Teacher-student interaction in classrooms of students with specific learning difficulties learning English as a foreign language

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to explore teacher-student interaction in classrooms of students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) learning English as a foreign language (EFL). This article presents an analysis of data from one of three classrooms involved in a larger-scale research project. The conceptual framework for the analysis and interpretation of the data includes socio-cultural models of teacher-student interaction and examination of deviations from traditional, restricted Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) classroom sequences. The main sources of data comprise transcripts of observation notes and video-taped classroom interactions. Results show how one EFL teacher created and increased opportunities for students' participation in learning through her choice of teaching strategies, verbal interaction and mediation. Findings reveal specific interactional strategies, such as deviations from the IRF sequence and the teacher's questioning and feedback style, which appear to facilitate participation and open up opportunities for EFL learning.

Keywords: ethnographic methodology; conversation analysis; case study

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1 Introduction

There is a tradition of support for language pedagogy throughout the history of education. Globalization and the forces of economic and social convergence have had a significant impact on wanting to achieve the best possible results in foreign language learning (Coyle et al. 2010). While learning a foreign language is an achievable goal for most learners, it may become an especially burdensome task for those with specific learning difficulties (SpLD). These students are often poor foreign language learners because they have ‘less developed native language skills, particularly at the phonological/orthographic levels’ (Ganschow et al. 1995: 95), and the teaching methods may not accommodate their learning or processing strengths. The aim of the study presented in this article is to examine teachers’ interactional strategies when teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to high school students with SpLD in order to search for types of interactions which appear to support EFL learning.

This study follows a growing body of research in the field of second and foreign language learning (henceforth referred to as L2) which has included socio-cultural theoretical frameworks in an attempt to explore how L2 is best taught (e.g., Aljaafreh and Lantolf 1994; Donato 2000; Jarvis and Robinson 1997; Ko et al. 2003; Lantolf 2000; Lantolf 2006; Lantolf and Poehner 2004; Nassaji and Cumming 2000; Walsh 2002). These studies draw on the work of Vygotsky (1978) as well as later theoreticians (see, for example, Wells 1999; Wertsch 1991) in an attempt to show how L2 development is influenced by social interaction in the classroom. These socio-cultural theories have been successfully applied to L2 contexts, thus offering applied linguistics an alternative to cognitive L2 acquisition theories and shifting the concept of learning away from the acquisition metaphor towards metaphors of participation (e.g. Block 2003; Donato 2000; Swain 2000). From the view that language grows through participation in social interactions, it follows that L2 research should also probe the kinds of interactions that may benefit its development.

Research in both L1 and L2 classroom interaction that builds upon socio-cultural frameworks embodies the view that learning is a socially constructed activity. It ascribes active roles to both teacher and student in a learning partnership where learning is facilitated, but not controlled, by the teacher. According to Webster et al.’s model of adult-child proximation (1996: 44–45), effective learning is viewed as a complex process, more than just the sum of a number of small sub-skills. Learners are not seen as isolated individuals who succeed or fail by their own efforts, but rather teaching and learning are treated as social and communicative processes. Teacher interaction opens up opportunities to take risks and make mistakes
and learning becomes a collaborative effort with partners who contribute different perspectives and understandings. Tasks are contextualized in the sense that teachers share the meaning and purpose with pupils. This model of adult-child proximation is used in the current study in order to provide background reference points against which data from the observational study was interpreted.

Many studies examining classroom instructional conversation from a socio-cultural perspective have based their classroom interaction analysis on a pioneering study that identifies recurring patterns of teacher-pupil talk in first language classrooms (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). This study identifies a three-part sequence generally known as: teacher initiation (the I move), learner response (the R move) and teacher feedback (the F move). These components have been found to be typical of classroom interaction. Applied linguists have argued that although the IRF sequence also occurs quite frequently in everyday conversation, it is often used differently in the classroom (e.g. Nassaji and Wells 2000: 377; Seedhouse 2004). In the classroom it is usually the teacher who initiates the exchange, often characterized by display questions requiring recitation and recall. Moreover, the teacher always has the right to provide the feedback which is very often evaluative in nature (Nassaji and Wells 2000). In such classroom interaction pupils become passive learners (‘vessels to be filled’) who are expected to come up with the ‘right’ answer (Webster and Roe 1998; Webster et al. 1996). Studies which examined L1 adult-child interaction amongst children with special needs found that during pedagogical interaction, teachers used strategies which required student imitation and repetition significantly more than natural conversation (Heineman-Gosschalk 1999; Webster and Roe 1998).

Nevertheless, L2 research studies have argued that in L2 instructional contexts where learners have limited language proficiency, it is more difficult for teachers to replicate speech events that are natural outside of the pedagogical setting (Gil 2002; Seedhouse 1996). Natural conversation, they argue, is differentiated from institutional discourse, and, in theory, it is not possible for L2 teachers to replicate conversation in the L2 classroom as part of a lesson (e.g. Gil 2003; Seedhouse 1996, 2004). Research studies of L2 classroom interaction that have gone beyond the IRF framework have found that significant effects on the process of the discourse as a whole can be achieved by slight deviations from the restrictive, traditional IRF sequence (Bliss et al. 1996; Cullen 2002; Gibbons 2003; John 2003).

Despite the ‘socio-cultural turn’ in L2 research (Johnson 2006), few empirical studies which have focused on L2 learners with SpLD have adopted the socio-cultural perspective, thus shifting the attention from the pupils’ cognitive problems to the teaching context and the teacher. According to Fred-
erickson and Cline (2002: 133–134), the predominant approach to studying L2 difficulties has been based on cognitive learning theories within the positivistic paradigm, focusing on individuals’ weaknesses as the prime cause of poor language learning. For example, Sparks and Ganschow (1991), looking at what causes difficulties in foreign language learners amongst college students with SPLD, suggested that weak foreign language readers and writers had difficulties mostly with the phonological, orthographical or syntactic codes of language. Their Linguistic Coding Deficit Hypothesis, stated that difficulties with foreign language acquisition stem from deficiencies in one or more of the linguistic codes in the student’s native language system. As a result Sparks and Ganschow believed that the SpLD students may have difficulty with the actual perception and production of language necessary for basic comprehension, speaking and spelling (Ganschow et al. 1998; Sparks, 2006; Sparks and Ganschow, 1993a, b; Sparks et al. 2006).

However, subsequent studies shifted the focus from students’ difficulties to teaching programmes that were thought to enhance L2 learning, frequently within experimental or semi-experimental designs. Those experiments aimed at finding relationships between the use of certain teaching methods and learners’ L2 acquisition (e.g., Schiff and Calif 2004; Sparks et al. 1997, 1998; Torgesen et al. 2001).

Few published studies have broadened our understanding of the types of teacher-student instructional interaction which facilitates learning in students with SpLD (e.g. Kraker 2000; Rex 2000). Kraker (2000) undertook a longitudinal case study of four remedial teachers of L2 learners with SpLD. The study was framed within a socio-cultural perspective, attempting to determine the types of teacher support required for students to achieve academic progress. The research focused on one teacher, who taught five fifth grade students with SpLD from ethnically diverse homes in which the English language was impoverished. Analysis of the videotaped language lessons indicated verbal as well as non-verbal interactions which appeared to improve students’ engagement in learning. These included: direct corrections, writing for students, modelling the correct use of language, expansion of students’ ideas, monitoring students’ performance and giving an element of a choice. These strategies appeared to promote students’ question-initiation and self-corrections.

The second published empirical study informed by the socio-cultural view to teaching and learning is a classroom based case study of a learner studying in a classroom which was part of a programme called Academic Foundations for Success (Rex 2000). This programme aimed to promote social integration between student groups – L2 learners, pupils with SpLD and gifted learners. The educational philosophy underpinning the programme was that in order to become identified as a rightful, capable member of a
classroom learning culture, pupils considered to be lower achievers had to become equal participants and contributors to the classroom academic discourse. This philosophy involved their learning to ask ‘genuine questions’, which meant that pupils were encouraged to ask any question they thought relevant and important for them to know or understand. Specifically, the researcher examined segments of instructional discourse where the teacher created, through verbal classroom interactions, conditions for the active participation for Judy, an L2 learner with SpLD. The teacher’s feedback to Judy’s questions aimed at providing her opportunities to reconstruct her questions through rephrasing and articulating her meaning through a request for clarification while acknowledging her questions and sending a message to the class that her questions can be valuable. The researcher concludes by providing some evidence from Judy’s interview and test results at the end of the school year which indicates her sense of improvement and successful academic achievement.

From the above literature review it is apparent that research in the intersection of L2 and SpLD has been meagre and small scaled, focusing on one teacher or one student. The aim of the current study was therefore to expand the investigation of teacher-student interaction in English as a foreign language classroom of pupils with SpLD.

2 Method

The research question which guided the design and data analysis of this study was: In what ways do teachers, through their choice of verbal interaction, create and increase opportunities for students with SpLD to participate in EFL learning? ‘Participation’ in learning was defined as observable manifestations of students’ actions that are oriented towards the goal of learning – ones that demonstrate taking part in the learning activity, engagement, personal involvement and/or taking of initiative (van Lier, 1988). Thus, ‘learning’ was defined by the newer ‘participation metaphor’ (Sfard 1998; Swain 2000).

This article presents data analysis from one of three classrooms involved in a larger-scale research project (Cohen 2006).

2.1 Participants

This research was conducted in the classroom of a teacher who taught students who had severe difficulties in EFL literacy at a Kibbutz comprehensive high school located in a central area of Israel. English in Israel is considered a foreign rather than a second language as it is taught in the framework of school a few hours a week. The students received four hours a week of EFL. The teacher was recommended to the researcher by the pedagogical adviser
of the school as a good practitioner and thus served as a suitable ‘opportunity sample’ for the investigation of constructive interaction. The teacher was a female non-native speaker of English who had taught English for more than ten years. The class consisted of 17 twelfth graders in their last year of high school. Sixteen out of 17 of the class students had been diagnosed as having SpLD. The students were preparing for the basic level (3 points) of the matriculation examination in EFL which is considered the most high-stakes examination in the Israeli school system. A pass-grade on the three-point level exam is a minimum requirement for a high school diploma, without which high school graduates cannot be admitted into higher education institutions and find their job prospects restricted. The observation of the lessons started four months before the EFL matriculation examinations took place, and many lessons took the form of review and practice.

The procedures for identifying pupils with SpLD in the Israeli educational system are based on two definitions: the IQ-Achievement discrepancy definition (DSM-IV) and the Interagency Committee on learning disabilities definition (1987) (Sharabi and Margalit 2009: 48–49). The discrepancy definition states that a significant IQ-Achievement discrepancy is a criterion for an individual being identified as SpLD. Significance is defined as a discrepancy of more than two standard deviations between achievement and IQ, and between one and two standard deviations in cases where an individual’s performance on an IQ test may have been compromised by an associated disorder in cognitive processing (DSM-IV: 46–47). The second definition is based on the Interagency Committee on learning disabilities definition (1987), which states that: ‘Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction’ (1987: 222). Determination was based upon didactic assessments (for example, phonological awareness, word decoding, reading comprehension, spelling and written expression) performed by qualified educational diagnosticians to evaluate the pupil’s academic difficulties and abilities as well as their basic learning skills, and/or psychological assessments to evaluate pupils’ psychological profile, performed by qualified psychologists (Sharabi and Margalit 2009: 48–49).

2.2 Data collection

The approach used in this research was a qualitative, case study methodology (e.g., Bogdan and Biklen 1998; Davis 1995; Holliday 2002; Miles and Huberman 1994; Stake 1995). As mentioned before, this article presents data analy-
sis from one of three classrooms involved in a larger-scale research project (Cohen, 2006). In the classroom discussed in this article the students were 17 twelfth graders in their last year of high school. Data from ten 45-minute lessons were collected taking observation notes, audio and video recording. Classroom observations were undertaken by arriving to the classroom with the teacher, sitting at the back of the classroom taking field notes, audio or video recordings. At first, only field notes and audiotapes were taken during classroom observation for a couple of lessons and only later was videotaping used. Introducing the research instruments gradually made it easier for the teacher and students to adapt to their presence. The data represented in this article is based on four out of the ten lessons examined in the original research.

2.3 Data analysis

Once data were collected and transcribed the data were divided into broad units of lessons. Within each lesson, certain episodes were selected for analysis according to their capacity to provide valuable information in relation to the research questions. In line with Nassaji and Wells (2000) ‘episode’ was defined as being ‘made up of sequences that, individually and cumulatively, contribute to the achievement of the activity or task goal. Each sequence consists of an … exchange … each exchange consists of obligatory Initiating and Responding moves and may also contain a Follow up move’ (p. 383).

The data analysis consisted of: first, data analysis whilst in the field, during data collection, (Bogdan and Biklen 1998; Miles and Huberman 1994), which allowed further steps in data collection to be based on actual data which emerged from the fieldwork. Second, data which was considered relevant and of interest to the research questions were highlighted and then transcribed. Initially, the selected data were transcribed verbatim. However, since the classroom and interview data were a mixture of English and Hebrew, utterances that were originally in Hebrew and were translated into English were put between slashes to differentiate them from ones that were originally spoken in English.

The transcribed data were arranged chronologically and divided into broad units of lessons which included descriptions of the relevant contexts for each lesson taken from observation notes. Within each lesson, certain episodes were selected for analysis according to their relevance to the research questions, and their capacity to provide valuable information in relation to the research questions. The analytical frameworks used to describe, analyse and interpret the data are: the teacher-pupil quadrant model (adapted from Webster and Roe 1998; Webster et al. 1996), and analysis of deviations from the IRF (Nassaji and Well 2000; Seedhouse 2004).
The analysis of deviations from the traditional, restricted IRF pattern (Dinsmore 1985; Nunan 1987) was chosen because studies of L2 classroom interaction suggest that it is the IRF cycle which is primarily responsible for traditional patterns of interaction. However, research has shown that close examination of verbal interaction with a focus on deviation from the IRF may yield instances of interaction that are not necessarily completely restricted by the IRF pattern (Seedhouse 2004: 64).

Third, narrative description (Nunan 1990) was used to describe episodes, events, actions, processes, situations, characters and the setting. These were considered valuable to understanding the classroom interaction and how it opens up learning opportunities.

Finally, thematic and categorical analysis of data was used (Bogdan and Biklen 1998; Holliday 2002; Miles and Huberman 1994). When certain segments of data (verbal or non-verbal interaction) appeared to link to the research questions they were marked and categorized under thematic headings, using a qualitative software (Kuckartz 2001). Using software ensured a punctual and rigorous analysis of the data through which reoccurring interactional patterns were clustered and organized as categories and sub-categories (Holliday 2002: 100). To examine the reliability of the categorization, samples of categorized data were sent to a second analyst with research and TEFL experience, asking him to categorize and/or analyse different episodes. The second analysts’ analysis was then compared with the researcher’s and the categories were adjusted accordingly.

3 Results

The findings of this study reflect the analysis of four lessons. Findings generated from the analysis of the broader lessons are presented first, followed by findings generated from analysis of shorter episodes containing deviations from the IRF sequence. This order reflects the stages in which the data was indeed analysed starting from a wide perspective of whole lessons and zooming into smaller units of interaction.

3.1 Analysis of whole lessons

The adult-child proximation quadrant model (Webster et al 1996; Webster and Roe 1998) was used to analyse the broader lessons. The quadrant model includes two continua which provide the structure for the framework. The horizontal axis represents the degree of initiative, engagement and active involvement of the pupil in the learning process, while the vertical axis represents the nature and level of the teacher’s management and control and the way that the teacher mediates learning in general. The model provided a
framework for describing and locating the quality of teacher-student classroom interaction and enabled a wide perspective and a larger variety of points of reference through which teacher-student interaction was analysed and interpreted.

3.1.1 Teacher’s preparatory work regarding text, task and resources

The first finding was termed ‘teacher’s preparatory work regarding text, task and resources’. It appeared that preparatory work by the teacher was conducive to evoking the students’ participation. Data analysis of two consecutive 45-minute sessions in which students were engaged in a vocabulary task while watching a sight and sound internet presentation revealed that student participation was high. Analysis of the observation data revealed that this may have been a result of the following factors. The teacher had chosen a topic relevant to the students’ age and interest (a social-political issue); although the topic itself was sophisticated, the teacher designed and adapted texts so that they would not be too long or too difficult in terms of syntax and vocabulary, while not sacrificing the contents of the text. Moreover, the teacher designed tasks that elicited success. For example, a task that required students to scan certain lines of the text in search of specific words and find their meanings was suitable for them, because it focused on a specific skill and was limited to segments of text rather than whole paragraphs or a whole text. In addition, the sight and sound internet presentation appeared to contribute to the students’ involvement in that it was a multisensory input in which the voice text assisted those students with word decoding difficulties to comprehend the text and the pictures assisted those students with comprehension difficulties to infer meaning from context. In this respect it appeared that using computer technology was supportive for the students who otherwise experience reading comprehension difficulties. In addition, the colourful, interactive and dynamic activity also appeared to engage students’ attention more than an ordinary pen and paper activities.

The example below is taken from classroom observation of two successive classes which took place in the computer room. During this observation the teacher first introduced a reading comprehension task to the students that they were to complete whilst watching an internet presentation and then supported them in completing the task. The internet activity itself took place in the second lesson. This involved an interactive sight-and-sound presentation about current political events. Excerpt 1 demonstrates the teacher’s preparatory work regarding text, task and resources and how it affects her ability to engage the students in learning. The participants were the teacher and 16 students (seven boys and nine girls).
Excerpt 1. Classroom observation of preparatory work done on by the teacher

1. The pupils sit down at the computers and begin working individually or in pairs ... After everyone logs in, the teacher goes to a student who did not manage to start and assists. She walks around and then starts the presentation. The presentation includes text and pictures. The text draws the attention by its big fonts and bold titles. The background is blue. Some words are underlined. It contains photos of people in a social situation ... It appears to ‘speak’ to the pupils ...

2. Teacher: Only the beginning is a bit difficult. We will go through it ... (She shows a pupil how to look up a word using the dictionary on 'Word')...

3. Teacher: At this stage I am letting you work on your own. (She asks the person in charge of the computer room to let students work each at their own pace ... She then begins to walk around the room, helping pupils with the task).

In the above episode the teacher recruits student attention through the attractive sight-and-sound internet presentation which deals with a relevant topic – a scaffolding strategy that helps activate prior knowledge and motivates interest in the subject at hand. The teacher then helps those who need assistance in getting started. Once the pupils seem to be engaged in completing the task, she lets the learners work independently and begins to walk around and provide help to specific pupils who need her assistance in order to complete the task.

3.1.2 Encouraging students' active and independent learning
The second finding emerging from analysis of whole lessons was termed ‘encouraging students' active and independent learning’. The following example is taken from observation notes of the last episode of the lesson in the computer room where the internet presentation was carried out. The excerpt demonstrates several scaffolding techniques that the teacher used to encourage students' independent work, until they eventually were able to complete the task.
Excerpt 2. Encouragement of independent learning

1. **Teacher:** Is this correct or incorrect according to the presentation. Look for the key words. She sits beside the student. Pupils work on the task individually or in pairs. When the teacher sits next to a student to help she doesn't respond to other students’ questions ... She reads out a few sentences from the worksheet and translates some words for the student.

2. **Teacher:** Does your chatting mean that you have finished? If there’s a problem call me ... The teacher approaches another student - the one who told her during the break that she thought the task was too difficult for her to cope with. She sits next to her for a few minutes and assists her ...

3. **Teacher:** But what does it say here? [She reads out loud the text for the student]

4. **Teacher:** Is this right? […] She turns to a pair of students working together]

5. **Teacher:** How are you doing?

6. **Student:** /We are making progress. We have finished everything but missed a question. /

7. **Teacher:** Go back to it. [She approaches the student]

8. **Student:** /Is the answer/ ‘the west’?

9. **Teacher:** /Is it reasonable? Think again./

The above excerpt shows how while students work individually or in pairs the teacher walks around the classroom checking in on the various students and assisting when needed, sitting by different students to assist them with vocabulary, reading strategies and word-decoding. The teacher reads out loud, uses verbal cues to prompt reading strategies, and facilitates student engagement and participation in order for learning to progress. It appears that students are not seen as isolated individuals who succeed or fail by their own efforts. Furthermore, rather than providing students with an evaluative feedback or the right
answer, we can see that in turns 8–9 the teacher encourages a student to make connections between the word ‘west’ and his general knowledge so that he can make an intelligent inference rather than making an impulsive guess.

3.2 Analysis of deviations from the IRF sequence
Following the analysis of whole lessons, analyses of smaller units of classroom interaction were conducted. Since the adult-child verbal interaction is at the core of the socio-cultural frameworks, it was important to probe interactional styles that deviate from the traditional, restricted IRF sequence in order to search for instances of teacher’s verbal scaffolding which lead to participation in the learning process. Using Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, i.e., the difference between what a child can achieve on his or her own, and what the same child can achieve when supported by a teacher or more able other (Vygotsky 1978), the aim was to look at how the teacher advances learning through verbal interaction.

3.2.1 Initiation by students
Data show that one type of IRF deviation which reoccurred during those lessons was that of students initiating questions. Recorded data and observation notes provide some numerical evidence showing that in five out of the ten lessons observed, teacher and student initiations of questions were almost equal in number. Between 44 and 48% of the initiations belonged to the students themselves rather than the teacher. These lessons included: an internet presentation in the computer room; group and pair work guided by the teacher in the English centre; and a guided role play. In these lessons the students had a high level of engagement throughout the class period and most of them appeared engaged in practising their language skills. In the other five lessons there was unequal proportion between teacher and student initiations and the teacher’s largely exceeded the students (approximately 80% teacher initiations). Here, the lessons were based on teacher instructions and explanations about the language.

3.2.2 Teacher’s questioning style
Another type of IRF deviation was concerned with questioning style. Many of the questions initiated by the teacher were process-orientated in the sense that students weren’t expected to provide the right answer but rather how and why they came up with their answers. Most questions did not demand display of knowledge of the correct answer, or rote repetition, but aimed at prompting thinking processes and endeavoured to increase the students’ strategic thinking, as illustrated below. The following example illustrates the teacher’s questioning style. The excerpt is taken from a transcription of a video-tape recorded while
observing a lesson which took place in the English center. In this episode, the teacher sits with a small group of students (three girls) while the other students work on their own or in pairs, completing reading comprehension or grammar tasks. The teacher and the three students are engaged in a multiple choice reading exercise where they have to fill in blank spaces with correct words. The following episode focuses on two test items (stative verbs) and demonstrates how the teacher uses questions in order to probe the students’ understanding, check language awareness and increase meta-cognitive strategies.

Excerpt 3. Teacher’s questioning style

1. Teacher: /Look at the brackets. Can you say which one is in the present and which is in the past?/
2. Sharon: /No/
3. Teacher: /What do you do then?/
4. Keren: /But what is this? Is it in the future?/
5. Teacher: /It doesn’t matter. Why can’t ‘know’ get ‘ing’?/
6. Tamar: /I don’t know./
7. Teacher: /Which group of verbs does it belong to?/
9. Teacher: /To know. Is it an action?/
10. Tamar: /Aha. So all the senses./
11. Teacher: /Yes, to know is a thinking act (touche's her head). If you remember that ‘know’ is a verb that does not get ‘ing’, you quickly rule it out. Then you are left with deciding between this and that. Right?/
12. Sharon: /But what's the difference between them?/
13. Teacher: Can’t you see the difference between ‘know’ and ‘knew’?/
14. Sharon: I can, but–/
15. Teacher: /You’ll also hear it on the tape. You will listen to it.
We can see from the above example that the teacher uses this activity in order to probe pupils’ understanding, asking process-oriented questions aimed at increasing grammatical awareness (e.g. ‘Why can’t “know” “get”ing?’ in turn 5). Turns 1–9 also reflect how the teacher assesses whether or not students have retained previously learned concepts (in this case the passive verbs) through informal assessment (see, e.g., Rea-Dickins 2001) and also encourages them to make connections between new concepts and past learning (turn 7). In turn 13 the teacher assesses whether the failure to distinguish between ‘know’ and ‘knew’ stems from an auditory difficulty. When the student says that she can tell the difference when hearing the words the teacher refers her to the use of the tape.

3.2.3 Teacher’s feedback

A third finding emerging from the analysis of IRF is of teacher’s feedback moves which took the form of questions. These feedbacks demonstrate that the teacher replies to students’ questions by handing the question back to the questioner. The following example illustrates how she used this feedback strategy. The excerpt is taken from the internet presentation lesson where students were engaged in completing their vocabulary task, while the teacher was walking around answering questions.

Excerpt 4. Teacher’s feedback

1. Student: (Student is asking the teacher in L1) What is this word ‘concrete’. What is ‘concrete’?

2. Teacher: Yeah. What is concrete? Let’s see what it says in the text (she reads the paragraph where the word appears: "... It is made of concrete ...").

3. Student: What is ‘made of’?

4. Teacher: Pointing at her sunglasses and saying ‘this is made of plastic’.

5. Student: (in Hebrew) Iron?

6. Teacher: (in Hebrew) Actually it’s ‘concrete’.

The example above demonstrates how a feedback in the form of a question can initiate a response from the student. In this case the teacher encour-
aged intelligent guessing from the context by handing the question back to the student (turn 1 – ‘Yeah. What is concrete?’) while making it clear that the answer lies in the context.

Another feedback strategy that emerges from the dialogue was providing a contextual clue (turn 3–4): when the student needed the meaning of the term ‘made of’ in order to understand ‘concrete’, the teacher provided him with yet another contextual clue, knowing that ‘plastic’ is a familiar term. The fact that he came up with ‘iron’ and not another material shows that he had made a good intelligent guess (a strong material). It was not accurate but it was in the right ballpark. So instead of letting him guess on, she gave him the answer. It appears that the teacher’s feedback strategies succeeded in activating the student in a process of inducing meaning from context.

4 Discussion

While learning EFL in Israel is compulsory for all school students and is essential for academic, occupational and social purposes, it may become an especially burdensome task for those with SpLD. Success in L2 learning amongst learners with SpLD depends on a range of factors including the quantity and the quality of the input, the learner’s language aptitude and motivation to learn the L2, and the social interaction with others which may influence the learner’s to communicate and overcome his/her linguistic deficiency (e.g., Genesee et al. 2004). The present study examines one influential factor – teacher-student interaction, making use of socio-cultural frameworks. The study shows how one EFL teacher, through her choice of teaching strategies, verbal interaction and mediation, created and increased opportunities for students’ participation in EFL learning (e.g., Nassaji and Wells 2000; Vygotsky 1978; Webster et al. 1996).

The research results reported in this article are consistent with findings from previous studies that attest to the effectiveness of the dialogic approach in promoting specific literacy skills and strategies in students with impaired capacities for learning (e.g., Genesee et al. 2005). The most salient finding of this research was the little use of the IRF sequence when meeting the needs of students with SpLD. Data reveal that the kind of pedagogical interaction which led to students’ participation in EFL learning incorporated deviations from the traditional, restrictive, IRF pattern. IRF deviations included: providing students with opportunities to ask questions and initiate turns; asking process-oriented questions; and providing answers and feedback in the form of further questioning. This discourse style appeared to encourage students to engage in higher order strategies which successful readers employ (e.g., making connections between new input and previous knowledge, making intelligent contextual inferences, monitoring of comprehension) so that they
could comprehend text in English. This finding is in line with a large number of previous experiments which have demonstrated how the process oriented questioning and reading comprehension strategies increased students’ comprehension of texts (e.g., Pressley 2000; Pressley and El-Dinary 1997). Instruction of reading and meta cognitive strategies has been found effective for L2 learners in advancing their understanding of academic texts (Genesee et al. 2005; Vaidya 1999; Wayne and Collier 1997). These kinds of strategies that are instinctively drawn upon by skilled readers when encountering challenging texts, were intentionally taught by the teacher in the current study to these students who lacked them. By doing so, she encouraged them to become more independent readers. The teacher used several more verbal and non-verbal instructional techniques to encourage students’ independent learning (e.g., moving around the classroom or sitting by various students and assisting them when needed, reading out loud for certain students, using verbal cues to prompt reading strategies). This facilitated student engagement and participation and enabled them to carry out the tasks which they would not have been able to manage on their own. This finding accords with sociocultural view of educational scaffolding (e.g., Mercer 2000; Wells 1999), which is, in socio-cultural terms, a way of operationalizing the concept of working in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). Bringing the learners to a state of competence which will enable them eventually to complete their tasks on their own and achieve some greater level of independence is at the heart of Vygotskian theory (Wells 1999).

In addition to using the above scaffolding strategies while teaching, the teacher’s preparatory work regarding the selection and adaptation of texts and tasks (i.e., the internet presentation on a relevant political issue) enabled her to engage the students in a grade-level and challenging theme which was presented in a visually stimulating way. This finding accords with previous research studies which provide research-based guidelines for making the grade-level curriculum understandable and promoting academic success for struggling L2 learners (e.g., Echevarria and Graves 2003; Echevarria et al. 2004; Freeman and Freeman 2002). Adaptation of materials, the use of visuals, connections to student experiences and prior learning, engagement of students in challenging themes and student-to-student interaction have been found as ways to promote L2 learning. Furthermore, research studies comparing students who had been taught by teachers employing instructional approaches which included cooperative learning strategies, academic tasks related to students’ personal experiences, technology, critical thinking and learning strategies, were found to be more engaged, comprehended texts better and made faster long-term progress than students attending more traditionally taught classes (Freeman and Freeman 2002; Wayne and Collier 1997).
Although the results reported in this article are derived from a small-scaled corpus of data, their compatibility with previous educational models provides sound support to the claim that the current results indeed reflect supportive teacher-student interaction. The aim of this study was to provide detailed analyses of everyday, natural classroom interaction by close examination of data emerging from one classroom of a specific teacher, but with a view to good practice. The results emerging from the fine-grained analyses of opportunities that arose through sustained goal-directed interaction may have some important implications for professional practice and language education policy. The results suggest that instructional strategies and the quality of teacher verbal interaction have a potential to open up and increase learning opportunities for SpLD students despite their limited literacy and communication skills. Programmes for training and practising EFL teachers should include systematic opportunities for teachers to increase their awareness and knowledge not only of SpLD causes, symptoms and intervention programmes, but also of socio-cultural theories and the types of verbal interactions which have the potential to facilitate learning. This may encourage practitioners to adopt better strategies for classroom interaction and consequently better meet some challenges posed by the specific needs of students with SpLD learning EFL. It would be interesting and important for future qualitative research on classroom interaction to embed some assessment measures of language acquisition which may shed more light on causal links between teachers’ instructional interactions and students’ language development.

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