed as a case study, focusing on a single recorded lesson, which enabled in-depth observation of real-world instructional discourse.

Respondents

The respondents in this study consisted of one English teacher and ten fifth-grade students from a primary school. The teacher was the official instructor for the class and had direct experience conducting online English lessons. The students analyzed in this study were those who actively participated in the recorded into session. No specific selection of students was conducted, as all students present in the video became part of the data by default. This ensured that the data reflected the natural and authentic classroom situation. The selection technique was thus based on the participants' actual presence in the recorded session taught by the teacher.

Instruments

The main instrument used in this study was a video recording of one online English lesson conducted via Zoom. The session lasted approximately 50 minutes and included several learning activities such as material presentation, vocabulary exercises, question-and-answer sessions, and brief discussions. The video served as the sole data source; no additional tools, such as interviews or document analysis, were used. The spoken data from the session were then transcribed for further analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through a complete observation of one live online session. The entire learning process was recorded with the teacher's permission, and the researcher did not interfere during the class. After the session ended, the researcher transcribed all verbal interactions from the recording. A verbatim transcription was created, focusing only on spoken utterances, without including non-verbal cues, gestures, chat features, or visual reactions. This transcription then became the basis for identifying interaction structures during the lesson.

Data Analysis Procedures

The transcribed data were analyzed using the IRF framework developed by Sinclair and Coulthard. Each classroom exchange was categorized into three components:

- Initiation (I): questions or prompts from the teacher that start the exchange.
- Response (R): students' replies to the teacher's initiation,
- Feedback (F): the teacher's follow-up, such as evaluation, praise, or clarification.

The researcher identified and categorized recurring IRF patterns from the transcript, noting whether the cycles were complete (I–R–F), partial (I–R). The analysis was descriptive and aimed to understand how the teacher directed classroom talk and how the students participated in taking turns during online interaction.

Ethical Considerations and Triangulation

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. The teacher was informed about the research objective, and consent was obtained prior to the recording. The identities of the students were anonymized to ensure privacy and confidentiality. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher used source triangulation by comparing the video recording, the verbatim transcript, and field notes taken during the observation. Although member checking was not conducted, this triangulation process helped ensure consistency and accuracy in interpreting the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

By synthesizing these studies, this research can answer the research question: “What are the IRF turn-taking patterns in online English lessons for young learners?” and “How does the teacher manage turn-taking in online English lessons for young learners?”

4.1 IRF Turn-Taking Patterns in Online English Lessons

This section presents the findings related to the realization of IRF patterns in online English classroom interactions at the elementary level.

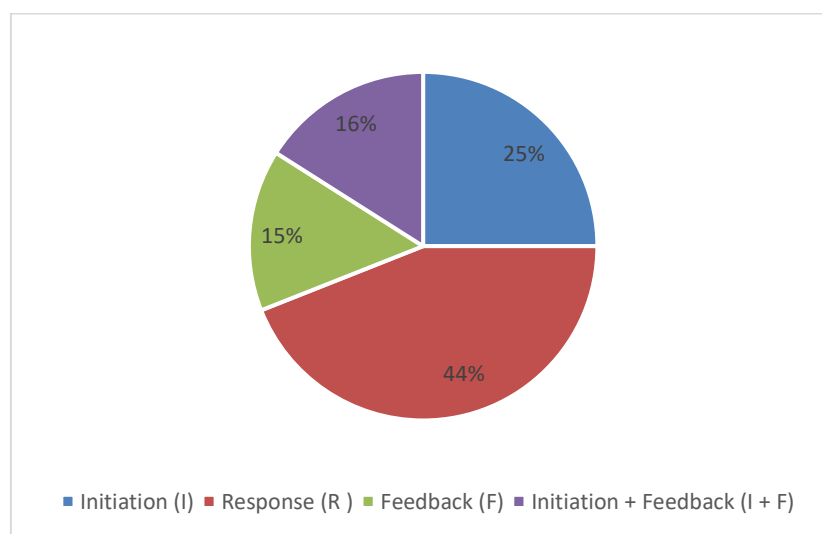


Figure 1 Percentage of Turn-Taking Patterns in Online English Lessons

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of turn-taking moves based on the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) structure observed in synchronous online English classrooms for Indonesian elementary students. The most frequent type of move was Response (R), accounting for 44% of all interactional turns, with a total of 74 occurrences. This indicates that student participation in responding to teacher prompts was dominant throughout the sessions. Initiation (I) moves made up 25% of the total, with 43 occurrences, reflecting the teacher's role in prompting interaction. Meanwhile, Feedback (F) accounted for 15%, with 25 occurrences, suggesting that teachers occasionally followed up student responses with comments, evaluation, or additional support. Interestingly, Initiation + Feedback (I + F) moves, where a teacher initiated a turn and provided feedback in a single sequence, comprised 16%, or 27 occurrences. This pattern may indicate moments where the teacher extended the interaction without allowing student response in between, or where initiation and feedback were combined due to time or technical constraints in the online setting. These findings highlight that while students were responsive, opportunities for extended feedback or dialogic scaffolding remained relatively limited.

The analysis of classroom interactions in synchronous online English lessons for young learners revealed that the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequence remained the underlying framework shaping turn-taking between teacher and students. This distribution shows that even though students are given the opportunity to respond quite actively, initiation and feedback are still dominated by teachers. This reflects a pattern of interaction that tends to be teacher-centered. In many cases, the IRF pattern does not occur in a full cycle. For example, some sequences stop at the response stage without being followed by explicit feedback from the teacher. This usually occurs when the student's answer is considered correct or when the teacher needs to move on to the next activity due to time constraints.

Furthermore, this fragmented IRF pattern is also influenced by the nature of the online environment. Teachers often have to wait for students' responses due to internet connection issues, which causes the flow of interaction to become unsynchronized. Overlapping conversations or prolonged silences (more than 5 seconds) also disrupt the ideal IRF flow. Despite this, teachers strive to maintain the IRF cycle by providing minimal feedback such as "good," "okay," or simply repeating the student's answer as a form of acknowledgment.

Based on the findings, the turn-taking pattern in online English language learning for young students still follows the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) framework, but in a form that is not always complete or intact. The dominance of student responses (44%) indicates that students are sufficiently engaged in the interaction, but still within the constraints of a teacher-controlled structure. This reflects that although there is student participation, the interaction remains teacher-led or teacher-centered.

The high use of closed questions and display questions by teachers limits the breadth and depth of student responses. The responses given tend to be short and direct, not encouraging exploration or the development of students' thinking. This shows that the IRF pattern is used more to check students' understanding than to encourage authentic communication.

In addition, not all IRF cycles are complete. Sometimes, after students respond, teachers immediately move on to the next activity without providing explicit feedback. This could be due to various factors such as time constraints, technical challenges in online learning, or teachers' lack of familiarity with providing constructive feedback in virtual classrooms. The fragmentation of the IRF cycle indicates that although the IRF framework is used, its implementation is not fully optimized in the online context.

Overall, IRF remains the dominant pattern in online classroom interactions, but the digital context presents its own challenges in maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of the cycle. Teachers need to develop strategies to better balance initiation, response, and feedback so that the interactions that occur are truly meaningful and actively promote the development of students' language skills.

4.2 Teacher Strategies in Managing Turn-Taking in Online English Lessons for Young Learners

The results of the analysis show that teachers use various strategies to manage turn-taking during online English lessons with young learners. These strategies are designed to maintain orderly interaction, ensure the participation of all students, and overcome common communication challenges in online classrooms, such as voice lag, internet connection disruptions, and limited nonverbal expression.

A. Use of the IRF Pattern

In online learning, teachers consistently apply the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) pattern as the main framework for shaping classroom interactions. This pattern begins with the Initiation stage, where teachers ask questions to trigger student participation. These questions are often displayed or closed questions, which require students to provide specific answers that are already known to the teacher. The Response stage occurs when students answer the questions. The Feedback stage, although not always present, is key in validating student answers, correcting mistakes, or expanding learning.

The IRF pattern provides a clear structure for classroom interactions, especially on online platforms that are prone to turn-taking chaos and loss of focus. While in some cases only IR (Initiation–Response) occurs, the presence of the IRF structure provides a stable foundation for teachers to control the flow of communication. Thus, this pattern is not only a pedagogical tool but also an important classroom management instrument in online teaching.

B. Calling Students' Names Before Asking Questions

In online learning, teachers actively use the strategy of calling students' names before asking questions. This action is a form of explicit turn-taking, which is very important given the lack of visual cues or body language that usually occurs in face-to-face classrooms. By calling the student's name first, teachers give a clear signal that the student is expected to speak, thereby minimizing the risk of interruption or uncertainty in taking turns. In addition, this strategy contributes to increased individual student engagement. Students feel more noticed and have a personal responsibility to respond when their names are called directly. On the other hand, it also shows that the teacher is aware of each student's presence, which is an important aspect of building a supportive and participatory classroom climate.

C. Verbal and Nonverbal Cues

The use of verbal and nonverbal cues is one of the important technique teachers use to regulate the flow of interaction and speaking turns. In an online context, verbal cues such as "Now it's your turn," "Let's hear from...," or "Please wait for your turn" serve as substitutes for visual cues that are not clearly visible on the screen. These cues function to mark transitions between speakers and maintain order in virtual classroom conversations.

Although limited, nonverbal cues are still used, such as raising a hand on the screen, nodding, or pointing the mouse cursor at a student's name. Teachers who are accustomed to using these gestures in offline classrooms try to adapt them to online platforms, even though their effectiveness is reduced due to screen limitations and video resolution. Interestingly, some students also imitate the teacher's strategies, for example, by raising their hands virtually or typing in the chat to indicate their readiness to speak.

D. Handling Silence and Overlapping

In an online learning environment, silence is quite common, especially due to connection delays, student confusion, or uncertainty about speaking turns. Teachers respond to this silence in a careful and strategic manner. Typically, teachers will allow a few seconds of pause as a form of technical tolerance, then repeat the question or shift the turn to another student. This approach prevents students from feeling pressured or embarrassed for not responding immediately.

For overlapping speech, teachers apply verbal control such as "One by one, please" or disable all student microphones and only allow one student to speak at a time. This approach is important in managing interactions to keep them orderly and focused, as well as preventing audio chaos that can interfere with other students' understanding.

E. Using the Chat Column as an Alternative Channel

Unstable technical conditions encourage teachers to provide an alternative channel for participation through the chat column. When students' microphones are not working, students feel less confident to speak, or there are other barriers to verbal communication, teachers provide the option to respond via chat. This strategy not only provides more inclusive access but also demonstrates the teacher's flexibility in facilitating active engagement for all students.

Additionally, using chat can increase the speed of collecting responses simultaneously, especially when teachers want quick answers from the entire class. Teachers can also use the chat column to provide written praise, quick corrections, or repeat questions without disrupting the main verbal discussion.

F. Distribution of Turns

Teachers show balanced attention in giving students turns to speak, not just limiting it to those who are active or dominant in the discussion. In some sessions, teachers compile a list of students who will speak and call them out one by one. This creates a fair structure and avoids the tendency for only a few students to be involved.

This even distribution of speaking turns also reflects the principle of inclusivity in learning, where all students, including those who tend to be passive or quiet, have the opportunity to express their opinions. Teachers also tend to monitor who has not contributed and strategically approach them gently to encourage participation without forcing them. This strategy helps create a democratic and cooperative classroom atmosphere where all voices are considered important.

DISCUSSION

This section presents a detailed discourse analysis of classroom interaction, specifically focusing on the turn-taking patterns in online English lessons for young learners.

Patterns of Initiation, Response, and Feedback (IRF) in Online Lessons

The analysis of this study indicates that the IRF structure remains a central framework shaping teacher and student interactions in synchronous online English lessons for young learners. As shown in Figure 1, the Response (R) turn is the most frequent, accounting for 44% of the total interaction turns. This high percentage indicates that students are highly responsive to teacher cues, demonstrating active participation within the boundaries of the teacher-directed interaction model. The Initiation (I) category, which accounts for 25%, reinforces the central role of the teacher in directing interactions and initiating conversations in the classroom. Meanwhile, Feedback (F) occurred less frequently (15%), and the combined Initiation + Feedback (I + F) movements accounted for 16% of total movements, which may indicate shorter exchanges or situations where the teacher provided feedback immediately after initiating, possibly due to time or technical constraints. This distribution supports the idea that online TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) classes continue to rely on the teacher-led IRF model, even in digital formats. This is consistent with the basic classroom discourse model proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), which has long been used to map pedagogical interactions. However, the way the IRF cycle is applied in an online context appears to differ significantly from traditional face-to-face environments.

The prevalence of response moves shows that students are able and willing to engage in teacher-initiated interactions. Yet, as noted by Estaji and Shojakhanlou (2021), while IRF provides a structure for participation, its overuse in a rigid form can limit students' opportunities for extended dialogue. In this study, many IRF cycles were incomplete, often ending at the response stage without follow-up feedback. This phenomenon mirrors the findings of Putri et al. (2021), who observed limited teacher feedback in high school classes, leading to reduced student engagement. The lack of elaborative feedback can also be seen in the tendency of teachers to give minimal responses such as "good" or repetition of the student's answer.

Furthermore, the occurrence of fragmented IRF cycles can be partly attributed to challenges inherent in the online environment. Earnshaw (2020) highlighted that audio delays, internet instability, and muted microphones disrupt the natural flow of turn-taking. These factors were similarly present in the current study, where prolonged silences and overlapping talk often disrupted the interaction. The combined I + F move, found in 16% of turns, may also be a teacher's adaptive response to these constraints compressing initiation and feedback into one utterance to maintain lesson flow. This echoes Wijayanti's (2021) findings on teacher-dominated turn-taking in online lectures, where control of interaction was maintained tightly by the teacher, though her focus was on adult learners.

In TEYL contexts specifically, Septiani and Rahman (2021) observed that children often required repeated IRF cycles and scaffolding due to their limited language proficiency. Similar tendencies were found in this study, where teachers used comprehension checks and repetition to scaffold students' responses. However, the frequency of such scaffolding was limited by the rapid pacing of online lessons, suggesting a need for better-integrated strategies that support both turn-taking and deeper understanding.

The dominance of closed and display questions—those with limited answer possibilities—also constrained the IRF sequence. As Prastiningrum et al. (2020) found in university-level online settings, referential questions tend to elicit more extended student responses. In contrast, the TEYL classes observed in this study featured more constrained questioning, which limited students' opportunity for meaningful language use. This shows that while student participation is high in quantity, its quality remains limited by the design of interaction.

Moreover, while Saragih et al. (2022) found evidence of student-initiated turns in Grade 8 classrooms, this pattern did not appear in the present study. Elementary-aged students still relied heavily on teacher cues to take turns, confirming the findings of Andini (2021) and Tjalla et al. (2023) that young learners require stronger guidance and clearer signals in classroom discourse—especially in online settings where non-verbal cues are diminished.

In terms of feedback, this study supports Estaji and Shojakhanlou's (2021) view that feedback can foster deeper engagement when it includes elaboration and scaffolding. However, in the analyzed lessons, feedback was often minimal or omitted altogether. This indicates a gap in the effective implementation of the third phase of the IRF cycle. When feedback was given, it was primarily evaluative rather than interactive or constructive, which aligns with Hu (2020), who found similar issues in college settings.

Overall, the findings indicate that the IRF framework remains dominant in online English lessons for young learners, but its implementation is challenged by both contextual and pedagogical factors. The teacher-centered nature of interactions, the limited use of elaborative feedback, and the impact of digital disruptions suggest that while students are engaging within the structure provided, the opportunities for more dialogic and interactive learning are constrained. Teachers need to adopt more flexible turn-taking strategies, integrate open-ended questioning, and provide more meaningful feedback to optimize the IRF cycle in virtual environments.

In conclusion, while this study reaffirms the relevance of the IRF model in online TEYL settings, it also highlights the need for its adaptation. The digital medium introduces technical and interactional complexities that require teachers to go beyond traditional patterns and create space for more dynamic, student-centered exchanges. This aligns with the research gap identified by Tjalla et al. (2023) and Earnshaw (2020), reinforcing the importance of context-sensitive discourse strategies in developing effective online English language instruction for young learners.

Turn-Taking Management by the Teacher in Online Young Learner Lesson

The findings reveal that teachers use a variety of strategies to manage turn-taking in synchronous online English lessons for young learners. These strategies serve both pedagogical and managerial functions, ensuring participation, minimizing disruptions, and addressing the limitations of the digital medium.

Use of the IRF Pattern

Consistent use of the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) model by teachers in online classes supports structured interaction and minimizes chaos. As emphasized by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), this triadic structure provides clarity and predictability in classroom exchanges. In this study, teachers applied IRF not only as an instructional tool but also as a method for managing turns and guiding the rhythm of conversation. However, as Estaji and Shojakhanlou (2021) argue, the IRF model must be used flexibly; when applied rigidly, it risks limiting student contributions to brief responses, which is also evident in the current data.

Calling Students' Names Before Asking Questions

This strategy was employed consistently to clearly allocate speaking turns. Especially in an online setting where visual cues are limited, explicitly naming students helps manage expectations and reduce overlapping talk. This aligns with findings by Tjalla et al. (2023), who note that the absence of physical classroom dynamics in online environments necessitates deliberate signaling. By addressing students by name, teachers also foster a more personalized and inclusive learning environment, enhancing student accountability and presence.

Verbal and Nonverbal Cues

Teachers employed verbal cues such as "Now it's your turn" or "Let's hear from..." to indicate transition points in conversation, replacing traditional body language used in physical classrooms. Though nonverbal cues were constrained by screen limitations, gestures like on-screen hand-raising and pointing were still used. This adapts Earnshaw's (2020) findings in graduate settings to young learners, demonstrating how verbal cues can be repurposed to maintain order and engagement in lower-level online classrooms.

Handling Silence and Overlapping

Teachers encountered silence and overlapping speech due to connection issues or uncertainty among students. Strategic pauses, question repetition, and microphone control were used to mitigate these disruptions. Similar to Earnshaw's (2020) report on online turn-taking breakdowns, the current study shows that teachers adopted compensatory techniques to restore interactional flow. Septiani and Rahman (2021) also noted that in TEYL settings, delays or confusion often required re-initiating interaction, which mirrors the teacher behavior observed here.

Using the Chat Column as an Alternative Channel

Teachers offered chat as a parallel communication channel to accommodate students facing technical or verbal challenges. This practice broadens participation and ensures that quieter students or those with unstable internet can still engage. Wijayanti (2021) identified chat as a vital component in managing Zoom-based lectures. In the current study, chat served not only for responses but also for praise and clarification, enhancing multi-channel interactivity—an important adaptation in online TEYL contexts.

Distribution of Turns

Teachers demonstrated fairness in allocating turns, tracking participation, and encouraging quieter students to speak. This reflects inclusive practices aimed at preventing dominance by more active students and aligns with principles of equitable pedagogy in digital classrooms. As noted by Andini (2021), younger learners need structured yet gentle encouragement to participate. The approach in this study shows a balance between teacher control and student autonomy, consistent with the IRF model's intent to scaffold learning while promoting engagement.

In summary, the findings confirm that teacher-led turn-taking strategies in online TEYL classrooms combine structured discourse models (IRF) with adaptive methods tailored to digital environments. These strategies reflect an awareness of young learners' developmental needs and online communication barriers. Compared to adult learning settings (Earnshaw, 2020; Wijayanti, 2021), TEYL online classrooms require more explicit signaling, increased tolerance for delays, and greater flexibility in response formats.

While many prior studies (e.g., Prastiningrum et al., 2020; Hu, 2020) explored feedback and participation in older learners, this study contributes a nuanced view of how teachers manage turns among young learners in real-time digital classrooms. By integrating multiple management techniques naming, cues, chat, distribution teachers can promote participation even within the constraints of synchronous online learning.

This comprehensive approach fills the gap in current literature regarding turn-taking in TEYL online settings and suggests practical strategies for improving engagement and maintaining interactional flow in primary-level virtual classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the patterns of classroom interaction and turn-taking in synchronous online English lessons for young learners using the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) framework. The findings revealed that while the IRF structure remains central to online instructional discourse, its implementation in virtual settings is often fragmented due to technical constraints, time limitations, and the absence of non-verbal cues. Responses from students dominated the interaction, indicating active participation; however, teacher feedback was often minimal or omitted, resulting in incomplete IRF cycles. The study also identified several strategies used by teachers to manage turn-taking effectively, including name-calling, use of chat functions, verbal and non-verbal cues, and distribution of turns. These strategies helped sustain student engagement and maintain interactional order in the absence of physical classroom dynamics. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of adapting traditional discourse patterns to suit the affordances and constraints of online learning environments. Teachers need to be more intentional and strategic in balancing initiation, response, and feedback to ensure meaningful interaction that promotes language development among young learners.

LIMITATION

This research was limited in several ways. First, the data were drawn from a single 50-minute online English lesson with one teacher and a small group of fifth-grade students. As such, the findings may not be fully generalizable to broader populations or different classroom contexts. Second, the study focused exclusively on spoken interaction and did not account for non-verbal communication or chat-based responses beyond their function in turn-taking. Additionally, since only one lesson was analyzed, the results may not capture the variability in teacher strategies or interaction patterns across different topics, timeframes, or teaching styles. Future research should include multiple sessions, involve different grade levels and teachers, and consider multimodal aspects of communication to provide a more comprehensive understanding of IRF application in online young learner classrooms.

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