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Unveiling Power Dynamics in Online ESL Conversation Classes: A Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis of the IRF Pattern

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Abstract:

This study explores power dynamics in online ESL conversation classes through the lens of the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern, a widely used discourse structure in classroom interactions. The research aims to examine how IRF shapes tutor-student interactions, influences student participation, and impacts learning performance. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, specifically Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA), the study analyzes recorded ESL conversation sessions from online platforms to identify patterns of discourse control, student agency, and negotiation of power. The Findings reveal that while the IRF pattern facilitates structured learning, it also reinforces power asymmetry, with tutors predominantly controlling discourse flow and topic management. However, variations in feedback mechanisms, such as open-ended questioning and elaborative responses, create opportunities for more balanced interactions. The study highlights the need for ESL tutors to adopt more inclusive discourse strategies that encourage student-led discussions and minimize hierarchical barriers in online learning environments. The implications suggest that modifying the IRF structure to allow greater student participation fosters communicative competence and enhances learner confidence.

Keywords: critical classroom discourse analysis; ESL; IRF pattern; power dynamics; tutor-student interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

For the development of fluency, communicative competence, interactional skills as well as digital literacy in second language acquisition (SLA), online ESL class is essential (Alamrani, 2020). Regular exposure to native speakers enhances students' enthusiasm, self-assurance, and fluency,

according to (Dey-Plissonneau et al., 2021). Despite practical challenges like unstable or lagged internet connection, students reported enjoying their experiences and appreciated the increased opportunities for participation and speaking practice in online ESL classes (Saputra et al., 2023). Unlike EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, which focus more on structured learning, ESL (English as a Second Language) conversation programs prioritize practical, spontaneous interactions, with native teachers guiding the process. While EFL students often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, ESL students, who are immersed in English-speaking environments, need real-time and authentic communication skills to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Si, 2019).

ESL learning experiences are greatly influenced by conversation-based education, particularly in-person interactions with tutors. Shawaqfeh et al.'s (2024) research highlights the value of classroom interaction approaches, such as meaning negotiation and questioning, in enhancing the L2 proficiency of ESL students. The power dynamics in these interactions, where real-time communication is central, also play a crucial role. Tutors shape discourse structures, which can either encourage or hinder students' engagement. Power dynamics play a crucial role in ESL conversation classes, where real-time communication is emphasized. Tutors shape discourse structures, which can either encourage or hinder students' engagement. Foucault's (1980) perspective emphasizes that power is not a fixed entity but is practiced and negotiated within social interactions. In this context, research by Syahriani et al. (2024) highlights how teachers strategically use discourse to maintain authority and foster a supportive learning environment, further illustrating the importance of balancing power dynamics to create an inclusive and empowering ESL experience.

A framework for examining power dynamics in ESL tutor-student interactions and determining how they either promote or impede communicative development is provided through Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA). Through a critical analysis of classroom discourse, CCDA exposes the ways in which language use can either reinforce or subvert established power dynamics, impacting students' chances for meaningful engagement and participation (Rachmawati et al., 2022). One way these power dynamics manifest in ESL classrooms is through the widely used Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern, developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern is a common framework for classroom interactions, especially in contexts where English is being used as a second language (ESL). The teacher initiates the conversation (for example, by asking a question), the student responds, and the teacher provides feedback (which frequently consists of assessment or correction). Power dynamics in tutor-student interactions are deeply embedded in turn-taking, feedback mechanisms, and control over discourse, significantly influencing student participation. In traditional classroom settings, the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern often reflects these dynamics, where the tutor initiates a question, the student responds, and the tutor provides feedback, thereby maintaining control over the interaction (Richards & Schmidt, 2011).

Research on power dynamics and discourse has predominantly focused on face-to-face classrooms or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, with limited studies addressing online English as a Second Language (ESL) conversation classes. For instance, Zaki (2021) explores classroom discourse analysis in EFL settings, highlighting the benefits and applications from a teacher's perspective. However, little attention has been given to how power is negotiated and exercised in virtual ESL environments, where real-time communication and interactional structures may differ significantly from traditional classroom settings. The shift to online learning

has transformed how discourse unfolds, particularly through the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern, which may either facilitate engagement or reinforce hierarchical power dynamics.

The study by Hidayatullah (2024) analyzes classroom interactions in an ESL setting, focusing on the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern and turn-taking dynamics between teachers and students. The findings reveal that teachers dominate communication (63.4%), while students contribute 36.6%, highlighting an asymmetry in interaction that may impact learning effectiveness and student autonomy. The study emphasizes that the teacher's control over discourse can limit students' ability to think critically and engage meaningfully. It suggests that a more balanced distribution of interaction could enhance student participation, improve comprehension, and foster more effective learning strategies in ESL classrooms. While this research underscores the impact of teacher control on learning effectiveness, it does not explore how these power dynamics unfold in online ESL conversation classes. The shift to digital learning introduces new factors such as the role of technology, the absence of non-verbal cues, and changes in tutor-student interaction patterns, all of which can influence how power is negotiated in virtual classrooms.

Tutor-student interactions play a crucial role in ESL teaching effectiveness, fostering learner autonomy. Asymmetrical interactions, where tutors control discourse, limit student engagement, while autonomy-supportive behaviors foster student involvement, improving language learning outcomes (Han, 2021). Han's research highlights those asymmetrical interactions, where tutors exert control over discourse, can limit student engagement, whereas balanced autonomy enhances student participation and overall language proficiency. However, this study does not account for how these dynamics unfold in online ESL conversation classes, where technological mediation, asynchronous communication, and digital constraints may alter tutor-student power relations.

Following the analysis of previous-related studies by Zaki (2021), Hidayatullah (2024), and Han (2021) on the analysis of power dynamics during classroom interactions, this study addresses gaps in the literature by examining power dynamics between tutors and students in online ESL classes, specifically through the lens of the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern in tutor-student interactions. By utilizing Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA), this research explores the extent to which online tutors maintain control over discourse, the impacts of tutors' control on students' learning engagement and autonomy, as well as the potential for modifying interactional structures to promote more student-centered communication. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of power dynamics in digital ESL education and offer strategies to create more interactive and equitable ESL learning environments.

This study aims to analyze how power dynamics is examined through the IRF pattern in tutor-student interactions in online ESL conversation classes. The findings of the study are carefully and objectively investigated to answer the following questions:

1. How does the IRF pattern structure tutor-student interactions in online ESL conversation classes?
2. In what ways do power dynamics emerge through the IRF pattern in these interactions?
3. What are the implications of these power dynamics for ESL online teaching and learning?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 IRF Pattern in Tutor-Student Interactions

The Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern, introduced by Sinclair & Coulthard (1975), is a common discourse structure in classrooms. It involves three stages: the tutor initiates, the student responds, and the tutor gives feedback. This framework also supports emotional regulation by helping students express their thoughts and feelings, enhancing engagement and motivation (Duan, 2024). While IRF facilitates structured learning, it also raises concerns about power dynamics and student autonomy in tutor-student interactions, as the tutor typically controls the flow of conversation through initiation and feedback, potentially restricting students' opportunities to lead discussions and express their ideas freely (Putri et al., 2021).

The IRF pattern is a useful framework for managing classroom discourse and promoting student participation. Research suggests that IRF pattern enhances learner-initiated communication by prioritizing referential questions over display questions and using content feedback to facilitate real communicative interactions in the classroom (Ariska et al., 2024). This approach enables teachers to strategize the IRF pattern to create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, leading to greater participation (Thanh, 2022). The IRF model structures classroom discourse by promoting turn-taking and encouraging student responses to teacher prompts (Badash, 2025). The response move represents the student's attempt to answer, while the feedback move affirms, corrects, or extends their response. Feedback plays a key role in reinforcing learning, enabling teachers to assess understanding and provide guidance (Dalia & Putra, 2024). In ESL conversation classes, this pattern helps learners organize their speaking practice and receive immediate feedback.

2.2 Power Dynamics in Classroom Interaction

Power dynamics within classroom interactions significantly influence the educational environment, affecting both teaching efficacy and student learning participation. Recent studies have highlighted that power is not solely vested in the teacher but is co-constructed through interactions between teachers and students. Manke (1997) argued that power in classrooms is not solely held by teachers; it is co-constructed through interactions with students. Teachers' decisions regarding classroom organization and discourse significantly impact power dynamics, allowing students to assert their agency. In co-teaching, power differences can be heightened by academic hierarchy and social identities. Traditional structures shape teacher roles and collaboration (Subedi, 2022), while disparities may affect relationships, student learning, and faculty retention (Monteblanco, 2021). Addressing these issues is key to fostering an equitable teaching environment.

The relationship between teacher authority and student agency is complex and interdependent, as both elements significantly influence the educational environment. Teachers often need to assert authority to maintain classroom order, which can provide a structured environment conducive to learning (Isidório & Reis, 2023). Effective teacher authority can empower students by encouraging participation and collaboration, as seen in practices that promote reflective learning and autonomy (Pu & Barnard, 2025). The development of student agency is linked to teachers' self-understanding, suggesting that when teachers recognize their own agency, they can better support students in realizing theirs.

While the IRF pattern provides structure, it can also reinforce power imbalances in tutor-student interactions. Research suggests that it often results in teacher-dominated discourse, limiting student participation and opportunities for spontaneous communication (Badash, 2025; Hidayatullah, 2024). Deviations from this structure may discourage engagement, but incorporating open-ended feedback and student-led discussions can foster more balanced interactions (Mariam, 2024). Adjustments to the IRF model can help promote equal participation between students and teachers.

2.3 Online ESL Conversation Classes

The rise of online ESL conversation classes has transformed second language learning by offering flexibility and accessibility to learners worldwide. These classes positively influenced students' second language communication skills through interactive, real-time conversations and enhanced digital literacy as students navigate various online tools and platforms for learning (Alamrani, 2020; Huong & Hung, 2021). Alamrani (2020) also added that digital communication, typically viewed as an informal learning setting, has been found to outperform many traditional and formal methods in enhancing language development and boosting engagement. Additionally, the digital environment facilitates personalized learning experiences, enabling students to engage with diverse teaching methodologies tailored to their individual needs (Suputra, 2021). Moreover, online ESL platforms integrate multimedia tools, such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and digital whiteboards, which contribute to a more interactive and engaging learning atmosphere (Dahmash, 2021). As a result, online ESL classes have become an essential tool for enhancing second language learning in a modern, digital world.

One of the key challenges of online ESL conversation classes is the physical distance between students and instructors, which can create a sense of isolation and limit spontaneous, real-time communication (Brooke et al., 2021). This lack of face-to-face interaction may hinder the development of deeper relationships and reduce the natural flow of conversation, both of which are important for effective language acquisition. However, despite this challenge, online classes offer significant advantages to increase student motivation and participation. The incorporation of digital tools enhances interactions, making online classes more engaging and accessible, which is essential in modern synchronous learning environments (Minosky et al., 2024). These tools can increase student motivation and participation, making them crucial for developing interpersonal competence and enhancing conversational skills in a second language.

2.4 Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA)

Classroom discourse is a dynamic environment where social issues are created, debated, and negotiated, and not merely a neutral platform. Classroom discourse is shaped by the identities of both teachers and students, which are influenced by cultural backgrounds and social expectations. Teachers' identities affect their discursive practices, while students' identities can either validate or resist these practices, creating a reciprocal influence (Eye, 2024). Knowledge sharing is influenced by the cultural capital, political objectives, and values that each person brings to the table. This interaction reflects larger conflicts in society over representation and authority.

Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA) examines power dynamics in classroom interactions, reflecting broader societal structures. Kumaravadivelu (1999) views CCDA as an extension of CDA, incorporating post-structural and postcolonial perspectives to analyze

discourse in educational settings. CCDA goes beyond traditional discourse analysis by critically uncovering how language reinforces power, ideologies, and social inequalities, aiming to challenge oppressive structures (Ranabhat, 2022). Classrooms reflect diverse social dynamics, where discourse shapes learning and authority perceptions (Purwanto et al., 2024). CCDA reveals how power structures, politics, and culture influence classroom interactions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA), to examine power dynamics in online English as a Second Language (ESL) conversation classes. Qualitative research, as described by Creswell (2013), is used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups assign to social phenomena. This approach is particularly suitable for analyzing complex tutor-student interactions and the construction of meaning in the context of online ESL conversation class. To uncover power dynamics in the class, this study analyzes tutor-student interactions through the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern. The IRF structure provides insights into how tutors control conversations, distribute speaking opportunities, and reinforce or challenge power relations within classroom discourse. CCDA, as a qualitative research method, not only describes these interactions but also critiques how power is maintained or negotiated through language. For data collection, this study employs non-participatory observational research, where researchers analyze recorded classroom conversations without direct involvement. By using recorded sessions, this study minimizes disruption to classroom dynamics, ensuring that tutor-student interactions are observed as they naturally unfold.

3.2 Research Subjects

The subjects of this research are two online private English as a Second Language (ESL) conversation classes available on YouTube, ensuring compliance with fair-use policies for educational research. YouTube is chosen due to its accessibility and the availability of selected videos featuring natural tutor-student interactions, allowing for an authentic analysis of classroom discourse. To ensure relevance and alignment with the research objectives, the selected videos feature live tutor-student conversations in an ESL learning context, with structured discussions where the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern is clearly identifiable. The tutors in both videos are identified as native English speakers based on their introductions at the beginning of the videos, where they provide details about their linguistic background. Similarly, the students are non-native English speakers, which is clear from their introductions as they explicitly mention being originally from countries where English is not the primary language. Ethical considerations are strictly upheld, as all selected samples remain anonymous, and no identifying details of tutors or students are disclosed, ensuring privacy and confidentiality. By adhering to these principles, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into power dynamics in online ESL conversation classes while maintaining high ethical research standards.

3.3 Procedure of Data Collection

Data collection for this study centers on transcriptions of recorded online ESL conversation classes from YouTube, chosen for their authentic interactions. The process begins with systematic video selection, ensuring alignment with research criteria: live tutor-student

interactions, structured discussions, identifiable IRF patterns, and native or proficient ESL tutors guiding non-native learners. Next, the selected conversations are transcribed, maintaining the integrity of discourse patterns and interaction structures. The analysis of IRF patterns focuses on excerpts that represent both standard and unique IRF sequences to capture variations in classroom interactions. Finally, power dynamics identification examines turn-taking, topic control, teacher dominance, feedback mechanisms, student agency, resistance, and negotiations, revealing how roles, influence, and control emerge within classroom discourse. These transcriptions, along with detailed discourse analysis, serve as the primary instrument for interpreting power relations in online ESL classrooms, providing insights into tutor-student dynamics and language-negotiated power in online learning.

3.4 Procedure of Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study is conducted using Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA) to explore how power is embedded within the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) structure of online ESL conversation classes. The process begins with discourse segmentation, identifying each instance of Initiation (I), Response (R), and Feedback (F) to examine communication flow and participant roles. Next, turn-taking analysis investigates conversational control by analyzing turn allocation and topic shifts, determining whether tutors facilitate or restrict student engagement. This is followed by feedback evaluation, which assesses whether tutor feedback reinforces or limits learner autonomy, focusing on content, tone, and responsiveness to students' linguistic needs. Finally, power positioning analysis investigates how tutors assert control in discourse, influencing participation and reinforcing or challenging power hierarchies.

The analysis is conducted by three authors, who each independently analyze the data, ensuring multiple perspectives on the interpretation of discourse. The results of these individual analyses are cross-checked through collaborative discussions. In the event of discrepancies in the interpretation or coding of specific instances, the authors review and discuss the conflicting findings. Any differences are resolved through detailed discussions, in which the authors revisit relevant video segments, re-examine the coding framework, and align on the most consistent and valid interpretation. This consensus-based approach ensures the reliability and consistency of the coding process and reduces the potential for individual bias (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). After initial findings are developed, the results are presented to experts in discourse analysis and ESL education for feedback, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in established theories and practices (Spall, 1998). External evaluation through expert feedback highlighted areas for improvement, including the integration of theoretical frameworks (such as Sinclair and Coulthard's IRF model and Foucault's theories), further depth in power dynamics analysis, insights on students' engagement and motivation, suggestions for enhancing transparency in the analysis process, and the inclusion of non-verbal communication and comparisons between online and offline ESL contexts. By following this process of inter-coder verification and expert validation, the study ensures the reliability and consistency of the analysis while maintaining high standards of academic rigor. Findings from these analyses, interpreted through CCDA principles, provide insights into how discourse structures influence classroom power dynamics and how educators can foster more equitable and empowering learning environments for ESL students.

4. RESULTS

4.1. IRF Pattern in Online ESL Conversation Classes

4.1.1 IRF Pattern Analysis in Online ESL Conversations

According to Sinclair & Coulthard (1975), Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) is a common feature that occurs in language learning sessions. The tutor often initiates with a question, the learner responds, and then the tutor follows up with feedback like a follow-up question or comment. Initiation (I): Tutor asks a question. Response (R): Student answers the question. Feedback (F): Tutor gives positive feedback or encouragement and continues asking a follow-up question.

To facilitate analysis and interpretation, the following formatting conventions are used to highlight the IRF components in the data:

1. Initiation (I) : The tutor's initiating question is underlined.
2. Response (R) : The student's answer is in **bold.**
3. Feedback (F) : The tutor's feedback is in *italics.*

In this subsection, various excerpts from two data sets are presented and interpreted in relation to their IRF pattern on tutor-student interaction during online ESL conversation classes.

Data 1

Excerpt 1.1

Tutor 1 : "Have you ever been to another country? Have you ever been abroad?"

Student 1 : **"Yes, we have been. My first abroad trip when I was four years old. [...] I don't remember anything about that but it was to Thailand, um Singapore, and Malaysia. Yes, I do remember a little bit about Singapore I remember that it is a beautiful city like you know there are so many beautiful buildings over there. [...] Then we went to Dubai and Mauritius once. [...] I've also went to Maldives; it is my favorite destination till now."**

Tutor 1 : *"No way! Oh my gosh! You're so lucky! The Maldives has always been somewhere I've always really, really wanted to go. Wow, okay. So, tell me about the Maldives, what did you do while you were there?"*

In this excerpt, the IRF pattern is evident in the tutor's interaction with the student. The Initiation (I) occurs when the tutor asks if the student has ever been abroad, prompting a detailed response. The Response (R) follows as the student shares their travel experiences, mentioning multiple countries and expressing enthusiasm for the Maldives. Instead of providing evaluative feedback, the tutor (F) responds with excitement and personal engagement, shifting the conversation into a more natural and interactive dialogue. This approach encourages further discussion, as the tutor asks a follow-up question about the Maldives, extending the exchange beyond a rigid IRF structure into a more dynamic conversation.

The IRF pattern has the potential to facilitate learner-initiated communication and give students opportunities to engage in interactive classroom dialogue. This is shown in the following data where the student initiates a follow-up question to the tutor as a response to the preliminary IRF cycle.

Excerpt 1.2

Tutor 1 : "[...] Is there a country in the world that you don't want to visit?"
Student 1 : **"Not really of course [...] every country has something in it, like there are a lot of hidden gems in countries. So [...]"**
Tutor 1 : *"I'm really glad you think so. I am really glad. That's fantastic!"*

Then, the student initiates a question similar to the topic previously being talked about.

Student 1 : "Have you ever visited any other country?"
Tutor 1 : **"Yes, I have. So, I'm from England. So, I have visited lots of places in Europe. I've been to [...]"**

This excerpt illustrates how the IRF pattern can foster student-driven communication rather than just teacher-led exchanges. The tutor initiates the conversation with a question (I), prompting the student to respond with their thoughts on travel (R). The tutor then provides feedback (F) through praise, reinforcing the student's response positively. However, what makes this interaction particularly valuable, particularly in an ESL setting is that the student goes beyond the typical IRF structure by initiating their own question, shifting the interaction into a more natural conversation. This demonstrates active language use, where the student practices formulating questions, engages in authentic dialogue, and gains confidence in speaking English. Such moments help ESL learners develop communicative competence, as they are not just answering questions but also leading discussions, an essential skill for real-world language use.

Not only providing reinforcement and building rapport with student in the form of positive comments, the tutor also facilitates evaluative feedback on the overall performance of the student throughout the class.

Excerpt 1.3

Tutor 1 : "[...] What is your plan for the rest of today? What are you going to do?"
Student 1 : **"Uh, well, basically nothing. But yes, I did have today, uh, in our house, there was a Puja. [...] and then now I'm talking to you, yeah. It has been a pretty good day, amazing day."**
Tutor 1 : *"Good. I'm so, so glad and you must be so excited for your Festival tomorrow. It sounds so exciting, yes. I am sadly it's already nearing the end of our lesson, but my goodness, fantastic job! So, your English is absolutely wonderful. You have such a wide range of vocabulary so you're able to answer all of the questions in so much detail which is so fantastic."*

After the IRF cycle, where the tutor initiates with a question, the student responds, and the tutor gives positive reinforcement, the tutor takes an additional step by assessing the student's English proficiency. The feedback highlights the student's vocabulary range and detailed responses, which serves to motivate the student and build confidence. In an ESL context, such feedback is crucial as it not only acknowledges language accuracy and fluency but also encourages continued participation and improvement. This approach helps maintain a supportive learning environment where students feel valued and motivated to refine their communication skills.

Data 2

Excerpt 2.1

Tutor 2 : "[...] What do you want to learn about English? What is your goal?"

Student 2 : **"I want to practice English well. So, these days I'm practicing speaking. So, I like to have a casual talk [...]"**
Tutor 2 : *"Oh, good, good. That sounds awesome. That's like, that's a good plan and so tell me what did you do today?"*

In this online ESL conversation class from Video 2, the tutor follows the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) pattern to engage the student in discussion. The tutor initiates the exchange by asking an open-ended question about the student's English learning goals. The student responds by stating a desire to improve their speaking skills through casual conversation. In the feedback stage, the tutor provides affective feedback through encouraging phrases such as "Oh, good, good" and "That sounds awesome." This positive reinforcement helps build the student's confidence and validates their learning approach. Additionally, instead of closing the interaction, the tutor extends the conversation by asking a follow-up question about the student's day. This transition maintains a natural flow and gives the student further opportunities to practice speaking in an informal, engaging way. While the feedback is supportive, it remains relatively surface-level as the tutor proposed a new question to a new topic instead of incorporating more elaborative feedback on the same topic being discussed by asking about the student's preferred conversation topics or offering strategies to improve casual speech. Although the IRF pattern is similar, Excerpt 1.1 in Data 1, however, successfully integrates elaborative feedback relevant to the topic that Tutor 1 and Student 2 discussed, prompting a more detailed discussion on the matter. Yet, nonetheless, both tutors' approach fosters a relaxed and interactive learning environment, which is essential in an ESL conversation class.

Excerpt 2.2

Tutor 2 : "[...] Do you get mad sometimes during your game (soccer)?"
Student 2 : **"Um, when I was young, I played games. I really mad a lot but now I didn't."**
Tutor 2 : *"You don't?"*
Student 2 : **"Now, yeah. I don't, yeah."**
Tutor 2 : *"Oh, good. I live in, um, in the south of France and I have gone to many soccer games or soccer matches, yeah, um, for the city team."*
Student 2 : "City team? Oh, did you, did you go out there and did you go there and watch it?"
Tutor 2 : **"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I watched in the stadium"**
Student 2 : *"Wow, that's cool!"*

In this excerpt, the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) pattern is clearly present in the first three lines before evolving into a more natural and engaging exchange. The tutor initiates the discussion by asking the student if they ever get mad while playing their game—referring to soccer. The student responds by explaining that they used to get mad when playing as a child but no longer do. However, their response contains grammatical errors. This time instead of providing an affective-like feedback like it is in Excerpt 2.1, the tutor plays his role well in correcting student's mistakes, yet not by giving direct correction but instead by providing implicit feedback through a clarifying question (*"You don't?"*), prompting the student to reflect and self-correct. This is a subtle but effective way to encourage independent language improvement.

After this structured IRF exchange, the conversation shifts into a more natural, student-driven flow. The tutor expands the topic by sharing a personal experience about attending soccer matches in France, but instead of posing a direct question, she leaves her statement open-ended. This intentional strategy subtly encourages the student to take the conversational lead by asking a

question about the tutor's experience (*"City team? Oh, did you go there and watch it?"*). The tutor then confirms with a simple response, and the student follows up with affective feedback (*"Wow, that's cool."*), mirroring the tutor's earlier supportive responses. This excerpt illustrates how the conversation starts with IRF as a structured tool and develops into a dynamic, student-led exchange that fosters authentic communication in ESL class. By sparking curiosity rather than controlling the discussion, the tutor encourages active participation, encouraging the student's confidence in speaking and guiding conversations.

Excerpt 2.3

Tutor 2 : "Do you have a balcony?"
Student 2 : **"Uh, balcony? What is balcony? Can you type that for me?"**
Tutor 2 : *"Um yes, of course. Balcony, it's, um, where you can go outside. I'll show you, my balcony. I have one. Ups, sorry. I have to move my computer. This is a balcony."*

This final excerpt in Data 2 presents standard IRF pattern during Tutor 2 and Student 2 conversation. The tutor initiates the exchange with a simple question, *"Do you have a balcony?"*, a typical starting point in an IRF sequence where the expectation might be a direct response of yes (having a balcony) or no (not having a balcony). Unlike in the previous excerpts where the students' responses are either giving direct answer as in Excerpt 1.1, 1.3, and 2.1 or mirroring the tutors' question to create reciprocity in the conversation as shown partly in Excerpt 1.2 and 2.2, this time, they openly admit their lack of understanding and request specific support by asking the tutor to type the word. This response shifts the dynamic slightly, as the student is not just reacting but also actively shaping the interaction by seeking support. In turn, the tutor adapts their feedback, not only defining the word but also incorporating a visual demonstration to enhance understanding. This variation of IRF illustrates how a structured exchange can still allow for moments of authentic communication, where students feel comfortable acknowledging gaps in their vocabulary and requesting assistance without hesitation.

4.1.2 Influence of Online Setting on IRF Interactions

The online setting significantly influenced the IRF interactions, primarily due to the absence of physical proximity, yet the use of video, voice, and interactive tools ensured dynamic engagement. In both classes, clear audio and video quality facilitated smooth communication, with no technological disruptions such as delays or lags. This allowed for a natural flow in interactions, where the tutor's questions (Initiation) prompted detailed responses from the student (Response), and positive feedback (Feedback) encouraged further dialogue, avoiding unnecessary repetitions and silence or other breakdowns in communication. The emphasis on the lively tone, expressive facial expressions, and gestures of the tutors and students also helped create an engaging environment. Additionally, in the casual one-on-one class setting, where daily-life topics such as travel and daily activities were discussed as presented in Data 1 (Video 1), the natural flow of interactions was further emphasized.

However, the online setting also introduced differences from face-to-face classrooms. While both tutor and student maintained eye contact and expressive faces, the physical distance as studied by Brooke et al. (2021) as one of the key challenges in online-based class, resulted in more rigid student gestures compared to the tutor's open and dynamic movements as found in Video 2. The shift in this non-verbal communication could affect how students express

themselves, which is less noticeable in a traditional classroom where physical presence allows for more fluid gestures.

Regardless the physical distance issue, the use of interactive tools, such as the chat box and camera, became critical for maintaining clarity and engagement (Minosky et al., 2024). In the case of Video 2, when the student was unfamiliar with the term "balcony" as shown in Data 2 Excerpt 2.3, the tutor used the chat box feature to type the word and adjusted her camera to show her balcony, offering visual clarification. These tools, which are not available in face-to-face settings, allowed for clearer feedback and encouraged the student to ask for clarification without hesitation, enhancing the interactive nature of the lesson.

Overall, while the online environment posed challenges due to physical distance, it also created opportunities to balance the tutor-student interactions. The lack of physical presence did not hinder communication; instead, it introduced new ways for both tutors and students to engage through audiovisual and technological tools, which promotes a more interactive and dynamic learning experience. As found in this study, these tools fostered a student-centered interaction and enhanced the flow of the IRF cycle, allowing both parties to more equally influence the direction of the lesson.

4.2. Power Dynamics in Tutor-Student Interactions

4.2.1 Teacher Dominance

Throughout both data sets, the tutors maintain a significant level of control over the discourse by initiating most interactions and guiding the flow of conversation. The Initiation (I) stage in the IRF pattern demonstrates teacher control, as tutors direct the discussion through questions. However, variations in how feedback (F) is delivered influence the degree of dominance exercised by each tutor. In Excerpt 1.1, Tutor 1 moves beyond a strict evaluative role and engages in an enthusiastic, conversational response, which reduces hierarchical distance and fosters a more balanced exchange. Similarly, in Excerpt 1.2, while the tutor initially controls the conversation, the student eventually challenges this control by introducing a follow-up question, shifting some of the power away from the teacher. By contrast, Excerpt 1.3 reinforces teacher authority, as Tutor 1 provides explicit evaluative feedback on the student's English proficiency, reaffirming their role as the knowledge authority. In Data 2, Tutor 2 tends to exercise more control by shifting topics rather than elaborating on student responses, as seen in Excerpt 2.1, where the tutor moves from discussing learning goals to daily activities without extending the student's initial response. However, Excerpt 2.2 presents a slight shift, as the tutor uses implicit correction instead of direct authority, allowing the student to self-correct and take ownership of their language learning. In sum, while both tutors maintain conversational control, Tutor 1 encourages more student engagement, whereas Tutor 2 sustains a clearer teacher-led structure.

4.2.2 Student Agency

The level of student agency fluctuates across excerpts, ranging from passive response patterns to active engagement and conversational control. The strongest examples of student agency appear in Excerpt 1.2 and Excerpt 2.2, where students initiate their own questions rather than merely responding to the tutor's prompts. In Excerpt 1.2, the student takes the lead by asking the tutor about their own travel experiences, demonstrating confidence in steering the conversation rather than passively participating. A similar shift happens in Excerpt 2.2, where the student, instead of waiting for another tutor question, follows up on the tutor's mention of soccer matches, keeping

the conversation going. In contrast, in Excerpt 1.3 and Excerpt 2.1, students exhibit lower agency, primarily responding to tutor questions without extending the discussion themselves. Even though the responses are detailed, the students do not attempt to shape the discourse. However, Excerpt 2.3 presents a unique form of student agency, rather than answering the question directly, the student redirects the conversation by requesting clarification. By actively seeking support ("Can you type that for me?"), the student momentarily shifts control to themselves, demonstrating a different kind of agency, one that is dependent on but also interactive with the tutor's role. Overall, higher student agency occurs when tutors allow space for students to ask questions, initiate discussions, or challenge expectations.

4.2.3 Resistance and Negotiation

Although explicit resistance to teacher authority is not observed in these excerpts, negotiation of control subtly emerges in some interactions. A key example of negotiation occurs in Excerpt 1.2, where the student disrupts the expected IRF cycle by asking the tutor a question. This shift indicates an active negotiation of power, as the student moves from being a recipient of knowledge to a participant in shaping the conversation. Similarly, Excerpt 2.2 demonstrates negotiation in a different form, the tutor, instead of directly correcting the student's grammatical mistake, uses implicit feedback ("You don't?") to encourage self-correction. This technique transfers some of the evaluative power to the student, allowing them to identify and adjust their own mistake rather than being explicitly corrected. Another form of negotiation appears in Excerpt 2.3, where the student rejects the expectation of immediate comprehension and instead asks for clarification. By redirecting the tutor's role from evaluator to facilitator, the student reconfigures the power dynamic, shifting the conversation towards a collaborative learning process. These instances show that while teachers maintain overall control, students actively negotiate their role in the discourse through question-asking, self-correction, and clarification requests.

4.2.4 Language Role in Shaping Conversational Authority

The way language is used in these excerpts either reinforces or redistributes power in the conversation. In Data 1, Tutor 1's use of enthusiastic and affective language ("Oh my gosh! You're so lucky!") helps equalize power by reducing the authoritative distance between tutor and student. By engaging in a more natural and personal reaction, Tutor 1 fosters a conversational dynamic that makes the interaction feel less like a formal classroom exchange and more like an authentic discussion. Conversely, Tutor 2 in Data 2 employs more neutral and surface-level feedback ("Oh, good, good"), which, while encouraging, does not deeply engage with student responses. This maintains a clearer teacher-student hierarchy, reinforcing the tutor's role as the primary speaker. Additionally, language is used as a tool for implicit power negotiation in Excerpt 2.2, where the tutor provides indirect correction ("You don't?") rather than explicitly stating the mistake. This subtle approach allows the student to retain some control over their own learning process while still adhering to the tutor's guidance. Lastly, in Excerpt 2.3, the student's request for clarification ("Can you type that for me?") momentarily shifts power, as the tutor follows the student's directive. By responding to the student's needs rather than dictating the flow of conversation, the tutor adapts their language use to redistribute authority more equally. Overall, the way language is employed, whether through affective feedback, implicit correction, or clarification requests, plays a crucial role in shaping the power dynamics of the discourse.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Role of the IRF Pattern in Power Negotiation

The Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern is a dominant discourse structure in online ESL conversation classes (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Traditionally, this structure positions tutors as authority figures, guiding the discussion through their initiation and feedback. However, the extent to which this pattern shapes power negotiation varies depending on the tutor's feedback style and whether the IRF structure is rigidly applied or adapted to encourage student engagement as previously emphasized by Dalia and Putra (2024).

In the analyzed interactions, the tutor-initiated IRF sequences establish a structured yet flexible learning environment. For instance, Excerpt 1.1 demonstrates how the tutor controls the discourse by initiating a topic on travel experiences which stimulates the student to share his personal experiences and guiding the conversation through personal engagement rather than strict evaluation. The shift from a rigid IRF cycle to a more natural conversation reduces hierarchical control, fostering a more balanced tutor-student dynamic. This finding supports Mariam (2024), who states that modifying the IRF model can promote equal participation. It also extends Ariska et al. (2024), whose study highlights how IRF enhances learner-initiated communication by giving referential questions (open-ended questions that the tutor does not know the answer to and are student-driven responses) over display questions (close-ended questions where the tutor already knows the answer and is asking to check the student' understanding) to stimulate students' active participation in the interaction. In Excerpt 1, the tutor was indicated to use, "Have you ever been to another country? Have you ever been abroad?" which is categorized as a referential question.

However, power asymmetry remains when the tutor predominantly dictates topic shifts and questioning sequences. In Excerpt 2.1, Tutor 2's question about learning goals follows a conventional IRF cycle but lacks elaborative or content feedback on the student's response. This approach, while encouraging participation, maintains the tutor's authority over discourse flow where the student's contribution is acknowledged as Isidório and Reis (2023) has pointed out, but their contirbutions are not expanded upon. Conversely, when students initiate follow-up questions, as seen in Excerpt 1.2, they momentarily assume conversational control, challenging the traditional power hierarchy. This aligns with Manke (1997), who argues that classroom power is co-constructed rather than teacher-controlled. It also challenges Hidayatullah (2024), whose study emphasizes teacher dominance in IRF interactions, whereas the data here show students momentarily shifting control through follow-up questions.

The IRF structure, while offering scaffolding, can either facilitate (Duan, 2024) or constrain (Putri et al., 2021) student contributions due to its dual-edged role in facilitating both teacher control and student autonomy. In Excerpt 1.2, the student actively engages beyond the IRF sequence by initiating a question, demonstrating agency in discourse participation. This suggests that when tutors provide feedback that extends rather than concludes exchanges, students feel encouraged to contribute beyond response phases. This finding supports Dalia & Putra (2024), who emphasize that the feedback stage in IRF is crucial for reinforcing learning. The data here extends their claim, showing that when feedback is elaborative rather than conclusive, students engage beyond the expected response phase. In contrast, Excerpt 2.1 illustrates a case where the tutor shifts topics immediately after positive reinforcement. While the feedback is affirming, it does not build on the student's response, limiting opportunities for deeper engagement. This

reflects how the IRF structure can inhibit extended student-led discourse when feedback remains surface-level rather than exploratory. One of the practical examples is by providing content feedback, as Ariska et al. (2024) suggested, it is a type of feedback that provides additional relevant information or further explanation related to the student's answer, which Excerpt 1.3 has done well by commenting on students' performance and pointing out the aspects students are good at.

Tutor feedback styles significantly influence student agency during classroom interactions. Evaluative feedback, such as in Excerpt 2.2, where the tutor subtly corrects grammar through implicit feedback of correction ("You don't?"), promotes self-correction and linguistic awareness without overtly exerting authority. Moreover, the difference between elaborative and non-elaborative feedback affects learner autonomy. Tutor 1's engagement in Excerpt 1.1, where personal enthusiasm drives the interaction forward, encourages spontaneous student contributions. Conversely, Tutor 2's approach in Excerpt 2.1, though supportive, lacks follow-up depth, reinforcing tutor control over discourse direction rather than empowering the student to extend conversation topics.

5.2 Power Asymmetry in Online ESL Conversation Classes

Online ESL conversation classes often differ from face-to-face interactions due to technological mediation, which can either reinforce or mitigate power asymmetry. The influence of the online setting on these interactions, as discussed in Section 4.1.2, highlights that while physical distance can limit the non-verbal cues that are typically available in a traditional classroom, it also introduces new avenues for engagement. These new opportunities may influence power dynamics in unexpected ways.

Unlike in-person settings, where non-verbal cues like gestures and physical proximity aid turn-taking, online interactions heavily rely on structured discourse patterns, such as the IRF cycle, for coherence. As demonstrated in Video 1 and 2, the absence of face-to-face interaction did not hinder communication. Instead, the integration of video, voice, and interactive tools like the chat box and camera allowed for more dynamic engagement, enabling a smoother flow in IRF exchanges, supporting Alamradi's (2020), Huong's and Hung's (2021) arguments. This technological mediation, however, also has the potential to reinforce tutor dominance, as seen in Excerpts 2.1 and 2.2. In these excerpts, the tutor controlled the conversational flow, dictating the rhythm of the interactions in a typical IRF sequence. This suggests that while the online environment introduces new ways of engaging, it can still allow tutors to maintain power through structured exchanges.

However, digital affordances in the online setting also offer more flexibility, allowing for shifts in power dynamics. As illustrated in Data 2 Excerpt 2.3 (referencing 4.1.2), the tutor utilized the chat box feature to clarify terms and the camera to provide visual context. This shift from traditional face-to-face methods to technology-mediated interactions demonstrates how the online environment offers opportunities for student agency by allowing students to ask for clarification or take the initiative without the constraints of a physical classroom, supporting Dahmash's (2021) arguments. This dynamic is especially prominent in one-on-one settings, where students can freely engage in personal discussions (as shown in Video 1), further reinforcing the idea that online environments can offer a platform for more student-driven interactions.

This flexibility aligns with Suputra (2021), who argues that digital environments can enable personalized learning experiences. Our data support this view, showing that despite the structured IRF cycles, interactive tools can empower students to take more control over their learning. This indicates that online settings can provide space for student agency, but only when tutors adopt more dynamic engagement strategies, as seen in Video 2 where the tutor encouraged a more open interaction by providing referential questions, elaborative feedbacks, and awareness of their own autonomy to give space for students to freely express their thoughts, despite the rigidities of physical distance. This finding approves Huong's and Hung's (2021) statements that despite the shortcomings in application, effective online classes can bring about rich engagement and participations.

In brief, while online discourse often follows structured patterns like the IRF cycle, which can reinforce tutor dominance, it also provides opportunities for more equitable exchanges when tutors adapt their strategies. The findings from this study suggest that, despite the constraints imposed by physical distance, online ESL conversation classes can still foster student autonomy and reduce power asymmetry, provided that tutors employ interactive tools and flexible engagement strategies to encourage a more balanced, student-centered approach to learning

5.3 Implications for ESL Online Teaching and Learning

The analysis suggests that tutors should adopt more flexible IRF structures to promote balanced participation by encouraging student-initiated questions, as seen in Excerpt 1.2. This can help decentralize power dynamics as it shifts the responsibility for directing the conversation onto the student, allowing them to actively influence the direction of the interaction. Tutors should also integrate elaborative feedback that builds on student responses rather than shifting topics prematurely, as seen in Excerpt 2.1.

Tutor discourse awareness is crucial in shifting online ESL interactions from tutor-dominated exchanges to student-centered discussions. The findings indicate that tutors who engage in elaborative feedback and implicit correction (Excerpt 2.2) enable students to develop linguistic confidence by providing a supportive environment e.g. through negotiation and balanced interactions where students feel more empowered to self-correct and extend their responses, aligning with Shawaqfeh et al.'s (2024) and Syahriani et al.'s (2024) study. This suggests the need for tutor training programs that emphasize discourse strategies fostering student autonomy.

To balance power dynamics in online ESL conversation classes, tutors should adopt collaborative interactional strategies, aligning with Pu's and Bernard's (2025) suggestions, which promote student agency, engagement, and participation. Rather than concluding discussions with closed-ended responses, tutors can use follow-up questions to extend conversations and encourage deeper exploration of topics (Ariska et al., 2024). Incorporating implicit feedback techniques, such as recasts and clarification requests, allows students to self-correct while maintaining the natural flow of dialogue. Additionally, giving students the opportunity to initiate topic shifts fosters a more interactive and reciprocal exchange, reducing tutor dominance. Providing elaborative feedback that builds on student contributions, rather than offering mere affirmation, supports meaningful engagement and stimulates student's initiation to extend their responses, ask further questions, and actively contribute to the direction of the conversation. By integrating these approaches, online ESL tutors can cultivate a student-centered learning environment that enhances learner autonomy and participation in online second language acquisition.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigates the subtle power dynamics within online ESL conversation classes, dissecting the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern through the lens of Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis (CCDA) to understand its impact on student engagement, confidence, and learning outcomes. This study used qualitative research method, by analyzing authentic interactions from YouTube-based ESL classes, the research reveals that the IRF pattern, while intended to provide structure, often reinforces tutor-dominated discourse, limiting student agency and hindering the development of spontaneous communication skills. Tutors frequently control the conversation's topic, direct its flow, and evaluate student responses, thereby maintaining authority. However, the study also identifies instances where students resist or negotiate these power dynamics, challenging tutor-initiated questions or introducing new topics, highlighting the contested nature of power relations in online ESL classrooms.

These findings underscore the need for ESL educators to be mindful of their discursive practices and actively promote student participation by adopting facilitative approaches, encouraging student-led discussions, and providing constructive feedback that fosters critical thinking. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between pedagogical structures, power dynamics, and student learning, offering insights for educators to transform the IRF pattern from a tool of control into a catalyst for collaborative learning and student empowerment, ensuring all voices are valued in the online ESL classroom.

While this study provides insights into power dynamics in online ESL conversation classes through the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern, several areas remain unexplored and warrant further investigation. Additionally, future studies could compare power dynamics in synchronous and asynchronous online ESL discussions to determine whether real-time interactions create more hierarchical structures compared to delayed, text-based communication. A longitudinal study tracking students' participation and confidence over time in different discourse structures could also offer valuable insights into the long-term impact of IRF patterns on language acquisition.

Finally, examining tutor-student power relations across diverse cultural backgrounds and educational settings could help identify how different sociocultural expectations influence online ESL discourse. Expanding research to include peer-to-peer interactions, rather than just tutor-student exchanges, could further reveal alternative forms of power negotiation and collaborative learning strategies in online ESL environments. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to a deeper understanding of how to create more equitable, engaging, and effective digital language learning experiences.

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