

Discourse Dynamics in Virtual EFL Classrooms: Examining Teacher-Student Talk and Student-Centeredness

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how teacher-student talk influences the development of student-centered learning in virtual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Indonesia. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the research investigates the experiences of two EFL teachers, one from a private school and the other from a public school, each with over two years of online teaching experience. Data were collected through written narratives, guided by open-ended prompts, and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal five interrelated themes: teacher-led dynamics, student contributions, strategies for balanced talk, student engagement, and learning outcomes. Results showed that excessive teacher talk, though often necessary for structure and control, can inhibit student participation and motivation. However, when teachers implemented strategies that encourage student voice, such as contextual topics, digital collaboration tools, and dialogic scaffolding, students became more engaged, accountable, and cognitively invested in the learning process. The study concludes that managing discourse balance is essential for effective virtual classroom management and the realization of student-centered instruction. This research contributes to the understanding of discourse as both a pedagogical and relational tool in online EFL contexts and offers practical strategies for teachers seeking to enhance interaction, agency, and engagement in remote learning environments.

Keywords: EFL teaching; narrative inquiry; student-centered learning; teacher-student talk; virtual classrooms

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a global transformation in education, rapidly shifting teaching and learning from physical classrooms to digital platforms, including the teaching of English in Indonesian junior high schools, where technology-enhanced instruction became a necessity (Rachmawati, Sahid K.H.M., & Prananda, 2025). In Indonesia, this transition was especially impactful for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, where interaction, dialogue, and participation are central to both language development and classroom management (Kisworo & Oktaviani, 2021). While virtual learning environments introduced opportunities for flexible, technology-enhanced, and student-driven instruction, they also exposed critical challenges, particularly regarding engagement, discourse balance, and the realization of student-centered pedagogy (Saleh, 2023; Iftanti et al., 2023). However, despite the global intention on digital education, existing studies in Indonesia have primarily examined the surface-level aspects of online learning, such as access, infrastructure, and

student motivation, while overlooking the nuanced, micro-level dynamics of classroom discourse. Specifically, there is limited research on how teacher-student talk is distributed, managed, and negotiated in virtual Indonesian EFL classrooms, and how this discourse impacts learner agency, participation, and classroom interaction.

One of the primary concerns emerging from this shift has been the dominance of Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and the corresponding reduction of Student Talking Time (STT). Brown (2001) emphasizes the importance of balancing TTT and STT, noting that effective language learning occurs when students have ample opportunities to use the target language actively. Without such balance, excessive teacher talk can restrict interaction, limit learner autonomy, and reduce communicative development. While teacher talk plays an essential role in modeling language and providing instruction, excessive TTT can suppress student voice and limit opportunities for interaction and meaning-making (Kareema et al., 2024). In virtual classrooms, this imbalance is often exacerbated by technological limitations, reduced visual feedback, and students' hesitancy to participate without the cues and comfort of face-to-face interaction (Prasetya, 2024; Amalia, 2022). These factors complicate the teacher's ability to foster inclusive discourse and manage classrooms in ways that promote engagement and autonomy.

In EFL instruction, where communication is both the process and the product of learning, the balance between teacher and student talk is not merely a methodological choice; it is pedagogically essential. Theories such as Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and Sociocultural Theory (Scott & Palincsar, 2013) emphasize that learning occurs through socially mediated interaction, particularly within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where scaffolded dialogue supports cognitive growth. Similarly, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Richards, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2000) advocates for authentic, student-centered discourse in language learning, where students actively construct meaning through collaborative talk and task-based communication.

Despite these well-established theories, many online EFL classrooms remain teacher-centered. Students are often relegated to passive recipients of information, especially when teachers default to lecture-based delivery due to technological constraints, a lack of training, or a desire to maintain control in unfamiliar instructional contexts (Hadromi et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2021). The result is a disconnect between pedagogical intention and classroom practice. While the discourse of student-centeredness dominates professional rhetoric, its implementation in virtual classrooms remains uneven.

In light of these challenges, educators must reflect on their discourse patterns and reconsider how talk is distributed and facilitated during online lessons. The evolving role of the teacher from knowledge transmitter to learning facilitator requires planning and awareness of how language is used to structure participation. Managing talk effectively in online classrooms is not just a matter of controlling behavior but of shaping the intellectual, emotional, and relational dimensions of learning. As digital environments become increasingly prevalent in language education, understanding the microdynamics of teacher-student interactions is crucial for ensuring inclusive and transformative classroom experiences.

Existing research has extensively addressed the challenges of online teaching, including internet access disparities, student disengagement, and lack of digital literacy. However, a significant gap remains in studies examining the microdynamics of discourse and how talk is distributed, negotiated, and managed in real time between teachers and students. Few studies have focused explicitly on how discourse management influences student agency, engagement, and classroom interaction in virtual EFL settings. Moreover, much of the existing literature relies on surveys and structured interviews, offering limited insight into the lived experiences of teachers who must continually adapt to shifting pedagogical demands.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore how EFL teachers in Indonesia manage classroom discourse in virtual environments. Narrative inquiry allows for in-depth, reflective accounts of practice, capturing the nuanced decision-making, challenges, and adaptations that characterize teachers' everyday experiences. This qualitative approach focuses on the stories educators tell about how they navigate the interplay between TTT and STT and how their talk influences the emergence or suppression of student-centered learning.

Through this lens, the study investigates how teachers perceive and structure interactions, how they utilize digital tools to support discourse, and how their choices around questioning, feedback, and wait time influence classroom dynamics. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate how the dynamics of teacher-student talk in virtual classrooms facilitate or hinder learner participation, engagement, and autonomy, with a particular focus on how these discourse patterns influence the realization of student-centered learning in online EFL environments.

Foregrounding teacher voices and focusing on classroom talk as a site of pedagogical negotiation, this research contributes to the broader discourse on effective online teaching. It offers insights into how discourse can be managed more equitably in EFL virtual classrooms, where communication is not only a tool for instruction but the foundation for meaningful learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to investigate how teacher-student interactions influence the development of student-centered learning in online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Rooted in the framework of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry emphasizes lived experience as a source of knowledge and positions teachers' stories as central to understanding pedagogical practices. This method captures the complexity of teaching in virtual settings, where relational, temporal, and contextual factors shape discourse. Rather than treating classroom talk as a static or measurable element, narrative inquiry reveals how teachers interpret, adjust, and make decisions about discourse in response to student needs, engagement levels, and technological constraints. Focusing on the voices of two EFL teachers, the study explores how their experiences with Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT) reflect broader challenges and opportunities for promoting learner autonomy and participation. The methodology enables a nuanced understanding of discourse not only as a tool for instruction but also as a dynamic and interactive practice that influences classroom climate, student motivation, and the realization of student-centered pedagogy in digital environments.

The participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives. Two Indonesian EFL teachers were chosen to represent diverse school contexts, one from a public junior high school and the other from a private secondary institution. Both teachers possessed more than one year of online teaching experience and demonstrated familiarity with student-centered pedagogical approaches. Their selection was not only based on their technical competence in using platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, but also on their capacity for critical reflection and narrative articulation. Including participants from distinct institutional settings allowed the study to explore how contextual factors such as policy, resources, and school culture influence discourse dynamics in virtual classrooms.

Table 1. Participant profile

Participant	Gender	School	School level
Participant 1	Male	Private	Junior high
Participant 2	Female	Public	Senior high

Source: Author Analysis

To collect data, the study employed a two-stage approach centered on narrative reflection. The primary instrument was a set of open-ended prompts designed to guide participants in writing reflective narratives about their online teaching experiences. These prompts elicited detailed accounts of how they structured classroom talk, managed student participation, and navigated the shift to virtual learning. Responses were submitted via email and Google Forms, offering flexibility and convenience while allowing for asynchronous and thoughtful reflection. To enrich the data, optional follow-up interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions. These interviews were conducted via WhatsApp, based on the participants' preference, and were intended to clarify responses or expand on key ideas that emerged in the written narratives. This layered approach supported the narrative inquiry framework by prioritizing participant voice and depth over breadth of coverage.

The analysis of data followed the six-phase thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase involved immersion and familiarization with the narratives through repeated readings. During this stage, the researcher took preliminary notes and began identifying initial patterns. In the second phase, open coding was applied to highlight significant excerpts related to teacher and student talk, engagement, classroom interaction, and scaffolding strategies. These codes were data-driven but also informed by theoretical constructs such as teacher authority and student agency. In the third phase, related codes were organized into candidate themes, including *Teacher-Led Dynamics*, *Encouraging Student Contributions*, and *Impact on Student Engagement*. These themes were then reviewed in phase four to assess their coherence across the dataset. In phase five, themes were refined, named, and clearly defined in alignment with the research question. Finally, in phase six, the themes were interpreted using the study's conceptual frameworks: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and principles of student-centered learning. Direct participant quotations were integrated throughout the findings to preserve authenticity and anchor interpretation in the lived realities of the teachers.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were prioritized. Participants received an informed consent form that detailed the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality and data protection. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. To protect privacy, all names, institutional affiliations, and geographical identifiers were anonymized and replaced with pseudonyms. Data were stored securely in password-protected digital files accessible only to the primary researcher, and physical notes were kept in a locked space. These measures ensured compliance with ethical standards in qualitative research and upheld the dignity and autonomy of all participants.

In summary, this study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to foreground teacher experiences and examine how discourse shapes student-centered learning in virtual EFL

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classrooms. Through reflective written narratives, the research explored how teachers manage and interpret the balance between Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT) in response to classroom dynamics. Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) framework, the methodology emphasized the relational, temporal, and contextual nature of teaching practices. By centering teacher voices, the study offers a nuanced understanding of discourse as a pedagogical tool that influences engagement, autonomy, and classroom interaction in digital environments.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study explored how teacher-student talk contributes to student-centeredness and classroom management in a virtual EFL setting. Based on narrative responses from two experienced EFL teachers, one from a private junior high school and the other from a public senior high school. The thematic analysis revealed five key themes as a representation of the result: (1) Teacher-Led Dynamics, (2) Encouraging Student Contributions, (3) Strategies for Balanced Talk, (4) Impact on Student Engagement, and (5) Learning Outcomes and Responsibility. Each theme provides insights into how discourse influences student participation, motivation, and cognitive development in online learning environments.

Teacher-Led Dynamics, while often problematized for restricting student voice, were shown to play a necessary scaffolding role, especially in early virtual teaching phases. This finding aligns with Brown (2001) and Garrett (2014), who argued that teacher talk can ensure classroom structure and behavioral regulation. However, consistent with Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Popovikj (2019), the study also shows that extended reliance on TTT can hinder learners' independence. This study presents teacher-led discourse as not merely a limiting factor but also a necessary and context-dependent form of support that can guide students during transitional phases, especially in virtual environments. It highlights that its impact depends largely on how and when it is applied, rather than assuming it is universally negative.

Encouraging Student Contribution emerged as a powerful catalyst for engagement, especially when lessons were personalized to students' lived experiences. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory of meaningful social interaction and mirrors findings from Amalia (2022), who reported increased participation when students perceived the material as relevant. What this study adds is a narrative-level understanding of how EFL teachers in Indonesia deliberately adjust topic selection to match student interests, even at the cost of stepping beyond their instructional comfort zones, thus fostering emotional resonance and voluntary participation.

Strategies for Balanced Talk, such as flipped content delivery, use of Zoom tools, and peer collaboration, were shown to gradually shift classroom discourse toward more dialogic, student-centered models. This confirms the scaffolding model described by Wood et al. (1976) and aligns with Fatima (2022), who advocates for strategic discourse allocation. However, unlike many quantitative studies, this research highlights how such strategies evolve in response to student affect and classroom dynamics, providing context-specific insight into decision-making and teacher agency in digital settings.

Impact on Student Engagement was not only evident in behavioral participation but also in affective investment and intellectual curiosity. While previous research (Herlambang, 2024) emphasized the link between discourse and trust, this study reveals how even minor shifts in teacher questioning and wait-time can redefine classroom dynamics. Participant narratives suggest that students thrive when they are not merely recipients of instruction but active shapers of dialogue. This finding advances the literature by showing how moment-to-

moment discourse decisions directly influence engagement levels in synchronous virtual environments.

Learning Outcomes and Responsibility improved notably when students were given more voice and agency. These results affirm Manning and Bucher's (2014) conclusions that dialogic and collaborative instruction enhances critical thinking and learner accountability. Yet, the current study provides deeper interpretive nuance by showing how discourse adjustments affect not only learning outcomes but also learners' perception of ownership and responsibility, an angle often underexplored in virtual learning literature.

This study offers key insights into discourse practices in virtual EFL classrooms. It positions teacher talk as a flexible pedagogical tool shaped by student readiness and classroom context, rather than as a fixed limitation. It also underscores the role of teacher reflexivity and emotional awareness in managing interaction. By drawing on narratives from Indonesian EFL settings, the study adds culturally grounded perspectives to a field often dominated by Western, survey-based research.

TEACHER-LED DYNAMICS

Both participants reported that, especially during the initial phases of online teaching, teacher talk dominated the learning environment. While teacher-led discourse ensured instructional clarity and control, it often limited student autonomy and engagement.

In contrast to earlier studies, which often measure discourse through pre-defined rubrics or time ratios, this research delves into the reflective reasoning behind teacher talk. It fills a methodological gap by adopting narrative inquiry to understand the affective and relational dimensions of classroom interaction, especially in underrepresented Southeast Asian EFL contexts.

Ultimately, this study advances current knowledge by demonstrating how discourse, when thoughtfully managed, functions not just as a medium of instruction but as a transformational space for agency, identity, and engagement in virtual learning. It encourages educators and researchers alike to view teacher-student talk not as a binary of control versus freedom, but as a dynamic negotiation with pedagogical, emotional, and cultural implications.

"One area where students excel is in discussing topics that resonate with their own lives... However, when the subject matter feels unfamiliar, hesitation creeps in."

Participant 1

"When they are allowed to use all the annotations on Zoom to do the worksheets... the learning environment surely became interactive as the students were excited to do the task."

Participant 2

This phenomenon reflects what Brown (2001) describes as "teacher talk time (TTT)" overwhelming the discourse space, leading students into passive roles. While teacher talk provides scaffolding, excessive reliance on it creates a teacher-dependent culture. Garrett (2014) argues that excessive teacher control can hinder classroom management, especially when students are not empowered to participate in their learning process. In this study, overuse of teacher talk led to disengagement, especially among students transitioning from elementary to junior high, where technological and cognitive readiness varied significantly. On the other hand, Teacher-Led Dynamic emerged as a critical starting point for understanding how classroom authority and structure are established in virtual learning environments. While excessive teacher talk can suppress student voice, this study highlights that teacher-led discourse, when used strategically, plays a pivotal role in scaffolding, providing direction, and maintaining classroom coherence, particularly in the early phases of online instruction. It offers a foundation from which teachers can gradually transition toward

more student-centered practices. Recognizing this dynamic is crucial, as it reveals how teachers can balance their instructional control with intentional efforts to improve student agency.

ENCOURAGING STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Participants noted that student participation increased significantly when the content was relevant and relatable to their lives. Activities that allowed learners to share personal stories or relate content to real-life experiences created more dynamic and engaging lessons.

“One area where students excel is in discussing topics that resonate with their own lives... However, when the subject matter feels unfamiliar, hesitation creeps in.” *Participant 1*

“When they are allowed to use all the annotations on Zoom to do the worksheets... the learning environment surely became interactive as the students were excited to do the task.” *Participant 2*

These results are consistent with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, which suggests that learning occurs when individuals can internalize knowledge through meaningful social interaction. Encouraging personal expression in classroom discourse helps students construct knowledge that feels relevant and applicable to their lives. Research by Amalia (2022) confirms that online participation increases when students perceive tasks as personally significant and when teachers encourage ownership of ideas. In this study, the use of familiar tools, such as Zoom annotations and familiar discussion contexts, made students more willing to take risks and speak up.

STRATEGIES FOR BALANCED TALK

Participants developed intentional strategies to manage discourse distribution and prevent teacher-dominated sessions. These strategies included pre-class materials, interactive tools, peer engagement, and personalization of content.

“To maximize our limited class time, I often prepare video lessons or multimedia content for students to explore before class begins or send them via WhatsApp. This allows them to build a foundation before we meet.” *Participant 1*

“I usually provide interesting topics that they would love to talk about, like viral issues, love stories, or their favorite things... I also take more time to listen and get into their conversations, even if I don’t like to talk about it.” *Participant 2*

These strategies align with Wood et al.’s (1976) theory of scaffolding, where teachers offer supportive structures and gradually shift responsibility to students. Pre-class preparation also reflects Flipped Learning principles, where students engage with content independently before applying it in class. Furthermore, participant narratives reveal how leveraging students’ interests, even if outside the teacher’s comfort zone can make them feel heard and respected. This contributes to the development of a learning space that encourages open dialogue and mutual respect, as advocated by Littlewood (1981) and recent student-centered teaching models (Fatima, 2022). Both participants emphasized that when they introduced topics related to students’ daily experience, such as trending issues or personal interests, students responded with greater enthusiasm and were more willing to participate. Aligning content with student interests fosters engagement and supports the shift toward student-centered discourse.

IMPACT ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Teachers observed that when students were given opportunities to speak, ask questions, and collaborate, their engagement improved significantly. The shift from passive listening to active discourse led to increased enthusiasm and motivation.

“When the material resonates with students’ social lives, enthusiasm flourishes. A classroom focused solely on the teacher’s voice can quickly become stale... If they aren’t given opportunities to express their thoughts, engagement diminishes.” *Participant 1*

“I feel so motivated when my students are able to follow my directions well. When they’re comfortable, they absorb the materials more easily. In my opinion, a student-centered class won’t succeed if students are confused about what they’re supposed to do.” *Participant 2*

These insights reinforce findings by Herlambang (2024), who emphasized that discourse balance strengthens trust, clarity, and mutual understanding. Student-centered classrooms encourage learners to take initiative, feel valued, and experience a sense of belonging. Garrett (2014) further notes that classroom engagement improves when students have consistent opportunities to use their voices, make choices, and build dialogue around content. In both narratives, we see evidence that balanced teacher-student talk fosters emotional investment and intellectual presence in the virtual space.

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND RESPONSIBILITY

A final and critical theme was that balanced discourse enhances learning outcomes and fosters student accountability. When students are allowed to contribute meaningfully, they take greater responsibility for their learning and demonstrate deeper comprehension of content.

“It is crucial to note that if learning is overly focused on the teacher, students may quickly lose interest and become disengaged. This can result in a shift from diligence to laziness.” *Participant 1*

“I noticed a huge difference in my learning outcomes compared to teacher-centered approaches... students are more focused when they’re busy with their own worksheets or discussions.” *Participant 2*

The results align with Manning and Bucher’s (2014) findings, which state that learners who are given responsibility through collaborative learning and open dialogue are more likely to prepare, reflect, and develop critical thinking skills. Balanced classroom talk enables students to articulate their understanding, ask clarifying questions, and develop their interpersonal skills, outcomes essential for 21st-century learners. When learning becomes participatory, students transition from passive information absorbers to confident, independent thinkers.

These five essential themes collectively illustrate that managing discourse in virtual classrooms is not merely about controlling classroom behavior but about shaping the cognitive and emotional dynamics of the learning process. Teacher-student talk, when carefully balanced, serves as both a pedagogical tool and a relational bridge. The data show that while teachers initially dominated classroom talk to maintain order and direction, intentional shifts toward student-centered strategies such as personalized topics, scaffolded discussions, and interactive platforms fostered increased motivation, accountability, and deeper learning. These results not only confirm the value of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2008) but also reinforce the importance of pedagogical reflexivity in online EFL instruction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined how teacher-student talk shapes classroom discourse and facilitates or hinders student-centered learning in virtual EFL contexts. Through a narrative inquiry approach, the experiences of two Indonesian EFL teachers were explored, revealing that discourse functions not only as a medium for instruction but also as a relational and motivational force. Thematic analysis identified five key dimensions: Teacher-Led Dynamics, Encouraging Student Contributions, Strategies for Balanced Talk, Impact on Student Engagement, and Learning Outcomes and Responsibility.

The findings indicate that teacher-led discourse plays a foundational role, particularly in the early stages of virtual instruction, by offering structure and direction. However, if overused, it can suppress student voice and reduce engagement. Teachers who intentionally shifted toward more student-centered discourse by integrating relevant topics, listening actively, and using interactive tools fostered greater participation and learner autonomy. These findings highlight the importance of managing talk not only to deliver content but also to promote agency and shared ownership in learning. Talk, when framed as a two-way interaction, becomes a pathway for students to co-construct meaning, rather than simply absorb information.

Moreover, the study reveals that effective discourse management depends on the teacher's ability to reflect and respond to the social-emotional cues of learners, especially in screen-mediated environments where feedback is often limited. Teachers' willingness to depart from fixed scripts and incorporate learners' personal contexts contributed significantly to increased motivation and classroom engagement. This responsiveness is particularly relevant in Indonesia's diverse educational landscape, where student readiness and access to digital tools vary widely.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, teachers should engage in reflective teaching practices that involve ongoing analysis of their discourse habits. Adjusting talk patterns to create more space for student input can enhance engagement and learning outcomes. Second, professional development programs should focus on dialogic pedagogy, scaffolding strategies, and the effective use of digital tools to promote balanced interaction. Teachers must be trained not only in using technology but in applying it meaningfully to encourage interaction, questioning, and collaborative learning.

Third, educational institutions should provide structural support such as adequate planning time, access to interactive platforms, and curricular flexibility to facilitate student-centered practices in virtual classrooms. School leadership and policy frameworks must recognize that effective discourse does not occur spontaneously but is shaped by institutional conditions that either enable or restrict interaction.

Finally, future research should build on this work by involving a more diverse group of participants, including learners themselves. Classroom observations and longitudinal studies in hybrid or asynchronous formats would offer deeper insight into evolving discourse patterns in varied digital learning environments. Comparative studies across different cultural and educational settings could further illuminate how discourse strategies must adapt to local contexts.

In conclusion, this study reinforces that teacher-student talk, when managed purposefully and responsively, can become a powerful pedagogical strategy. Effective discourse fosters not only instruction but also engagement, autonomy, and meaningful learning in virtual EFL classrooms. As online education continues to evolve, educators must be equipped not only with digital tools but with a deep understanding of how language itself structures participation, builds relationships, and drives cognitive development.

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