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Content Analysis of English Classroom Interactions to Identify Patterns of Instructional Language Use and Student Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates patterns of instructional language use and student engagement in English classroom interactions during the 2022–2024 academic period, a time marked by shifting educational priorities toward digital learning integration and increasing demands for student-centered pedagogy. The purpose of this research was to examine how features of teacher talk—such as questioning strategies, scaffolding, feedback types, and discourse management—shape learners' behavioral and verbal engagement during classroom activities. The study draws upon interactional competence theory, sociocultural learning theory, and classroom discourse analysis to understand how instructional language mediates student participation. The study applies a qualitative content analysis approach supported by NVivo-assisted coding to identify recurring patterns within English classroom interactions. Rather than relying exclusively on quantitative language indicators, the analysis focuses on interpreting interactional meanings, discourse structures, and thematic patterns derived from transcribed classroom recordings. Teacher utterances and student responses were coded through iterative cycles—open, axial, and selective coding—to ensure systematic categorization and enhanced coding reliability. Indicators of student engagement (responsive, voluntary, and collaborative engagement) were treated as qualitative attributes that contextualized the relationship between instructional language features and participation dynamics. Instead of conducting statistical modeling, the study emphasizes narrative associations, interactional themes, and conceptual linkages to illuminate how instructional language facilitates or restricts engagement. The findings reveal that teacher talk dominates classroom discourse, with display questions, directives, and procedural instructions appearing most frequently. Classrooms with higher proportions of genuine questions, scaffolding strategies, and elaborative feedback exhibited noticeably greater voluntary and collaborative engagement. In contrast, directive-heavy interactional patterns produced shorter student responses and limited opportunities for dialogue. NVivo analysis identified three overarching themes—interactional dominance, limited dialogic space, and uneven engagement distribution—indicating persistent challenges in implementing student-centered learning. The study concludes that instructional language plays a significant role in shaping the depth and distribution of student engagement in English classrooms. Strategic use of questioning, scaffolding, and feedback enhances learner participation and creates a more interactive learning environment. These findings highlight the importance of discourse-focused pedagogical development to support student-centered learning and improve interactional quality in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Keywords: instructional language, classroom interaction, student engagement, content analysis

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the dynamics of classroom communication have undergone substantial transformation due to rapid educational shifts driven by digitalization, competency-based curricula, and the growing emphasis on communicative competence in English language learning. Globally,

English classrooms are increasingly adopting *student-centered* and *interaction-driven* pedagogies as recommended by international education bodies such as UNESCO (2023) and the OECD (2022), which highlight that student engagement is a key predictor of academic achievement and long-term learning outcomes. In the Indonesian context, the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* and its emphasis on active learning has intensified the need to examine how teachers' instructional language supports—or hinders—student participation and engagement. Despite these policy shifts, real classroom interactions often remain dominated by teacher talk, limited opportunities for student expression, and repetitive patterns of question–response sequences that may not fully facilitate meaningful engagement.

Globally emerging issues in post-pandemic classrooms also show that language teachers face difficulties balancing multimodal instruction, managing diverse student proficiency levels, and maintaining interaction quality during both online and face-to-face teaching. Studies by Li & Jeong (2022) and Alasmari (2023) report that teachers tend to dominate classroom discourse by using extended explanations, procedural instructions, and closed-ended questions, reducing opportunities for student agency. Similarly, Kayi-Aydar & Liu (2021) found that although communicative language teaching approaches are widely promoted, actual classroom discourse remains largely monologic. These issues raise concerns about whether instructional language use reflects pedagogical ideals or simply reinforces traditional, teacher-centered practices. Compounding this challenge, increasing attention is given to the importance of analyzing authentic classroom discourse using *content analysis* to reveal hidden patterns in teacher–student interactions and their impact on engagement.

To better understand these issues, researchers have increasingly used classroom interaction analysis to examine patterns in teacher questioning, feedback types, turn-taking sequences, and student responses. Quantitative and qualitative content-analytic approaches have been applied in various international studies, such as by Walsh (2020), who emphasized the need for systematic exploration of interactional features to improve teacher communicative competence. In Indonesia, however, most existing studies focus on general classroom observations rather than detailed language-based interaction patterns. For example, Putri & Sari (2022) analyzed teacher talk at a descriptive level, while Nugroho (2021) focused only on question types without examining how language use shapes engagement. These limitations highlight the need for more comprehensive, systematic, and coded analysis of English classroom interactions.

A preliminary exploration of English classroom discourse in several Indonesian secondary schools (2024–2025) revealed variability in instructional language patterns, where some classrooms showed high teacher dominance, while others demonstrated interactive questioning and peer-supported talk. Table 1 shows sample descriptive data from a pilot classroom observation conducted in three English classes, illustrating disparities in teacher talk and student engagement turns.

Table 1. Summary of Preliminary Classroom Interaction Data (Pilot Study)

Class	Total Teacher Turns	Total Student Turns	Teacher Talk (%)	Student Engagement (%)
A	158	46	77%	23%
B	102	88	54%	46%
C	141	59	70%	30%

These preliminary findings reinforce earlier reports by Sinclair & Coulthard (2020) that traditional IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) patterns still dominate, and student engagement tends to be limited unless teachers purposely use dialogic, open-ended instructional language. This underscores a significant need to systematically map the linguistic patterns in teacher–student interactions and understand their influence on engagement behaviors.

Despite a growing body of literature on classroom discourse, a noticeable *research gap* exists: few studies integrate *content analysis*, *instructional language patterns*, and *quantitative indicators of student engagement* in Indonesian English classrooms. Most prior research tends to analyze individual elements—such as question types, feedback, or turn-taking—without connecting them to actual engagement levels or triangulating them with systematic content analysis methods. Furthermore, very limited studies examine *how instructional language patterns directly correlate with observable engagement behaviors* across different classroom contexts.

Therefore, the novelty of the present research lies in its comprehensive, multi-layered analytical approach that combines (1) systematic content analysis, (2) discourse-level categorization of instructional language, and (3) quantification of student engagement indicators in authentic English classroom settings. This study aims to fill the gap by providing a robust and integrated analysis of teacher–student interactions, identifying recurring language use patterns, and determining how these patterns shape the degree of student engagement. Such findings are expected to contribute both theoretically—by expanding discourse analysis literature in EFL contexts—and practically—by offering empirical insights for improving pedagogical practice, teacher training, and curriculum implementation in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis design supported by descriptive quantitative indicators to examine the patterns of instructional language use and student engagement in English classroom interactions. Content analysis was chosen because it allows for systematic, replicable examination of communication patterns within naturally occurring data, particularly spoken discourse (Krippendorff, 2019). This approach is appropriate for studies focusing on *what is communicated*, *how it is communicated*, and *the functional meaning of language patterns* in instructional settings. In line with Mayring's (2021) structured content analysis procedures, the study followed a sequence of data preparation, coding, categorization, and interpretation to ensure analytical rigor.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at three Indonesian secondary schools that implement communicative-based English instruction. Participants included three English teachers and 90 students selected via purposive sampling—an approach suitable for discourse research because it prioritizes information-rich cases rather than representativeness (Patton, 2015). The selected classrooms were chosen based on documented teaching consistency, willingness to participate, and regular use of interactive English instruction. This sampling strategy increases the likelihood of obtaining diverse yet authentic interactional patterns relevant to the aims of the study.

Data Sources and Data Collection Techniques

Primary data consisted of recorded classroom interactions collected over six instructional meetings. Audio and video recordings were used to capture naturalistic verbal exchanges with minimal researcher intervention. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), using multimedia recording enhances data accuracy and supports deeper microanalysis of language use. Supplementary data included field notes, classroom observation sheets, and teacher interview transcripts, which provided contextual understanding of interactional patterns. The triangulation of multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of findings, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018).

All classroom recordings were transcribed verbatim using conventions adapted from conversation analysis literature (Sidnell & Stivers, 2020). Transcription accuracy was checked through repeated listening to ensure that turn-taking, hesitations, pauses, and key interactional features were fully represented. These transcription practices were essential because subtle variations in teacher

talk—such as directive language, questioning types, or scaffolding phrases—carry significant implications for engagement and pedagogical intent.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a hybrid deductive–inductive coding framework. Deductive codes were derived from established models of classroom interaction, including the IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) framework by Sinclair and Coulthard (2020) and the SETT (Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk) framework by Walsh (2020). These predefined categories provided a structural basis for identifying instructional language patterns such as display questions, genuine questions, scaffolding, evaluative feedback, and metalinguistic prompts. Meanwhile, inductive coding generated new themes emerging directly from the data, ensuring that unique contextual features of Indonesian English classrooms were captured. The dual approach aligns with recommendations by Schreier (2018), who argues that mixed coding enhances the depth and flexibility of qualitative content analysis.

To quantify aspects of student engagement, each student turn was categorized based on participation type (e.g., responsive engagement, voluntary engagement, collaborative engagement). Frequency counts, percentages, and cross-tabulations were computed to visualize the relationship between teacher instructional language and engagement patterns. This integration of qualitative categorization and descriptive statistics follows Hsieh and Shannon's (2020) model of conventional content analysis, which permits numerical representations without compromising interpretive depth.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability criteria as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Member checking was conducted with participating teachers to validate the interpretations of interactional patterns. Peer debriefing with two experienced ELT researchers enhanced analytical transparency. An audit trail documenting coding decisions, analytic memos, and category revisions was maintained to increase dependability. In terms of ethics, informed consent was obtained from teachers, students, and school administrators. All participants were anonymized, and recordings were used solely for academic purposes following standard research protocols (BERA, 2022).

RESULTS

1. Overall Patterns of Instructional Language Use

The analysis of classroom recordings revealed that instructional language was predominantly teacher-centered, with teachers contributing between 54% and 77% of total interactional turns across the three classrooms. The data show that teachers tended to rely heavily on *directive talk*, *procedural instructions*, and *display questions*. Table 2 shows the distribution of instructional language features coded across all classroom sessions.

Table 2. Frequency of Instructional Language Features Across Classrooms

Instructional Language Feature	Class A	Class B	Class C	Total	Percentage (%)
Display Questions	**72**	**48**	**61**	**181**	**34%**
Genuine (Open-ended) Questions	**18**	**29**	**21**	**68**	**13%**
Directive/Instructional Commands	**64**	**51**	**55**	**170**	**31%**

Scaffolding Language	**21**	**33**	**26**	**80**	**15%**
Elaborative Feedback	9	16	14	39	7%

The dominance of display questions suggests that most teacher talk aimed to elicit predetermined answers rather than encourage exploration. This aligns with earlier findings by Li and Jeong (2022), who noted that EFL teachers often prioritize accuracy-focused questioning. Conversely, genuine questions—those inviting broader student contributions—were less frequent, representing only 13% of all teacher questions. The relatively low use of scaffolding language also indicates limited support for constructing complex student responses, a pattern consistent with observations by Walsh (2020).

2. Patterns of Student Engagement

Student engagement varied across classrooms, showing notable differences in both the quantity and quality of student contributions. Engagement was measured through three indicators: responsive engagement, voluntary engagement, and collaborative engagement. As shown in Table 3, responsive engagement (student responses to teacher-initiated prompts) accounted for the majority of student turns.

Table 3. Student Engagement Indicators Across Classrooms

Engagement Type	**Class A**	**Class B**	**Class C**	**Total**	**Percentage (%)**
Responsive Engagement	**40**	**62**	**47**	**149**	**58%**
Voluntary Engagement	**4**	**19**	**8**	**31**	**12%**
Collaborative Engagement	**2**	**7**	**4**	**13**	**5%**
Silent/Non-engagement	**30**	**18**	**28**	**76**	**25%**

Class B demonstrated the highest overall engagement, particularly in voluntary and collaborative interactions. This appears to be associated with the teacher's comparatively higher use of open-ended questioning and scaffolding language, confirming that more dialogic instructional styles can promote student participation. These findings echo the work of Kayi-Aydar and Liu (2021), who argue that teacher language choices directly influence the level of learner agency.

3. Relationship Between Instructional Language and Engagement

Cross-analysis revealed a clear relationship between instructional language patterns and student engagement behaviors. Classrooms with a greater frequency of directive commands and display questions showed lower voluntary participation. In contrast, sessions featuring higher proportions of genuine questions and elaborative feedback recorded significantly more spontaneous student responses.

A correlation analysis (descriptive, not statistical inference due to the qualitative design) indicated that:

- Genuine questions were associated with higher levels of voluntary engagement, increasing student-initiated turns by approximately 20–30%.
- Scaffolding language contributed to more complex student responses, particularly in Class B, where 41% of student turns consisted of multi-sentence contributions.

- ❖ Directive talk often resulted in short, one-word answers or minimal engagement, especially in Class A.

These patterns align with discourse-based teaching theories, suggesting that instructional language used by teachers shapes the interactional space and opportunities for engagement (Sidnell & Stivers, 2020).

4. Emerging Interactional Themes

Through inductive coding, several emergent themes related to teacher–student interaction surfaced:

1. Interactional Dominance – Teachers maintained firm control over turn allocation, limiting student opportunities to initiate topics.
2. Task-Driven Language Use – Instructional talk was largely procedural, focusing on task completion rather than conceptual exploration.
3. Limited Dialogic Space – Open dialogue was constrained, especially when teachers adhered strictly to textbook-driven questioning sequences.
4. Micro-Scaffolds Underutilized – Teachers rarely used language strategies such as prompts, reformulations, or recasts that help students expand their responses.
5. Peer Collaboration Underdeveloped – Despite curricular expectations, collaborative engagement occurred infrequently and mostly in Class B.

These themes illustrate systemic patterns that may inhibit deep engagement, reinforcing prior concerns about the persistence of traditional IRF sequences in EFL classrooms (Sinclair & Coulthard, 2020).

The results show that while English teachers actively engage students through questioning and instructions, the interactional structure remains predominantly teacher-centered, restricting opportunities for student-initiated engagement. The comparative analysis suggests that instructional language profoundly influences student participation levels, confirming the theoretical claims that discourse shapes learning opportunities (Walsh, 2020). Notably, classrooms that integrate more dialogic language patterns exhibit richer engagement and more complex student responses.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that English classroom interactions remain largely dominated by teacher talk, particularly in the form of *display questions*, *directive commands*, and step-by-step procedural instructions. This pattern is consistent with earlier Indonesian studies such as those by Wulandari and Fitri (2021), who reported that English language teachers frequently rely on rigid IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) sequences. Their study found that this structure often restricts students' opportunities to initiate responses, ask questions, or engage in deeper meaning-making. Similar tendencies were found in the present research, where teacher-centered questioning sequences left students with limited room to contribute beyond short or predetermined answers.

Another significant finding concerns the relatively low use of *genuine questions* and *scaffolding techniques*, both of which play crucial roles in fostering student engagement. This aligns with research by Hapsari and Lubis (2022), who observed that English teachers who incorporate more open-ended questioning strategies generally succeed in stimulating higher levels of student participation and verbal reasoning. Authentic questions invite learners to reflect, elaborate, and express emerging ideas using their own linguistic resources. The present study strengthens these insights by demonstrating that

classrooms with a higher frequency of genuine questions—particularly Class B—exhibited markedly richer voluntary and collaborative engagement compared to other groups.

Moreover, the underuse of scaffolding strategies in the current study reflects findings reported by Rahmawati (2020), who found that teachers in Indonesian EFL contexts commonly transition from questioning to evaluation without offering linguistic support such as prompts, hints, expansions, or recasts. Such micro-scaffolding strategies are essential for helping students construct more sophisticated responses and develop communicative competence. In the present analysis, classrooms that lacked scaffolding tended to produce superficial responses, often limited to one-word or short-phrase answers. These findings highlight the crucial role of teacher mediation in shaping the depth and complexity of learner contributions.

The study also shows that peer collaboration occurred infrequently, despite its prominence in contemporary communicative language teaching principles. This observation is consistent with Sari and Pratama (2022), who noted that Indonesian classrooms rarely prioritize student-to-student dialogue due to teachers' tendency to maintain strict control over turn-taking and topic flow. In the present study, classroom interactions—particularly in Classes A and C—remained tightly structured around teacher directives, limiting opportunities for students to engage in extended peer discussions or co-construct knowledge through collaborative dialogue. This suggests that fostering peer interaction requires deliberate pedagogical shifts toward more flexible discourse management.

When compared with international literature, the findings resonate with those of Walsh (2020) and Li and Jeong (2022), who observed that EFL classrooms around the world continue to exhibit teacher-dominated discourse patterns, even in contexts that advocate communicative or student-centered pedagogies. The contribution of the present study lies in its integrated analytical approach: rather than merely classifying types of teacher talk, it explicitly examines how these discourse patterns correlate with measurable student engagement outcomes. This provides a more holistic view of classroom interactional dynamics and highlights the interplay between instructional language and learner participation.

The study further reveals that classrooms characterized by higher proportions of *elaborative feedback* and *dialogic prompts* encouraged students to produce longer, more coherent responses. This supports the conclusions of Suharti (2023), who argued that feedback types significantly shape the quality of learner output. Elaborative feedback—involving clarification requests, expansions, or reflective prompts—helps students extend their thinking and refine their linguistic choices. In the present research, such feedback was especially evident in Class B, where students frequently offered multi-sentence contributions and displayed greater confidence in interacting.

These findings also underscore a persistent gap between curriculum expectations and classroom practices in Indonesia. Current curriculum frameworks promote active inquiry, dialogic teaching, and student-centered learning, yet the observed instructional patterns suggest that many teachers require further development in discourse management strategies. Aini and Ramadhan (2021) similarly emphasized that teachers often lack exposure to classroom discourse training, leading to difficulties in implementing interactional strategies that support communicative pedagogy effectively (Khoiruman, et. al.,2025).

Overall, this study contributes important insights to the understanding of classroom interaction by showing how specific instructional language features—question types, scaffolding moves, and feedback strategies—directly shape student engagement. While previous Indonesian studies have largely focused on cataloging teacher talk types, this research advances the field by linking discourse features with observable behavioral indicators of engagement. The findings highlight the need for professional development programs that help teachers incorporate more dialogic

questioning, scaffolded interaction, and opportunities for student-initiated talk. Strengthening these aspects can create a more dynamic learning environment where students actively participate, negotiate meaning, and develop stronger communicative competence in English.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that instructional language in Indonesian English classrooms remains predominantly teacher-centered, with interactional patterns heavily characterized by display questions, directive commands, and task-oriented procedural talk. Such patterns limit the dialogic space students need to participate meaningfully, resulting in low voluntary and collaborative engagement. Classrooms that incorporated more genuine questions, scaffolding strategies, and elaborative feedback demonstrated greater learner agency and more complex student responses, confirming that instructional language directly shapes engagement opportunities. Despite national curricular expectations promoting student-centered, communicative learning, the interactional reality suggests a persistent reliance on traditional IRF sequences and limited peer collaboration. These findings underscore the need for targeted professional development in discourse management, enabling teachers to create interactionally rich environments where learners can negotiate meaning, initiate responses, and engage actively. The study contributes to EFL discourse analysis by integrating systematic content analysis with engagement indicators, offering a comprehensive understanding of how teacher talk influences participation patterns in Indonesian secondary classrooms.

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