

Unit 8

Types of Spoken Discourse

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It is commonly the case that formal classroom interaction has its benefits in increasing the learners' proficiency in language structures, but it does not meet the communicative demands of the learners. This factor has led scholars to attempt specifications of what might be termed "informal interactive environment" in the belief that this sort of language is conducive to the fluency of second language learners¹.

It is, therefore, worth considering what the professionals think of such environments as being formal or informal, interactive or not-interactive².

1. Variety of types of Spoken Discourse.

1.1. Formal interview.

This form of interaction takes place between the teacher and individual students. The content of the interview might include questions about the students' application to the school or the university, the students' specialization of a specific field of study, the assessment of the English course they have undertaken and so on. Consider the following extract³:

1.2. Formal Classroom Interaction.

¹ Willis (1981) states: "sociologists, at least, those concerned with education and classroom studies rarely define what they mean by "formal" and "informal". (p. 6). Equally, the word "interactive" tends to have different meanings in the literature. In general, it is considered to be restricted to certain types of oral and written discourse where all participants are involved in the discourse.

² Hasan, (1988) has attempted to look at a variety of types of spoken discourse.

³ Here is an extract from an interview with one of the students:

T. How many applications have you made?

S. Ten applications.

T. Ten.

T. Ok. What, what is your specialization, what specialization have you applied to do?

S. About civil engineering?

T. Yes.

S. specialization, stability of construction.

T. Stability.

S. Stability of construction including structure engineering.

T. That is a part of structure engineering?

P. Yes.

T. Ok.

- * The formal lesson is either based on a textbook or teacher-made materials and activities.
- * It is characterised by teacher control, with little or no possibility for the students to develop the lesson as they wish.
- * It is formal in the sense that it is tightly structured.
- * It exemplifies very strongly the “Stimulus-Response-Feedback” of the behaviorist school.
- * It is not interactive because students are not permitted either to initiate discourse or use authentic language¹.

1.3. Informal Classroom Interaction.

- * The informal lesson, like the formal lesson, can be based on a textbook or teacher-made materials.
- * But unlike the formal lesson, the informal lesson is very much less tightly structured in terms of direction.
- * There is little shape to the lesson and little decisive teacher intervention.
- * Students are given the chance to say what they want to say within the framework of the topic of the lesson.
- * The teacher can lead the activities, but he can not control the class.

¹ Here is an extract from a formal lesson:

T. Is Tony happy or sad?

S. happy I think.

T. happy you think, quite right.

T. What's her name?

S. Kate.

T. You're right Kate.

T. And who is that?

S. The opposite.

T. What's the opposite?

S. Tony.

T. Tony.

T. Is Tony happy or sad?

S. Sad.

T. Quite right, sad.

- * There is a relatively high amount of off-stage activity (whispers, bursts of the use of native language, laughter... etc.)¹:

1.4. Informal Classroom Discussion.

- * In this lesson, the students are asked to discuss a topic of interest to them such as marriage, sports, holidays... etc.
- * The topic is usually chosen to invite discussion and disagreement in an open debate within the physical confines of the classroom and in class time rather than over coffee.
- * The teacher's task is to encourage students to participate in the discussion in an informal manner and not to control events²:

1.5. Informal conversation.

- * In this type of interaction, the conversation can be conducted between the students and their colleagues or teacher in an informal setting such as that of a coffee room.
- * The aim here is to create a natural environment in which all participants concerned get involved.
- * Participants are allowed to choose a topic of interest for discussion on their own.

¹ T. Anybody knows what a whale is?

S. Mammals.

T. It is a mammal, yes.

S. Camel.

T. No it is not a camel. It is a mammal.

S. Fish, fish (Ss laugh).

Ss. Fish and chips (Ss laugh).

T. Come on Mohammed, draw me one.

S. (draws).

T. Excellent. Ok. That's a whale. Isn't it brilliant?

T. Stop talking in Arabic and French. Ok.

² IB. The marriage in Algeria, it isn't like England.

T. What happens in England?

Az. In England, they get marriage today and divorce tomorrow. Many problems between husband and wife.

- * In this way, they participate in the conversation in a manner in which they forget the artificiality of the context¹.

1.6. Analysis of Types of Interaction.

It has been found that the formal type of interaction is characterised by the following features:

- There is a clear structure to the lesson.
- Questions are based on content rather than on personal experience.
- Pseudo-questions dominate the interaction.
- Students only speak when asked.
- The teacher dominates classroom interaction and allows no comments outside the topic.
- Teacher stands and students sit behind desks.

On the other hand, the informal type of interaction is characterised by:

- A relaxed atmosphere inside the classroom.
- Students participate in the interaction and the teacher plays a minor role.
- Open-ended questions predominate in the interaction.
- The teacher does not isolate himself from the students and moves about.

It can be said that the question of formality and informality can be associated with the two basic roles of the teacher: as an instructor and as a manager

¹ Consider the following extract:

NS: it seems natural; it seems natural to us. So what do you do in Algeria?

Mo: No, when you meet a man with a woman, meet together, we make (asks his colleague about the meaning of some French words in English).

S: To know each other.

MO: to know each other, before marriage, he spend...

RA: For example in Algeria, when we, we, to get married, we, we chose the girl, we and we ask about family, and we ask about her behaviour.

respectively. As an instructor, the teacher presents or elicits language, as a manager he sets up situations for students to interact in by themselves¹.

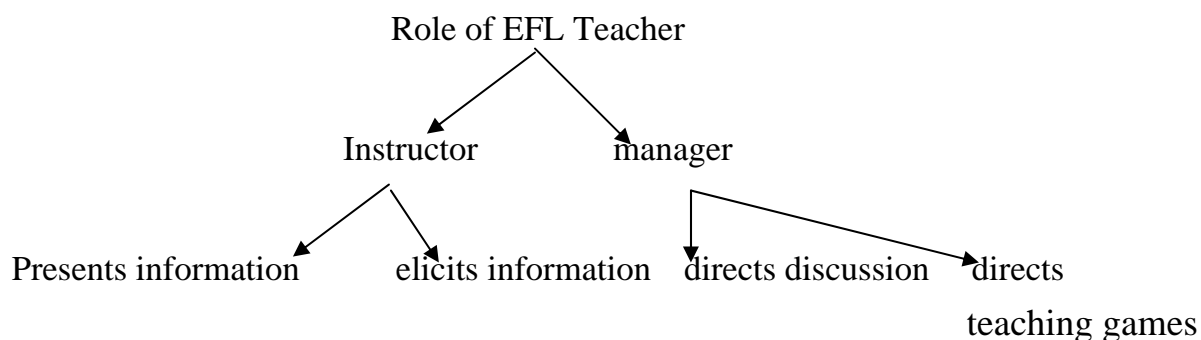


Figure 8.1.: The two basic roles of the teacher.

Thus formality is usually associated with the role of the teacher who acts as the sole determiner of classroom discourse by presenting and eliciting information. When the teacher acts as a manager by either chairing a discussion or directing some role play games he is introducing an informal type of interaction.

It can be said that the very end of informality is when the classroom interaction becomes similar to that used among friends outside the classroom, where participants feel at ease to say whatever they like. In the classroom, it is difficult to achieve this degree of informality. However, a similar sort of interaction such as informal classroom discussion can be incorporated instead, though the teacher always has the right to interrupt and bring things to a close.

Features of Interactive/ non-interactive Discourse.

With regard to the question of “very interactive” and “not-interactive” it can be said that a very interactive lesson is characterised by:

- * students’ participation and involvement in the lesson;
- * students talk most of the time;
- * the teacher does not dominate the interaction;
- * students initiate and elicit information;

¹ The following diagram, adapted from Willis (1981, p. 11) shows the cline of formality running from left to right according to the role of the teacher.

- * a relaxed atmosphere exists inside the classroom.

On the other hand, a very non-interactive lesson is characterised by teacher-centred interaction, and the students play a minor and a passive role¹.

The more the interaction moves towards the end of informality the less the teacher controls and initiates discourse, and the more the interaction becomes interactive in the sense that students initiate the discourse and produce more of their oral output. In both classroom discussion and informal conversation students compete to initiate discourse and take turns in a manner which is typical of natural discourse.

2. Aiding Comperhension.

Krashen (1981) considers comprehensible input the most important characteristic for language acquisition, and regards (naturally enough) incomprehensible input as a factor that hinders second language (L2) acquisition².

If the comprehensibility of input is essential for (L₂) acquisition, the question of how input is made comprehensible becomes crucial. This can be done in two ways: by linguistic and non-linguistic adjustments to non-native speakers' (NNSs) speech.

2.1. Linguistic Adjustments to NNSs Speech.

By linguistic adjustments we mean the ways in which the language addressed to NNSs is rendered more comprehensible. Research in this area shows that the input the learners receive is characterised by:

- * shorter utterances,
- * simplified vocabulary,

¹ These views seem to regard a very interactive lesson as having the characteristics of an informal type of interaction, and a very non-interactive lesson as having the characteristics of a formal type of interaction.

² This, krashen believes, explains why educational T.V. programmes fail to teach foreign languages unless the acquirer speaks "a very closely related language". These factors have led Krashen to define the good language teacher as "someone who can make input comprehensible to a non-native speaker, regardless of his or her level of competence in the target language". (P. 64).

* and more clarification requests¹.

Among the common features of the foreigner-talk discourse are the following: shorter utterances, syntactically less complex clauses, and less subordination, also containing less varied vocabulary².

It is through this sort of simplified input that language learning becomes most beneficial. It is under such conditions that the classroom can be of great benefit for (L₂) Learners. It should be noted that the value of the (L₂) classroom does not lie in the grammar instruction, but in the simpler “teacher-talk”. Also, for the informal environment to be of any use, the language addressed to NNSs should be simple and comprehensible.

2.2. Non-linguistic adjustments to NNSs Speech.

Modification of the interaction in conversation is also necessary for providing better access to the language acquired³.

It is important, therefore, to look at the integral issues which play a major role in the modification of the interactional structure in teacher – student discourse: question types, repetitions by the teacher of students’ utterances, expansions by the teacher of students’ utterances, and the use of conversational frames.

1. The Use of Questions.

Echoic Questions.

¹ This sort of input is known in the literature as “foreigner-talk discourse”.

² (Gaies, 1977, Henzl, 1973, Hasan, 1988).

Consider, for example, the following extract:

T. Anybody knows what a whale is?

S. Mammals.

T. It is a mammal, yes.

This example shows that the exchange is typical of observational studies of foreigner talk in which the input is made simple. The teacher uses an uninverted question lacking auxiliary verb “does”.

³ Thus Tsui (1985) reports that “it has been hypothesized that input which is comprehensible and interaction which has been modified best facilitate second language acquisition” (p. 8). Moreover, Long (1983) considers modification in the interaction structure of conversation more important than linguistic simplification in making the input more comprehensible to NNSs.

The direction and negotiation of information conveyed by utterances is made through acts whose functions are made obvious by means of the modification of the interaction structure which render the input more comprehensible to the learners. These acts or “echoic questions” are referred to as:

Comprehension checks: (e.g. “Do you understand what I mean?”; ‘Do you know of the word divorce”).

Clarification requests (e.g. “What?” “Sorry?” “What do you mean?”; what is your question?).

Confirmation checks (e.g. S. I think we need some, I think reading T. more reading? S. Yes¹).

These questions are also good interaction devices to avoid a breakdown of communication and to repair the discourse when communication breaks down.

Consider the following example of a comprehension check strategy:

1. T. Are there any words that you don’t understand?
2. S. Rather like a fish.
3. T. Rather like. Some parts of the whale look like a fish, but not all of it, it is rather².

Once the communication has broken down, the teacher uses the clarification request strategy to repair the discourse. Consider the following extract:

1. T. What is the first paragraph about?
2. S. xxx.
3. T. yes description of...?
4. T. Mohammed, what was your work?
5. S. characteristics.

¹ These questions clearly show that the teacher explicitly checks the comprehension of the learners, asks them to clarify their utterances, and elicits confirmation that their utterances are clearly heard and understood. Obviously such acts help the modification and the comprehensibility of the interaction structure.

² This example illustrates how the teacher explicitly checks the comprehension of the students after explaining the lesson. The teacher in turn (1) wants to make sure that the students have understood the vocabulary of the lesson before proceeding further on the premise that any misunderstanding might otherwise lead to a breakdown in communication. Here, the comprehension check device serves a metalinguistic function where the focus is on the meaning of the language rather than on its forms.

6. T. characteristics is a good word to use, but it could be anything, it could be anything.
7. S. external structure.
8. I. Yes, external appearance you would say or what it looks like, what a whale looks like¹.

Epistemic questions.

In the classroom, the teacher uses “display” questions or closed questions which ask the respondent to provide or display a knowledge of information already known by the questioner².

When the teacher uses display questions the interaction becomes teacher – centered, question – answer – feedback during which knowledge is displayed and evaluated. By using these sorts of questions, the teacher makes the input more comprehensible to learners. However the language used is artificial where the focus is on the transmission of factual or propositional information rather than on communication or the exchange of genuine information.

To make classroom interaction more genuine and authentic, the teacher uses referential questions which require information not known by the questioner³.

He may also use reasoning questions which require the respondent to think and give an opinion⁴.

Unlike display questions, referential and reasoning questions show clearly that the teacher seeks some information from the students which he does not

¹ The extract above illustrates the use of the clarification strategy in turn (4). On the student's part it is used as an attempt to clarify and repeat the word, and on the teacher's part it is used as an attempt to hear more clearly what is being said to him. The clarification request is used as a strategy for the negotiation of meaning which occurs in an environment of linguistic trouble. The solution in such a case is not achieved separately by the teacher or by the learner. It is achieved by the joint effort of both the teacher and the learner to maintain communication. What is important, therefore, is the negotiation of an agreement on meaning.

² (e.g. what's that? Is it a man's head or a woman's head? Is he happy or sad?).

³ (e.g.. How many applications have you made? Has anybody eaten anything from a whale? What about you, have you been to Paris?).

⁴ (e.g. why is he poor? What do you think about that?).

know. In this sense, the interaction is meaningful, and the language is used for “genuine” or “authentic” discourse.

Display questions predominate in the classroom. Learners are seldom given the opportunity to show their opinions freely and express personal experience. Beyond the classroom the teacher uses referential and reasoning questions which provide the learners with opportunities to enhance their abilities to use the language more freely for communicative purposes. (Hasan, 1988)

2. Repetitions by teacher of students utterances.

One of the interesting strategies employed by teachers to make the input more comprehensible to language learners is the repetition of learners’ utterances. It has been argued that this strategy is believed to have a potential impact on language learning and language acquisition.

The teacher repeats students’ utterances as a form of evaluation of their responses:

T. has she ever been to Rio?

S. yes, she has.

T. yes, she has. Jolly good¹.

It is intuitively a peculiarity of classroom interaction to allow for a great number of teacher repetitions of student utterances than any other type of interaction. This shows the artificiality of classroom language where the emphasis is placed on the correctness and evaluation of student responses rather than on the use of language for communication.

3. Expansions by teachers of students utterances.

Another communicative strategy employed by teachers to render the input more comprehensible to FL learners is the use of expansions of students’ utterances. This strategy is believed to have the potential for language acquisition:

¹ Thus repetition here is intended to show the teacher’s satisfaction of students’ utterances. It reinforces learning and in consequence, makes the input more comprehensible.

T. Utility, what do you mean by that?

S. for their oil, and their meat, and.

T. So, utility what you can use them for, yes, excellent¹.

4. Conversational Frames.

The use of conversational frames is another strategy employed in the classroom to make the input more comprehensible. By conversational frames we mean those boundary markers such as “well”, “so”, “ok”, “now”, “right” etc. which signal the end of an exchange, or the beginning of a new one, or a new “stage in the lesson²”.

The introduction of new topics or exchanges is largely determined by the teacher who is in sole control of the process of interaction:

T. Ok. Here is the story with some words missing (T. distributes handouts).

T. Ok. Can you write the missing words, please.

T. Ok. Can you look at the punctuation at the bottom. Let’s do it together.

T. Right, you tell me the story³.

In short we have presented the possible ways and means in which the teacher makes his input more comprehensible to FL learners. These include the use of questions, repetitions, expansions of students’ utterances, and conversational frames. In addition, implicit in the discussion above is that language learning results from learning how to communicate in the FL and communicative opportunities are afforded by the types of interaction that place

¹ This extract shows that the teacher expands on the student’s utterance. The expansion occurs in the third part of the initiation response–feedback (IRF) structure. Expansion here takes the form of paraphrasing and/ or adding some information to the student’s utterance in a more acceptable form. In this sense, it is used to modify and evaluate the student’s response, and, in consequence, to make the interaction more comprehensible. Thus, expansion can be considered as some sort of a repair strategy of incomplete responses.

² (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975).

³ These examples illustrate the teacher’s control of the classroom discourse. Every now and then, the teacher is trying to introduce a new activity and makes his introduction clear by using conversational frame like: “ok”, “right”. Clearly, conversational frames, thus used, help learners focus on the stages or ideas of the lesson and provide them with another means of making the input more comprehensible.

emphasis on an exchange of information in natural discourse such as the informal classroom discussion or informal conversation. But what do you mean by natural discourse?

3. Natural discourse.

3.1. Some features of natural discourse.

Natural discourse usually refers to the discourse which takes place outside the classroom. It may also refer to the sort of discussion type of discourse inside the classroom¹.

Emphasis on content.

Natural discourse is usually associated with informal conversation in which the content rather than the medium is the main concern of participants².

Unfolding:

Spoken discourse unfolds as it progresses leaving a variable but relatively low level of predicatability for what is going to be said next. Participants are always aware of what has already been said, but not of what will be said.

The type of interaction will determine the unfolding principle of spoken discourse. Consider the following extract taken from formal classroom interaction:

I. Listen to the story again.

T. Once upon a time there was a very honest man called...?

S. Tony.

T. Tony, ok.

T. And there was a very rich girl called...?

¹ Indeed, Brumfit (1984) says: 'natural use for most people is primarily discussion and conversation.' (p.87).

² In this sense, Burt and Dulay (1981) consider: "a natural language environment exists whenever the focus of the speaker is on the content of communication rather than on the language itself". (p. 178).

S. Kate.

T. And Tony...?

S. Fell in love with kate.

T. Tony fell in love with kate¹.

An example in which the unfolding principle of natural discourse is presented can be seen in the following extract taken from informal conversation:

Ns. If you decided that you wanted to marry somebody, and your family, your parents, say you won't do that or whatever, then you won't do it, will you?
Could you say no, I want to get married?

S1. We can't, we can't be angry with our parents for example, because we live together, and we are...

S2. We always depend for our parents, not like here, I think here, I think here².

Thus, the setting of interaction determines the nature of spoken discourse. Classroom interaction in which the teacher controls the discourse and assumes his role as an initiator, controller, or evaluator run contrary to the production of unfolding and open-ended discourse. On the contrary conversation in which the teacher relinquishes his role as initiator, controller or evaluator, usually preserves the unfolding nature of spoken discourse.

Multiple Source.

This feature means that in natural discourse more than one participant takes part in the interaction. It is true that classroom interaction is multiple source, but it is restricted to certain roles and procedures in a setting whereby the teacher decides

¹ This extract presents the students with a semi-completed dialogue with some words of the teacher's utterances missing to be filled in by the students. This means that there is no unfolding as the discourse progresses because the end product is there to be reached.

² In this extract, the students are asked to discuss the question of marriage in Algeria. They show their opinions in different ways. This preserves the unfolding nature of spoken discourse: the ending is not prescribed and the way in which the discourse develops is left to the responsibility of all participants.

who speaks, when, and about what. In other words, the teacher assumes the dominant role in the distribution of turns¹.

Attempts to make classroom discourse of a more informal discussion type should, presumably, also be encouraged. This type of discursive interaction is found to be more interactive and preserves the principle of multiple source:

T. What do you think about that?

RA. We can meet girls before we get married we can walk, we can prepare, it isn't like.

T. It is much easier.

LA. No, we can get meeting between men and women, but not like this country.

AZ. Not like England.

LA. Not like England, no problem, you can't go in her house².

Taking the initiative.

It is believed that opportunities to initiate and use the language in the on-going communication have important effects on (L₂) acquisition. In the classroom the teacher speaks most of the time, and students do not have the chance to initiate and speak freely. Beyond the classroom, in natural discourse, the ratio of student – teacher talk is almost equal.

It is only in an informal or natural setting, and only where a discussion is permitted to develop³.

¹ To make this sort of discourse more interactive, pairs or group work would presumably have to be incorporated into the classroom activities.

² In this extract, taken from informal classroom discussion, the student gives his opinion regarding the question of marriage initiated by the teacher to reach a satisfactory answer. Thus this type of discourse is interactive and multiple source in the sense that it is the “collaborative construct of two or more participants” (Riley, 1985).

³ (that is, where the teacher abandons the right to speak wherever he wants, to direct the conversation, perhaps to stand where others are seated, and so forth)

that students feel able to initiate. It is only when the teacher abandons his role as teacher in natural discourse, in other words, that the student may create discourse as well as respond to it¹.

Turn-Taking.

The study of turn-taking can be related to the issue of initiation and participation in the discourse, since it is in turn-taking that the initiative becomes more apparent. A turn in talking refers to the oral output produced by a speaker during the time of speaking. It refers to the length and duration of the turn rather than its content.

In the EFL classroom, the teacher assumes the dominant role in the distribution of turns while learners do not usually have such rights².

On the other hand, in an informal conversation setting, all participants have a wide range of opportunities to construct their turns in a competitive way because the nature of conversation allows them to do so³.

In a word, both participants and types of interaction have important effects on turn-taking procedures: participants constrain turn-taking through psycho-social phenomena such as authority, status, and role. The types of interaction determine particular turn-taking features⁴.

Unlike formal classroom interaction, learners in informal classroom discussion or in natural conversation outside the classroom select their turns in the form of initiations. Such settings provide the learners with opportunities to select their

¹ Students here begin to take the initiative in discourse and take their turns in conversation in a highly competitive way (Hasan, 1988).

² The teacher decides who speaks, when, and about what, while learners are restricted in taking the initiative or changing the direction of the discourse.

³ Participants, here, take the chance of any opportunity or a pause or a delay to take the initiative in the discourse.

⁴ Bidding for turns, for instance, is a characteristic of classroom interaction while competition for turns characterise informal or natural discourse

turns and increase their involvement and participation in the discourse in a way similar to what takes place outside the classroom in natural discourse¹.

3.2. Strategies of Natural Discourse.

Conversation takes place in real-time. It is constructed as the speaker is thinking of what to say next. This is why conversation is marked by such features as pause, hesitation, change of topics, and search for appropriate items. This is also why conversation seems disorganised, repetitious, and ungrammatical. Such features of conversation often pose problems in coding the utterances. Therefore, speakers often use discourse strategies to overcome these difficulties.

In what follows, two of these strategies will be considered: holding the floor and self-correction.

Holding the Floor.

This strategy is used when a speaker uses a filler or a repetition to overcome the difficulty of finding the appropriate vocabulary of expression, and to indicate to the listeners that he is still holding the floor as a speaker:

EX1. NS: anything about your applications you want to say.

S: Ah, ah, ah, for this month, I haven't contact with other university, but after, I talk....

EX2. S: the women we met, we met, after, we spend long, long, time, maybe

two or four years. I don't know, after they get married, officially, you know (S. why?) I don't know².

¹ This means that if we have to make the classroom a better environment for language learning, we should give learners the opportunity to practise turn-taking procedure as they take place in natural discourse. Teachers should reduce the constraints of the setting on turn-taking procedures; when teachers do that the interaction becomes more of an informal or natural type of discourse.

² In the first example, the learner uses fillers ("ah", "ah") in order to hold the floor. In the second example, the learner twice employs the tactic of repeating words he has just spoken to fill in the potential pause before he proceeds to complete his utterance.

Learners who use unfilled or filled pauses are called “planners” in that they carefully plan their utterances before they start talking again. Perhaps, they are looking for the appropriate item in the sequence of their utterances. Learners who start correcting and repeating their utterances before they complete their plan are called “correctors”. This leads us to a consideration of the self-correction strategy¹.

Self-Correction.

Speakers use the strategy of self-correction in order to amend words that they wish to replace during the on-going communication:

S. you can control your birth, because when woman has a baby, he can stay, she can stay two years².

It should be mentioned that in the EFL classroom, the reverse takes place; errors are usually repaired by the teacher and thus the repair is other-initiated³.

Unlike formal classroom interaction, only in natural discourse settings such as the formal interview, informal classroom discussion or informal conversation do learners avail themselves of the opportunity of using these strategies⁴.

In short, it can be said that unlike the formal classroom interaction, the informal classroom discussion or the informal conversation preserves the features of natural discourse. It is said to be characterised by such features as:

- * emphasis on content,
- * unfolding,

¹ (Seliger, 1980).

² In this example, the student uses the word “he” and then corrects himself and uses the word “she” instead. The correction is placed next to the item to be repaired. This self-correction is used as a self-repair strategy.

³ This factor would hinder the development of self-initiated repair which is a characteristic of competent (L₂) learners.

⁴ This may be attributed to the fact that unlike classroom interaction, learners here are given the opportunity to speak in longer utterances and express their ideas more freely, thus creating the opportunity for many encoding problems of communication to occur.

- * multiple source,
- * taking the initiative,
- * taking turns in discourse, and
- * making use of some strategies of natural discourse.

Since it is of great benefit to FL learners to practise natural discourse in the EFL classroom, it is important that teachers take the features of natural discourse into consideration when designing their classroom activities.

Finally, it would be wrong to consider speaking skills solely in terms of oral production. Speaking may be preceded or followed by reading or writing activities¹.

But how do we teach reading? And what are the basic skills of reading? We shall examine these issues in the following unit.

¹ For example, a speaker may be asked to read the instructions of a certain exercise before attempting to do pairwork or group discussion.