

# Working with authentic ELT discourse data: The *Flensburg English Classroom Corpus*\*

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The *Flensburg English Classroom Corpus (FLECC)* is a special corpus containing authentic classroom discourse. It consists of transcripts of 39 complete lessons of English as a foreign language taught in North German schools of diverse types: *Grundschule*, *Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, and *Gesamtschule*. This classroom corpus, which fills a gap in the field of TEFL research, will be introduced. A sample analysis of excerpts from a 5. *Klasse* English lesson will be provided. This way, some examples of the *FLECC*'s use in academic EFL teacher training will be demonstrated and explained.

*Keywords: classroom discourse, code-switching, corpus, error treatment, IRF exchange, speech act, turn taking*

## 1 Introduction

While communicative and usage-based approaches to language teaching in the classroom have been in favour with the Applied Linguistics community for a while (cf. Schmitt 2002), the area of academic teacher training is still waiting for some of those new influences to catch on. This paper is a contribution to a communicative and usage-based approach to English language teacher training at university level.

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The *Flensburg English Classroom Corpus (FLECC)* (Jäkel 2010) is a new corpus devised and put together at Flensburg University in the years between 2003 and 2007. It consists of reader-friendly transcripts of 39 complete lessons of English as a foreign language taught in North German schools of diverse types: *Grundschule*, *Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, and *Gesamtschule*. This special corpus of more than 56,000 words (amounting to 240 printed pages) covers all age groups of EFL learners, from the 3rd year of Primary School, to the last year of *Sekundarstufe 1 (Klasse 10)*, with the numbers of transcribed lessons per year/grade as follows: 3. Klasse: 4; 4. Klasse: 7; 5. Klasse: 10; 6. Klasse: 6; 7. Klasse: 3; 8. Klasse: 5; 9. Klasse: 1; 10. Klasse: 3. All 39 lessons were taught by advanced students of English during their major six-week school practicals. They were audiorecorded and transcribed by the author, who was observing the lessons as academic supervisor. Of course, all participants, pupils, teachers, and schools, remain anonymous.

This empirical corpus material presents unique opportunities for students in language teacher training to develop their analytical skills, working with authentic classroom discourse with all its flaws and hitches. Theoretical approaches from linguistic pragmatics and discourse analysis as well as from Applied Linguistics and TEFL research can be tested as to their explanatory value when it comes to analysing real classroom data. In a consciousness raising approach, students' intuitions about good or bad EFL teaching provide the cognitive basis upon which a sharpened and more profound awareness of linguistic patterns of classroom discourse can be built.

Because I cannot here represent the ways in which the discourse data from the *FLECC* are used in academic seminars, with all participants involved in the collective exploration of those patterns of classroom communication, the main part (section 2) of this paper will instead provide a sample analysis of some

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*FLECC* material. The paper will then end (in section 3) with an outlook on the potential of the *FLECC* and the possibilities of using it for diverse purposes.

## 2 Sample analysis of excerpts from an English lesson

In this section, we will look at an example passage from an English lesson in a *5. Klasse Grund- und Hauptschule* (Jäkel 2010: 84). In the following, bracketted numbers denote transcript lines; *T* stands for *teacher*, *P* for *pupil*; short comments on the situational context important for an understanding of what is going on are given in square brackets.

- (1) T: Let's start! Good morning!
- (2) All P: Good morning!
- (3) [...]

In this short passage (1-3) we witness the opening of the lesson. Notice that the teacher does not start with greeting the class, which only comes second. The first speech act, though, is a directive (Searle 1975) by the teacher, a complex *framing move* (Sinclair & Coulthard 1992: 3; 21; cf. 1975), signalling to the pupils that the lesson is about to begin: 'It's English time now, so please concentrate and switch your mindsets on to English!' Only after this has been established, will this teacher precede to exchange greetings with her class. With this *5. Klasse*, with pupils aged between ten and twelve years, the teacher's "Good morning!" is actually followed by a whole-hearted chorus of "Good morning!" from all pupils, thereby forming a perfect, ritualised *adjacency pair* (McCarthy 1997: 119-120). With pupils of higher age groups, this might not work out so fine.

After this opening transaction, the teacher starts an exercise concerning the use of prepositions and prepositional phrases, which lasts for a while (4-23). Making use of the traditional German blackboard with wings that can be opened and closed as a prop, she demonstrates different positions in space by moving from her ordinary position to one behind that wing. During this demonstration, she comments (4 and 5) on the ongoing events, with the two assertives (Searle 1975) closely resembling motherese, or child directed language. The last act in this teacher's turn (6) is a typical *display question* (Allwright & Bailey 1991: 110; cf. Byram 2004: 501-502). It is the first move of a three-part *teacher elicit* exchange (Sinclair & Coulthard 1992: 14; cf. 1975: 34), displayed here in its most canonical fashion: the famous "*Initiation – Response – Follow up (IRF)*" pattern.

- (4) T: I'm standing in front of the board.  
(5) Now I'm standing behind the board.  
(6) Where am I?  
(7) P: In front of the board.  
(8) T: Very good!  
(9) [...]

The teacher (6) initiates this exchange by way of her question. This move is followed by a pupil's response (7), which takes the shape of the appropriate prepositional phrase. The elicit exchange is completed by another turn from the teacher (8), the so-called follow-up move, in which the teacher provides feedback on the pupil's performance. As a speech act, this is an expressive (Searle 1975), namely one of praise. Fortunately, this teacher does not insist on

the pupil to utter a complete sentence, but with her positive feedback provides confirmation of the contextually fully appropriate prepositional phrase.

In the following passage, the teacher asks first a girl (10-11) and then a boy (16) to come to the front of the classroom to help demonstrating positions in space. Both (10) and (11) as well as (16) are directives (Searle 1975), the most frequent speech act to be found in many teachers' performance. The passage also displays another series of IRF patterns, both initiated by teacher questions (12 and 17), and followed by appropriate pupil responses (13 and 18). Notice that one pupil actually answers in a complete sentence (13), which may be the reason for an even more emphatically positive feedback by the teacher (14). The last move in the second of the IRF exchanges (17-19) is not revealed in this transcript.

- (10) T: Now, Pam, come here!  
(11) And please, sit on the table!  
(12) Where is she?  
(13) P: She is on the table.  
(14) T: Yes, very good!  
(15) [...]  
(16) T: Please go under the table!  
(17) Where is he?  
(18) P: Under the table.  
(19) [...]

The exercise continues with another boy being called up front by the teacher's directive (20), and yet another IRF elicit exchange initiated by the teacher's display question (21). This time, though, the answer provided by a pupil (22) is

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found wanting by the teacher, who corrects the incomplete prepositional phrase by modelling the correct form (23).

(20) T: Please stand in front of the board!

(21) Where is he?

(22) P: Front of the board.

(23) T: In front of the board!

This follow-up move (23) is a corrective feedback in the shape of a *recast* (Allwright & Bailey 1991: 98-118), the most frequent form of error correction found with the majority of teachers. Although situated on the metalinguistic level, this correction within the communicative situation is least disruptive to the ongoing communication. Though she cannot be sure if the pupil who made the mistake will actually take notice, this recast is the teacher's way of making sure that the correct form is modelled as part of the linguistic input for the whole class, in order to prevent fossilization of the incorrect form (*ibid.*).

From here on (24), the lesson enters another stage, the longest in this transcript (24-39). With the overall topic of the use of prepositions and prepositional phrases remaining the same, the new transaction (Sinclair & Coulthard 1992: 5) now is that of a different exercise involving both picture cards (flashcards) and word cards. Having pinned a number of flashcards to the board (24), the teacher uses a pointing gesture while initiating another IRF exchange with her display question (25). The pupil's answer (26) is correct as regards its content. But this time, the teacher's follow-up move (27) contains not only a short positive feedback ("*Okay*"). This is immediately followed by the teacher's adversative conjunction, which shows that there was still something else wrong, and her directive tells the pupil and the whole class that they should

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raise their hands before voicing their answers: a small but important disciplinary action.

(24) [...]

(25) T [pointing at one of the picture cards on the board]: Where is the man?

(26) P: On the car.

(27) T: Okay. But do it like this [gesture]!

The same exercise continues in the following passage (28-32). In (29), we find the teacher repeating exactly the same display question plus pointing gesture she had used in (25), and again its function is that of initiating another IRF exchange. But this time, the answer provided by a pupil is not really comprehensible (30), so that the teacher finds it necessary to follow up (31) not only with a clearly articulated recast "*Behind the car*". She adds the elliptical directive "*All together!*", to which the whole class responds as desired (32), this chorus fashion being a well-established means to secure uptake with this age group.

(28) [...]

(29) T [pointing at one of the picture cards on the board]: Where is the man?

(30) P: [incomprehensible mumbling]

(31) T: Behind the car. All together!

(32) All P: Behind the car.

In the last passage to be analysed here (33-39), the exercise is modified by adding word cards. The teacher's assertive (33), once more commenting on her

own actions (34) in motherese fashion, has the function of organizing the collective activity.

(33) T: And now I've got the words here.

(34) [pins word cards to board]

(35) Can you come here, and take one word, and put it next to the

(36) picture!

(37) [P pins *next to* next to the wrong picture]

(38) T: Nanu?!

(39) [...]

Then (35) the teacher starts yet another IRF exchange, but this time, her initiating move is that of a directive (35-36), requesting no answer, but a non-verbal response (Sinclair & Coulthard 1992: 9; 25-28). The pupil who comes to the board fails to put his word card next to the right picture (37). This non-verbal mistake is followed by the teacher's surprised "*Nanu?!*" (38), which is a most interesting and enigmatic utterance. Quite obviously, the exclamation is an instance of code-switching, in fact the only one on record by this teacher in this lesson. In moments of strong emotional involvement, such as surprise, even some of the most competent speakers of a foreign language are likely to fall back on their L1. When analysing this transcript in an academic seminar, one of the first issues could be the students looking for pragmatically appropriate renderings of the illocution of the German exclamation in English. Probably one of the best candidates here would be an emphatic "*Oops!*"

But this is not necessarily the end of the discussion. It could be argued, and is certainly worth discussing, that this teacher may have had other things in mind with her follow-up move (38) to the erroneous performance by her pupil.

In fact, her utterance could as well be interpreted as a feedback inviting the learner to self-correct. This so-called *prompting* (Allwright & Bailey 1991: 105-108) is meant to give learners room to correct themselves, or to allow them to correct each other as peers. – Here we end our sample analysis of the excerpt which comprises the first half of this 5. *Klasse* EFL lesson.

### **3 Outlook: Using the *FLECC***

The above analysis of authentic classroom discourse was meant to show some of the potential of the material documented in the *FLECC*. The greatest advantage of this classroom corpus is that we can use it to engage our teacher students in an ELT analysis 'in slow motion'. One of the most difficult aspects of working in the classroom, not only for beginners, but also for many experienced teachers, is the constant need to make quick decisions on how to react or continue. In the case of pupils' errors, e.g., the teacher has to decide within milliseconds if the error needs to be corrected, if so, who should correct it, as well as when and in what form (cf. Allwright & Bailey 1991: 99-100). In the protected environment of the academic seminar, however, we can take our time to discuss the merits or drawbacks of individual teacher decisions, in as much detail as desired by the group. Moreover, we can take our time to think up alternative options not followed by the teacher in the documented classroom discourse, and again weigh the advantages and disadvantages. In all of this, the fact that we are studying printed transcripts instead of video-taped lessons has the effect of drawing our attention to the linguistic details, which are part and parcel of successful EFL teaching (Jäkel 2010: 12; cf. Allwright & Bailey 1991: 62).

This empirical, data-driven approach to language teacher training presents unique opportunities for students to develop their analytical skills, working with

authentic classroom discourse with all its flaws and hitches. In consciousness raising fashion, students' intuitions about good or bad EFL teaching provide the cognitive basis upon which a sharpened and more profound awareness of linguistic and communicative patterns of TEFL classroom discourse can be built. And as we often learn more from the negative examples of obviously 'ropey' teacher performances, it may be regarded as one of the best things about those lessons documented in the *FLECC*, that they also include some pretty bad ones.

In addition, theoretical approaches from linguistic pragmatics (cf. Spencer-Oatey & Žegarac 2002) and discourse analysis (cf. McCarthy, Matthiessen & Slade 2002) can be tested as to their explanatory value when it comes to analysing real classroom data. E.g., one of the general results from studying the *FLECC* include the finding, that the canonical IRF-pattern (Sinclair & Coulthard 1992: 3; 1975:21) is still 'alive and kicking', prevalent in many current EFL classrooms. Thus, the classical 'Birmingham Model' (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975; 1992) can be confirmed as one of the most effective tools of analysing classroom discourse (cf. Allwright & Bailey 1991: 12).

I will end this paper with a list of issues that can be tackled based on the *FLECC* material (cf. the research questions proposed in Jäkel 2010: 227-230). How is a particular lesson structured (opening, stages, topics, exchanges/moves/acts, closing)? What kinds of speech acts occur? How much of speaking time in the classroom is occupied by the teacher, and how much is given to the learners? What is the role of typical turn taking patterns such as the classical "Initiation – Response – Feedback" (IRF)? How are tasks set, and instructions given? What forms and functions of teacher questions are found? What kinds of errors can be detected (both pupils' and teacher's), and how are they treated? What role does English-German code-switching play? How can the teacher's performance be

evaluated? How are the special demands on the teacher as linguistic role model met, in particular in Primary School English? – These and similar questions can be approached on the basis of the authentic corpus material of English classroom discourse provided by the *FLECC*. The corpus, which is also available online, can be mined for a multitude of purposes, including student projects in Applied Linguistics.

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