Under Challenge: Claim Trajectories in EFL Classroom Interaction

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Abstract

Reason-giving, justification, and disagreement are widely recognized as important features of reasoning in second and foreign language classroom interaction. They have been associated with collaborative sense-making and developing interactional competence.

The literature shows that although disagreement and justification are face-threatening, they create structured communicative opportunities that allow students to defend stances, negotiate understanding, and co-construct disciplinary knowledge. Studies have shown that in EFL classroom interaction, when a participant's knowledge claim is challenged, the subsequent sequence follows distinct trajectory paths: participants either defend and upgrade their stance, deploy pragmatic mitigation to renegotiate claims, or retract and abandon them (Solem, 2016; Toluei & Tahririan, 2022; Sherman & Tůma, 2023).

This study adds to the body of research that examines what happens to learners' positions after they are held accountable or challenged in interaction. In other words, it looks at accountability and challenging within a bigger context. It addresses this issue through a secondary discourse analysis of 12 whole-class EFL classroom discussions originally generated in the context of critical-thinking pedagogy (Alnofaie, 2013). The original data were collected in a Saudi EFL higher-education context. The participants were 18 Saudi high-school graduates enrolled in a compulsory English-language program before beginning their undergraduate degrees. The students and their EFL teacher are native Arabic speakers. The data were collected in the same classroom over 4 months. Rather than evaluating learners' critical-thinking skills or identifying individual reasoning moves, the study examines the sequential trajectories of publicly expressed positions following requests for justification, disagreement, counterclaims, counterexamples, and other forms of challenge.

The analysis identifies four broad trajectories. Learner positions may be transformed through qualification, reformulation, reclassification, or reversal; they may be maintained while their justificatory grounds are defended or reconstructed; they may remain unresolved as competing positions continue to coexist; or they may be closed. The findings further show that challenge does not necessarily lead to convergence or changes in learners' stance. The data show that in some cases, the position remains stable while the reasons supporting it change substantially, whereas in others, disagreement results in qualification, hybrid solutions, or sustained epistemic uncertainty. These findings suggest that the interactional significance of classroom reasoning lies not only in learners' production of claims and reasons but also in the subsequent interactional work performed on those positions and their grounds. The study therefore proposes claim trajectories under challenge as a useful analytic perspective for examining reasoning in EFL classroom discourse and argues for greater pedagogical attention to sustaining the development of learner positions beyond their initial justification.