

# THE ROLE OF TONE-MANAGEMENT IN IMPROVING CLASSROOM INTERACTION IN A TERTIARY-LEVEL EFL TEACHING CONTEXT

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## Abstract

*Classroom interaction in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) has received much research attention recently. However, one area that has not been explored in terms of improving classroom interaction is tone-management, which has to do with creating and sustaining an appropriate socio-affective environment for collaborative production of classroom lessons by the teacher and learners (Allwright 1984). The paper investigates what constitutes effective and ineffective tone-management in EFL classrooms with specific reference to a tertiary level context in China. The findings of the study, on which the paper is based, indicate that effective tone-management is likely to lead to a more congenial and contingent pattern of classroom interaction, where students become symmetrical discourse managers, contributing to authentic teacher-student talk and meaning-negotiation. Ineffective tone-management, on the other hand, tends to result in frequent repression in class, where students remain or grow reticent and tend to reduce their attempts at elaboration to mere truncated responses. Some specific strategies that will enable teachers to nurture a supportive classroom atmosphere in facilitating interaction are then identified.*

## Introduction

EFL teaching in mainland China has long been recognised to be not very interactive, due to certain culture-specific factors (see Hird, 1995, for instance). Teacher dominance, students' uncritical acceptance of teachers' authority in class and the pressure from various national examinations, conspire to restrain teachers from spending class time interacting with their students. However, we argue that notwithstanding these constraints, generally associated with teacher-fronted classroom contexts, this does not necessarily justify the prevalence of non-interactive lessons within the EFL teaching context in China, particularly at the tertiary level of English language education. Based on our data from tertiary level classrooms, we

suggest that even within the larger macro-context of teacher-fronted classrooms in China, it is possible to create micro-classroom teaching contexts that are supportive and encouraging, where students and teachers negotiate for meaning and authentically share feelings and information, and where students can gain opportunities to initiate productive interaction with teachers.

The paper is divided into five main sections. Section One reviews the concept of tone-management as delineated in the literature and also presents our interpretation of the concept. This is followed in Section Two by a description of the sample of data on which this study is based. Section Three provides analyses of the data, focusing on the relationship between classroom interaction and tone-management, while Section Four offers some strategies for the development of a supportive classroom environment. Section Five offers concluding remarks.

## **Tone-management**

The importance of interaction as central to classroom language learning has been well established over the last two decades. Defining it as the “co-production” of classroom lessons by teacher and learners, Allwright (1984) includes five aspects of interaction management that teacher and learners have to cope with simultaneously: management of turn, topic, task, tone and code. Of these, he notes, tone is an aspect of all contributions, permeating all social behaviour, quite inevitably, all the time. Yet, tone-management has been the least explored area in interactional studies.

According to Allwright (1984: 162), “tone-management refers to the important business of establishing the appropriate socio-emotional atmosphere for the interaction”. Effective tone-management works to influence positively the interaction between teachers and students (Allwright, 1984; Allwright and Bailey, 1991). We hold that in a teacher-fronted EFL context, well-managed tone in class is often what contributes to successful and smooth exchanges of teacher-questions-and student-answers. When classroom interaction is conducted with effective tone-management and necessary rapport, it has been found that teachers’ general initiation of questions is sufficient in eliciting answers from different students, making redundant the nominating of particular students by the teacher (Leng, 2000). Besides, effective tone-management reduces, to a great extent, the tension that may exist in EFL classes when students are asked to stand up and answer teachers’ questions. Thus effective tone-management can promote student responses and facilitate classroom interaction. On the contrary, if the classroom atmosphere is tense and repressive due to teachers’ ineffective tone-management, teacher-student interaction is constrained, and student production is reduced regardless of the types of question that teachers ask. In such a case, individual elicitation from teachers usually has to be applied to remedy the

unsuccessful general initiation, or teachers end up having to answer the question themselves, because no students venture to speak up in class.

## The study

The data presented in this paper comes from data obtained in the course of a larger study (Leng, 2000), involving 64 hours of lessons taught by 13 teachers to 14 classes that were observed and audio-recorded over three months in 1999 at a teacher-training university in Dalian, China by the first author. For the purposes of the present study, we used data from just four EFL classes. These comprised two classes each from two different grades, taught by three teachers, with one of the teachers being responsible for teaching two classes of two different grades. These informants were chosen for the salient features of their tone-management.

All the three teachers were native Mandarin speakers with over 10 years of teaching experience as senior lecturers at the tertiary level. Teachers A and B were female whereas Teacher C is male. Teacher A, in essence, was the teacher in charge of Class A of Grade I (coded as TAI) and also of Class A of Grade III (coded as TAIII). The other two teachers from classes I and III are coded (TBI) and (TCIII), respectively.

Both Teacher A and Teacher C had attended a year-long teacher-training course overseas. In addition, Teacher C holds an MA degree in Linguistics, obtained from a university in China. Teacher B was studying for her MA in Applied Linguistics in the same university where the data was collected.

All the student informants were English-majors in the teacher-training university, with an age range from 19 to 22. Each class contained about 22 students, with 3 males on average.

In all, the four classes were observed and audio-recorded over a period of 24 hours. Details of the recordings are indicated in the table below:

**Table 1: Recording hours of the study**

Teacher informants	Student informants	Recording hours
Teacher AI	Class A, Grade I	6 hours
Teacher BI	Class B, Grade I	8 hours
Teacher CIII	Class A, Grade III	10 hours
Teacher AIII	Class B, Grade III	10 hours

Since the study concerns face-to-face classroom interaction between teachers and students, the data are described and analysed qualitatively to capture the subtle tone-management strategies used by the teachers and students. The contrast between effective and ineffective tone-management would allow its different effects on classroom interaction to surface through the description and analysis.

## Effective tone-management and classroom interaction

Effective tone-management in this study has been found to be conducive to the facilitation of classroom interaction. It is found to create a supportive micro-classroom teaching context within the macro-context of teacher-fronted teaching in four specific ways:

- 1) by encouraging students' symmetrical discourse management;
- 2) by activating contingent discourse between teachers and students;
- 3) by inviting students' authentic contribution; and
- 4) by eliciting student-initiated meaning negotiation.

Whereas the concept of negotiation of meaning is widely understood, particularly in the context of Communicative Language Teaching, which privileges a focus on the interpretation of meaning and function over a focus on form, it may be useful here to clarify the sense in which, following van Lier (1996, 1998), we use the terms *symmetry*, *contingency* and *authenticity* in discourse management in interpreting the data below.

The classroom can be seen to constitute a speech exchange system that has its own rules for turn-taking and gives its participants certain rights and duties. The IRF (initiation – response – follow up) exchange format has been criticized on the grounds that “the teacher does all the initiating and closing (in other words, takes all the first and third turns) and the student’s work is done exclusively in the response slot” (van Lier 1998: 165). Students’ opportunities to exercise initiative or to develop a sense of control and self-regulation are extremely restricted because of this asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student in terms of rights and duties as well as initiation of turns. Interactional *symmetry*, on the other hand, is power-neutral and relates to shared rights and duties of participants involved in the joint construction of talk (ibid, 1998: 168). van Lier goes on to comment that such symmetry, most clearly visible in conversation among equals, may be more difficult to achieve for less proficient speakers. But what appears clear is that “the phenomena relating to, on the one hand, control, power, and equality and, on the other, conversational symmetry and negotiation of meaning are connected: unequal participants tend to have asymmetrical interactions” (ibid, 1998: 169).

van Lier further links up an orientation toward symmetrical interaction with the concept of ‘contingency’, which refers to two distinct characteristics of interaction: (i) the ways in which utterances are linked to one another, either directly or through shared knowledge or shared affordances (learning opportunities) in the environment; (ii) “the raising of expectations and the crafting of deliberate ambiguities so that future utterances can find a conversational home” (ibid, 1998: 169). When talk is contingent, utterances are constructed on the spot rather than planned in advance. But what characterizes contingent interaction most distinctly is perhaps the way the interactant’s mutual engagement is achieved and maintained. In terms of classroom talk, when this happens students freely initiate talk, and through collaborative and constructive interaction processes, begin to articulate their thoughts more critically and creatively. Contingent talk then, allows free play to the learner’s personal point of view, to learner voice.

Next, the point to be made about the way ‘authenticity’ is used here is that it has nothing to do with the usual domain of the term: that of authentic materials or authentic tasks. The concept goes far deeper, requiring us to look at it as a process of engagement in the learning situation, and as a characteristic of the persons engaged in learning (such as self-determination, self-actualization, intrinsic motivation, and so on). It has basically to do with appropriate response, a commitment to understanding and a sense of purpose. Ultimately, this becomes a question of the relevance of the things said and done, and the ways in which they are said and done. Once again, in terms of classroom interaction, “this means that authenticity is not brought into the classroom with the materials or the lesson plan, rather it is a goal that teacher and students have to work towards, consciously and constantly” (van Lier, 1996, citing Candlin, 1993).

With the help of excerpts from the classroom data investigated in the study, we proceed to show below how effective tone-management can help encourage student symmetrical discourse management, invite students’ authentic engagement and activate contingent interaction in class and student-initiated meaning negotiation.

### **Excerpt 1: Effective tone-management and students as discourse-managers**

*Context: The teacher (TCIII) was focusing on teaching a paragraph from the text Blackmail.*

1 T: ...Good, OK, next paragraph. “But it might be done, if the car could be driven at night and concealed by day. There were plenty of places to pull off the highway and be unobserved.” Well, do you know the phrase pull off? (writing on the board) Pull off? What is it?

S1: **Far away.**

- T: You mean be far away from. Do you agree? (S2 nodding at the teacher)  
Yes?
- S2: **Stop.**
- 5 T: It means stop the car, right? Stop the car. Where?
- S2: **Stop the car somewhere on the highway.**
- T: Stop the car somewhere on the highway, where?
- S2: **I don't know.**
- T: You don't know? In the middle of the highway? And which part?
- 10 S2: **Beside the highway.**
- T: Beside the highway or we say on the side, right? You drive the car to the side of the highway and stop there, right? That's pull off the highway, right? Stop there. That's pull off, pull off the highway, right? is it? Sorry, so you still think it's a...
- S2: **I didn't catch what you said.**
- T: OK, you didn't catch what I say. I said pull off means you drive the car to the side of the highway, right? To the side of the highway, OK? And stop there. So there were plenty of places to pull off the highway, right? ...

From the excerpt, it is seen that the teacher, while maintaining his role of class authority, gave some power to the students through his tolerant attitude towards their imprecise answers (Turns 2 & 6). The power-sharing interchange created a space for potential symmetrical interaction – enough for S2 to feel uninhibited in voicing her own ignorance frankly at Turn 8 upon being asked to answer a probing question. The teacher appreciating S2's frankness at Turn 9, managed the interaction along a congenial line by offering S2 a clue with a “choice question”. The teacher's effort at establishing symmetrical interaction is evident again at Turn 11 in his expression of concern at S2's puzzlement, as reflected at Turn 12.

The positive tone achieved through symmetrical interaction encouraged S2 to speak up and make efforts to remedy the practically broken discourse, with no hesitation whatsoever in articulating her problem when she couldn't give the right answer, at Turns 8 and 12. Such open demonstration of one's ignorance is understood to be quite uncommon in the context of China, amounting almost to the teacher's authority and/or effectiveness of teaching being challenged (Cortazzi and Jin 1996b).

The excerpt shows that S2, almost on a par with the teacher, played the symmetrical role of a key manager of the discourse. If she had kept her puzzlement to herself, she would not have been able to get the teacher to realise that she had not caught what he had said. The discourse would have been more didactic than interactive, with the student's need being ignored.

## Excerpt 2: Effective tone-management and contingent interaction between the teacher and students

*Context: The teacher (TCIII) was asking his students to describe one of the three characters in the text of Blackmail.*

- 1 T: ... So, so, for the detective, right? His name is O- (writing on the blackboard) gilvie,  
Ss: **Ogilvie; Ogilvie (pronounced as in gate)**  
T: Right, Ok? O-,  
Ss: **Ogilvie, O-g-i-l-v-i-e**  
5 T: Is it? (1) Let me have a look at it.  
Ss: **Yeah.**  
T: Yes, I'm right. So just now you said this guy is greedy, and? (2)  
Ss: **slying, humble, vulgar.**  
T: vulgar, and? (3)  
10 Ss: **Slying.**  
T: Sly, let's see sly. And just now she mentioned that he is fat, fat, right? Or we say, actually in this text he is ? (4)  
Ss: **gross, heavy, gross, gross.**  
T: Sorry? (5)  
Ss: **gross, gross, gross**  
15 T: (writing on the board) This one, right? (6)  
Ss: **Gross. Yes.**  
T: Is it gross? (7)  
Ss: **Yes.**  
T: Gross? (8)  
20 Ss: **Yes.**  
T: I think it's gross (as in box), right? (9)  
Ss: **gross**  
T: gross? (10) (acceptingly) OK. And have you noticed this word, obese, obese means very, very fat. right? Very heavy and any? (11)  
S: **oafish**  
25 T: How do you spell this word? (12)  
S: **o-a-f-i-s-h**  
T: o-a  
S: **i-s-h**  
T: i-s-h. Yes? (13)  
30 S: **f-i-s-h**  
T: oafish  
S: **Yeah.**  
T: (writing on the board) Is it (14)? Yeah. Any other word to describe

the detective? (15)

Ss: **piggy**

35 T: You mean the detective is piggy or? (16)

S: **the looks**

T: 'the looks. Actually, I think it is the eyes. right? His eyes are piggy. His eyes are piggy. Have you noticed another word to describe his eyes? (17)

The contingency of the classroom interaction in this excerpt is ensconced in a series of confirmation questions. The teacher asked 17 brief and crisp questions as indicated in the text, but over half of them were aimed at gaining a better understanding of the students' messages (see questions marked (1), (5), (6), (7), (8), (9), (10), (13), (14)). As a result, at the corresponding Turns of 6, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 30, the students held answers with which they were able to grant confirmation to the teacher. (However, Questions 10 and 14 were answered by the teacher himself). Both the teacher and the students were participating in the contingent interaction as "knowers" and "askers", respectively. The ambiguity in the teacher's understanding of the students' discourse created an opportunity for the sharing of knowledge between them, making room for students to produce some utterances spontaneously.

The effective tone-management achieved through asking confirmation questions enabled the teacher and students to break out of the rigid IRF grid, with the students being not only highly attentive to what was going on in class, but also contributing mutually to the naturally-emerging discussion, and keeping the interaction contingent.

### **Excerpt 3: Effective tone-management and authentic interaction**

*Context: The teacher (T/III) was discussing the benefits of household computerisation as in the text.*

1 T: Automatic. Automatic, automatic washing machine (writing on the blackboard), automatic washing machine. So almost, so almost in childhood, in the city has this kind of automatic washing machine. Have you got automatic washing machines at home? How many of you have this?

S1: **In our dormitory.**

T: Oh, in your dormitory you have one?

S2: **Each floor has one.**

5 T: Each floor, has one?

Ss: **No, no**

T: Each dormitory?

Ss: **No, no.**

- S3: **Each building has one. (Ss: xxx)**
- 10 T: Where did you get this?
- S3: **From one of the company of washing machine and offered. (Ss: xxx)**
- S4: **University.**
- T: University?
- S3: **No, not the university. One of the company of washing machine.**
- 15 T: Yeah, one of the company.
- S3: **If we want to wash something we must pay, we have a card.**
- T: Oh? Ahem that makes things easier. You don't have to wash. It's good, good. You know what? ... ..

The authentic contribution to the interaction manifested in the excerpt here derived from the students' responses to the teacher's referential questions. The teacher asked six questions aiming at acquiring information about a part of the students' university life (Turns 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 13). Thus at Turns 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16 the students shared with the teacher authentic information about the automatic washing machine they had in their dormitory. Among the 17 turns in the excerpt, students took 9 turns. Indeed, over half of the communication time was taken up by the students.

The well-managed class tone engaged the whole class attentively on the topic, and every student sought an opportunity to contribute to the interaction. The interaction between the teacher and the entire class revolved around the authentic questions and answers which led to the speedy and coherent progression of the discourse.

To a great extent, the authentic nature of the interaction lay in S1's response to the teacher's questions. Instead of following the teacher's question rigidly to answer whether or not he had an automatic washing machine at home at Turn 2, the student opted to respond freely with an indirect answer. Ostensibly, this utterance breaks the rule of *relevance* (Grice, 1967) in co-operative conversation. However, the teacher did not ignore the response; instead, she allowed the students numerous opportunities to elaborate during subsequent turns.

Thus the temporary digression, deriving from S1's seemingly irrelevant response, created a rich span of speaking time for the four students who chose to speak and elaborate. More chances for students to speak up in one of the classes of Grade I were also observed when students initiated communicative interaction to share their life experiences with the teacher, as appears in the next excerpt.

#### Excerpt 4: Effective tone-management and student-initiated classroom interaction

Context: Morning report in Class A of Grade I.

- 1 S1: ... Now in my home there are three dogs. (Ss: laughing) One is, one is big, and the other and another two are twins. I call them Little Lihai, and Little Yueba (Ss: laughing). They are white and they, they...
- T: (cutting in) Why do you call them by that name, by those names?
- S1: Because one of it is, er...
- T: "lihai", is that so?
- 5 S1: Yes, and he always, er, er, er (T: barks) and eat, eat foods first.
- T: Always bully the other one, is that so?
- S1: Yes.
- T: So it's Lihai.
- S1: The other one is Yueba.
- 10 T: Yueba (Ss: laughing).
- S1: I think they are very lovely and sometimes...
- T: Do you mean to say that Yueba means timid?
- S1: Timid?
- T: "lao shi ba jiao, dan xiao de" (quiet and timid)
- 15 S1: Yes, and it, she is small and he is larger. That's all.
- T: It's interesting.

This student-initiated interaction took place within the micro-context of a communicative task in class, the Morning Report, between the teacher and students of Grade I, who had registered in the university not long before the data were collected. While participating in the morning report, which was reserved as a separate teaching procedure for students to share information with each other, S1 was thoroughly engaged in talking about her own experiences with her pets to the real audience of the teacher and the other students in class. That she was motivated and eager enough to struggle to communicate these experiences to her audience with her less than fluent English is obvious from Turns 3 and 5.

The teacher's emphasis on the content of the report, rather than on the language forms that the student displayed, helped to nurture an effective class tone. The teacher's keen interest in the topic at Turns 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 and 16 temporarily overtook her constant concern about the student's language forms which was the intended goal of Grade I teaching, according to the stipulated Curriculum objectives (1989).

The creation of such a class tone was found to be positively encouraging. It benefited the whole class by provoking their participation. When the reporter and the teacher were interacting with each other, the rest of the class were observed to be highly vigilant, responding appropriately by laughing and murmuring, and taking down notes when the teacher wrote on the board a new word, “timid” at Turn 13. The reporter herself gained a lengthened speaking time, which guaranteed more words from her in this excerpt than from her interlocutor, the teacher.

**Excerpt 5: Effective tone-management and student-initiated meaning negotiation**

*Context: The teacher (T/III) was checking her students’ understanding of what a chip was made of, and the amount of silicon available, which, according to the text, is the second most abundant element next to oxygen on the surface of the earth.*

- 1 T: ... What does this sentence mean? “Next to oxygen, the most abundant element”. A.  
S1: **That means silicon is the second amount quantity in the air.**  
T: second amount of quantity, what do you mean?  
S1: **the amount, because the oxygen is, er... the oxygen is the largest part of the air, and silicon is the second part.**  
5 T: second to this. OK, uhum, OK, yes, sit down please. (S2 is bidding for the turn by raising her hand). So B, what do you think?  
S2: **“Dan” (Nitrogen) is the most abundant element in the air, it consists, er the 78% of of the air is “Dan”.**  
Ss: **on the earth, on the earth**  
T: Oh really?  
Ss: **In the air.**  
10 T: In the air, you mean “Dan”?  
S2: **Yeah.**  
T: Another chemical?  
S2: **21% is oxygen.**  
T: Oh, really? But actually, from this sentence, we know, from this sentence we know, oxygen is the most abundant element.  
15 S3: **It means the element on the surface of the earth, not in the air. Just on the surface of the earth, silicon is the second most abundant element.**  
T: Ah? Just on the surface of the earth?  
S3: **Yes.**  
T: Silicon is the second most abundant element?  
S3: **Yes.**

- 20 T: Not in the air, not in space?  
 S3: Yes.  
 T: OK, maybe, thank you. I'm not sure about that. OK. Do you agree?  
 Just on the surface of the earth, very close to the earth, oxygen is the most abundant element, so that we can breathe in a lot of oxygen, is that so? We won't be choked...

Students' initiation for meaning negotiation got off to a start when the teacher noticed that S2 was bidding for a turn, and nominated S2. S2 at Turn 6 challenged the teacher's acceptance of S1's answer by declaring her own knowledge about nitrogen. She then supported her claim with statistics. Her declaration stimulated eager participation from other students, who offered their different opinions at Turns 7 and 9. It is seen that S3 spoke of her own free will to contradict S2's evidence with her explanation at Turn 15, emphasizing that it was "... on the surface of the earth, not in the air. Just on the surface of the earth, silicon is the second most abundant element."

Student-initiated meaning negotiation was also largely due to the teacher's frank acknowledgement of her ignorance about the knowledge of chemical science at Turn 22. She showed her keen interest at Turn 8, and asked questions for confirmation from the students at Turns 10, 12, 16 and 20. Here the students were the knowers, the sources of knowledge. S2, S3, and the rest of the class felt uninhibited in digressing from the teaching agenda and navigated the discourse (Allwright, 1984) to meet their own different needs in clearing their doubts and negotiating for clearer meaning. They, for the time being, became symmetrical, if not equal, with the teacher in co-producing comprehension of the text.

To sum up, both teachers and students in the above five instances of effective tone-management initiated some episodes of *symmetrical*, *contingent* and *authentic* interaction. The classroom teaching was geared towards student participation, and the classroom atmosphere was observed to be harmonious. In such contexts, student were communicating their knowledge and personal experiences to their audience, i.e., teachers and other fellow students. Effective tone-management, therefore, had manifested its motivating function intangibly in generating free student expression and meaning-negotiation, so immensely benefitting EFL development.

### **Ineffective tone-management and classroom interaction**

It is evident that all the teacher informants in this study were conscientious, and that they were all aware of the important role of student participation in class. However, there were teachers observed in the data who frequently failed in class to get students to interact with them. In Excerpt 6 below, for instance, the teacher and her students were unable to sustain a well-established tone, which resulted in a tense atmosphere

and a sense of repression in class. The students were reluctant to participate in teacher-student interaction, and were deprived of the free flow of expression due to the teacher's ineffective tone-management.

### **Excerpt 6: Ineffective tone-management and student truncated expressions**

*Context: The teacher (TBI) was checking her students' understanding of a sentence in the text of The Open University.*

1 T: ... Now others, how do you understand this sentence?... What is your understanding? A, what is your understanding?

**S1: ye zhe me li jie de (the same as others)**

T: But I want different words.

**S1: For example, if a per-, people, person has many, has some job and ...**

5 T: (cutting in) What does a person has many jobs means? Can a person has many jobs? I don't think, I don't think so.

**S1: If a person has a job, or he or he has, or he has children (T: uha) to look after (T: uha), he, he he have limited time to study (T: OK), so the time he he study the course will be long, must be long.**

T: er, I don't understand you. I understand your meaning, but you didn't express yourself well. What does "the time he studies the course will be long", what does that mean?

**S1: be longer than other people. For example, if, if the other learn the course for three, three years, he, perhaps he will study, study the course for four years, five years or six years.**

T: uhum, sit down please. That's the point....

The ineffective tone-management was largely due to the teacher's over-emphasis on the checking nature of her questions. When S1 claimed that her answer was the same as the one given by the previous student at Turn 2, the teacher at Turn 3 was not satisfied and insisted that she should express herself differently. At the teacher's bluntness, S1 became nervous and got tongue-tied at Turn 4, although she made a valiant attempt to offer an example to illustrate her point. The teacher, nevertheless, instead of reducing the growing tension and making S1 feel at ease, interrupted the struggling student to point out flatly at Turn 5 that S1 had made a logical mistake since a person can't have many jobs (itself a questionable assumption).

Being criticised openly, S1 thus became more nervous, and her elaboration was affected by her becoming tied-tongue when she tried to rephrase her expression and improve her explanation at Turn 6. However, at Turn 7 the teacher reiterated the fact

that S1 had not come to the point, that her expression was faulty. Since the teacher was intent on evaluating students, she would not give up criticising S1 before S1 could come up with an answer to match her own preconceived one. She thus commented on the student's answer with even more negative feedback, prodding her to "express herself well" at Turn 7. Upon being challenged, at Turn 8, S1 was forced to refine the linguistic form of her answer to please the teacher, but in the end her sentence was seriously fragmented with four unnecessary repetitions.

Due to the tension in the classroom created by the teacher's ineffective tone-management, none of the students in class dared (or were willing) to initiate turns, and they all waited to be nominated by the teacher. Not only did S1 become tongue-tied, the whole class was deadly silent, with everyone bending down their heads to avoid eye contact with the teacher. When they had to stand up to answer the teacher's questions, they were reluctant to elaborate on their points, because they knew that their poor English would evoke the teacher's public criticism and disdain. Not surprisingly, classroom discourse in this class was restricted to the IRF pattern.

Compared with the other class of Grade I conducted by TAI, students in this class with TBI were repressed and anxious. They all looked puzzled. Clearly, they did not enjoy the free participation and the easy learning environment that was experienced in the other Grade I class. The whole class, as a matter of fact, exhibited a wordless resistance to the teacher's authoritarian tone.

### **Strategies for nurturing effective tone-management**

We maintain that it is possible to produce effective class tone even within a teacher-fronted class characterized by IRF interaction. First, effective tone-management could be achieved through symmetrical interaction, as in Excerpt 1. "... Symmetry refers purely to matters relating to the talk and the interaction itself ... to equal distribution of rights and duties *in talk*" (van Lier 1996: 175; emphasis as in the original). Students in Excerpt 1 were seen to be making symmetrical contributions to the interaction. They were allowed to make mistakes (Turns 2 and 6), to declare their ignorance (Turn 8), and to ask for clarification (Turn 12).

Secondly, effective tone-management could be achieved through the teachers' own 'learning-episodes' in class. This may seem to fly in the face of the teacher's image of authority deeply entrenched in many Asian cultures, since teachers are regarded as the repository of knowledge, and not as someone still involved in the process of learning. With reference to the question of teacher authority, van Lier (1996) distinguishes between being an authority and being authoritarian and maintains that teachers can be in authority in constructing authentic conversations in class, without being authoritarian. Teacher CIII in Excerpt 2 and Teacher AIII in Excerpt 5

maintained their class authority by asking confirmation questions, and established a positive class tone by displaying a keen interest in the production of knowledge, and thus naturally invited students to contribute to the contingent process of information-exchange and meaning-negotiation.

The third strategy for achieving effective tone-management could be through the use of referential questions. Long and Sato (1983) distinguish between referential questions and display questions. Referential questions provide contextual information about situations, events, actions, purposes, or relationships; contrary to this, display questions are known information questions, asked to establish the addressee's knowledge of the answer.

Referential questions asked by Teacher A, as in Excerpts 3 and 4, contributed to genuine communication in the classroom context. Questions about the students' daily life experiences triggered off the students' own accounts of their experiences and they were motivated to converse with their teacher in terms of equal discourse rights and duties. Classroom atmosphere was relaxing and the teacher-student discourse was no longer constrained by the IRF pattern. Students took up more class time than the teacher, experiencing a sense of being authentic language users.

The fourth strategy that could be used in setting up an effective class tone was to cater to students' immediate needs. Teacher CIII in Excerpt 1 and Teacher AIII in Excerpt 5 were attentive to students' needs even when they were teaching to a pre-designated syllabus. In Excerpt 1, Teacher CIII at Turn 11 came to realise that S2 was still in the dark as to the meaning of "to pull off", and temporarily digressed from his teaching in order to explain it to her again; in Excerpt 5, Teacher AIII at Turn 5 acknowledged S2's bidding and gave her the chance to clear her doubts. Giving each student individual attention indicates that teachers play an assisting role in the learning process, akin to Vygotsky's (1978) and Bruner's (1983) notion of scaffolding. Maintaining flexibility in teaching indicates that the teacher recognises the importance of the students' own internal syllabus. And meeting students' needs creates unpredictable opportunities for students to develop their own potential and exhibit their learning autonomy.

## Conclusion

ESL classroom teaching is undeniably different from informal, non-instructional conversation in several ways (Thornbury, 1996). One of them is the examination-oriented syllabus, which reduces many potential opportunities for students to engage in classroom interaction. However, this study showed that students were greatly encouraged to interact and negotiate with their teachers when teachers were able to manage the classroom interaction tone effectively alongside their teaching syllabus.

Within such a context, teachers were likely to make their teaching congenial and symmetrical so that students would extend and elaborate upon their contingent responses and use their foreign language abilities for authentic information exchange and meaning negotiation with teachers.

In contrast, if teachers did not make an effort to manage class tone effectively, the tense classroom atmosphere was likely to lead to rigid IRF patterns of discourse, and students were not motivated to exert their potential for participation. Their discourse failed to reflect authentic interaction or meaning negotiation. Thus their opportunities for learning to use the language in the EFL context were smaller than those students whose teachers were able to develop effective classroom interaction tone.

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