Teacher-Student Talk in Singapore Chinese Language Classrooms: Construction or obstruction?

Liu Yongbing
CRPP, National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University

Abstract
In this paper, we analyze the interactive exchanges between teachers and students in the teacher-fronted instruction by using transcribed classroom data. Adopting a social constructivist position, we examine ways in which teachers construct or obstruct students’ learning opportunities in these teacher-fronted communications. Furthermore, we demonstrate how language is used to serve the functions of scaffolding and to provide learning opportunities as students progress in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Although teachers talk most of the time and control most of the turns, we argue that teachers can improve their control and talk to facilitate and optimize student contributions and scaffold students learning in their fronted instruction.

Introduction
Recently we have reported a study on the Singaporean Chinese language classroom practice observed by using the CRPP’s Pedagogy Coding Scheme and Mother Tongue Pull-down menu (Liu et al. 2004). In the study, we found that the teacher fronted talk (IRF and monologue) is the dominant feature of social organization of Chinese classroom activities. Although many educators and researchers have been concerned to analyze the classroom discourse by comparing it to communication in the ‘real world’, and teachers have been criticized for their excessive teacher talk, we assume in line with a view (Cazden, 2001; Wells, 1993) that classrooms are specific contexts in their own right where teachers largely control both content and procedure, and classroom pedagogic discourse takes the forms of various language routines that accompany specific curricular activities. Thus teacher-dominated talk or the quantity of teachers’ talk is not the determiner of whether teachers hinder or facilitate student’s learning. By recognizing the important relationship between language use and pedagogic purpose, we assume that quality rather than quantity should be the focus in understanding the nature of classroom discourse.

In this paper, we analyze one type of Chinese language classroom discourses, triadic dialogues, typically defined as IRF or IRE (Cazden, 2001; Wells, 1993) between teachers and students in the teacher fronted instruction. Adopting the social constructivist position that maximizing student involvement in interaction is conducive to language learning (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997), in this paper we examine the ways in which two teachers, through their control of content, procedure and choice of language, constructed or obstructed student learning opportunities in their triadic dialogues of classroom communication. We also demonstrate through the analysis of transcribed data when students are engaged in negotiation/interaction, how language is used to serve the functions of scaffolding and to provide learning opportunities as students progress in the ZPD (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997). We conclude the paper by arguing that although teachers talk most of the time and control most of the turns, they can improve their control and talk to facilitate and optimize student contributions and scaffold students learning in their fronted instruction. In addition, teacher fronted interaction play an instrumental role in determining whether students can gain access to the learning process.

A theoretical perspective
The current pedagogic discourse of Chinese language education in Singapore informed by what is generally termed as ‘social constructivist theory’ (e.g., Chin, 2003) addresses the way students learn through social interaction as delineated by Vygosky’s ZPD and the way language mediates these processes. According to Newman, Griffin and Cole (1989), Vygosky believed that social interaction is a prerequisite to learning and cognitive development. In other words, knowledge is co-constructed and learning always involves social interactions where learners are enabled to form and test hypothesis based on their pre-knowledge in problem solving by using the mediational tools (language as the most important one). Vygosky (Newman, Griffin and Cole, 1989) situated learning in the ZPD which is widely described as the distance between what a learner can achieve alone, and what a learner can achieve with the assistance of a more advanced partner (teacher and more capable peer). This notion of the ZPD has highlighted the way teachers or advanced learners can scaffold the participation of students in classroom activities, for example, by directing attention to key aspects of the curricular task, simplifying the task, appropriating language or other tools, monitoring ongoing performance, and providing appropriate feedbacks depending on the students’ level of understanding in classroom interaction. It is clear that in the ZPD, the teacher or the advanced partner offers scaffolded assistance to the learner, providing a certain higher level of potential learning opportunities. The scaffold assists the learner in carrying
out new components of the task which the learner would not be able to complete without assistance. According
to this view, scaffolding does not exclusively mean what is generally interpreted as peer interactions in group
work or project work in classrooms. Teacher-student interactive exchanges, such as IRF, can lead students to
become highly involved in the negotiation of meaning, linguistic form and rules for classroom behavior during
class activities (Cazden, 2001; Wells, 1993, 1998).

While recognizing that students can construct meaning through peer interactions and consequently
these interactions facilitate the learning of new knowledge in group work or project work, many researchers
view classroom as a context in its own right jointly created and defined by the teacher and students, curriculum,
institutional rules and social norms. Within the classroom, teacher-and-student interaction or pedagogic
discourse can take the forms of various language patterns that accompany different curricular activities (Cazden,
2001; Wells, 1993). In this view, classroom verbal behavior is curricular goal-oriented and governed by certain
rules, and learning in the classroom is tied to specific interactive patterns that are largely set by the teacher and
used by students to question and respond to new information (Cazden, 2001). According to Cazden (2001, p. 2),
“the teacher, is responsible for controlling not just negatively, as a traffic officer does to avoid collisions but
also positively, to enhance the purpose of education”. Indeed in the classroom, teachers talk most of the time,
initiate most exchanges through display questions and control both content and procedure interaction
(Musumeci, 1996; Westgate & Hughes, 1997). Among various language patterns of classroom discourse, the
three part-exchange structure, typically called IRE or IRF is perhaps the most ubiquitous discourse format
anywhere in the world. If we recognize that “it is the default option – doing what the system is set to do
‘naturally’ unless someone makes a deliberate change” (Cazden, 2001, p. 31), we have every reason to assume
that it can play the function of scaffolding for student learning. In the recent reconceptualization of the IRF
pattern, some researchers (Hall & Walsh, 2002 for a review) have confirmed that this teacher directed pattern of
interaction provide scaffolding and enhance student opportunities for learning. According to Hall and Walsh
(2002), whether the IRF pattern serves scaffolding or not largely depends on how it unfolds moment-to-moment
on particular activities in particular classroom contexts. In line with this observation, we will focus our analyses
on whether the teacher fronted IRFs in Chinese language classrooms construct or reduce students’ opportunities
for learning by describing their local contexts and analyze sequential organizations of the interactions.

Data and methodology

Research context and data

Committed to studying longitudinal effects and outcomes of the 1997 reforms, and with deliberate attempts to
build an empirical and interpretive context for the ‘new wave’ of reforms, the Centre for Research in Pedagogy
and Practice (CRPP) has carried out a large scale longitudinal core research project on Singapore schools since
2003. It examines the shapes and possible lines of development for ‘new Asian pedagogies’ fitted for a state that
is at a crucial historical juncture in its economic, cultural and social development (for detail, refer to Luke, et al.,
2005).

Within this broad research design and with its ambitious purpose, one of the research foci is a
description, on an unprecedented scale, of what happens in about 1000 classroom lessons in the core curriculum
areas of Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, English, and Mother Tongues (Malay, Tamil and Chinese). These
lessons are coded for 2 years, and they are aggregated from a whole week of observation of instructional
units in randomly sampled schools. These lessons are coded ‘in real time’ using the CRPP Pedagogy Coding
Scheme (PCS) and the coded data is analyzed statistically to identify different patterns and relationships for
various purposes. At the same time, these lessons are also audio-taped (with some videotaped) for transcription
and corpus building, and are subjected to fine-grained descriptive, interactional, pragmatic and discourse
analyses (for detailed design, refer to Luke, et al., 2005).

As a part of CRPP core project, we have been building a computer corpus of Chinese language
classroom data that will contain transcribed data of about 150 hours out of 32 units of Primary 5 and Secondary
3 classes. So far, we have transcribed 23 hours of audio-taped data from 4 units of Primary 5 and 3 units of
Secondary 3 classes. The data of this paper, however, is drawn from two 2 primary 5 classes of the same stream,
EM2. While these two classes follow the same curriculum set by the MOE that offers the same textbook and
evaluation procedure, there are considerable variations in actual teaching practices among the two teachers.
They both have had more than 8 years of experience teaching Chinese to students in Singapore schools. Both
teachers use a variety of activities in their classrooms such as IRF, monologue, students’ demonstrations,
language games, and text-analyses. Due to the limited space of this paper, the present analyses focus only on the
IRF patterns between the teacher and students in their initiation phases of two units.

The excerpts analyzed here reflect our interest in the initiation of a unit typically conducted as a practical
and regular task of Primary 5 Chinese instruction. In our classroom observations and repeated readings of the
transcripts we found that there is a particular unit organization pattern or a similarity that is identifiable across
different units or classroom contexts. In other words, nearly all the teachers observed introduced a new unit
typically by an ‘initiation phase’ or a ‘unit opener’ where certain background knowledge or information relevant to a new exemplar text is discussed or elaborated. The initiation phase (or phases) is realized by different social organizations, such as teacher fronted monologue, IRF, student demonstration. It is two these initiation phases that are examined in the subsequent analyses of two long excerpts. These two excerpts reflect two different ways the two teachers in question use triadic dialogues in their instruction. Therefore, the analyses that follow are by no means a comprehensive examination of teacher-student interactions in Singaporean Chinese classrooms. Rather, these are “telling cases” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239) of how teachers could construct or obstruct students learning opportunities in their IRF interactions. However, readers are encouraged to treat the presented data and our analyses, not simply as typical cases of how teachers started their new units but as demonstrations of what we can find in teachers’ use of these initiation phases if we inquire into whether the teachers create or reduce opportunities for student learning in the sequential organization of classroom talk. More specifically, we will address the following research questions.

1. In what ways do teachers, through their choice of language and their control of content and procedure, can create or obstruct opportunities for learning?
2. How can teachers, by varying the IRF pattern of interaction in the classroom, increase opportunities for student involvement?
3. What evidence is there that teachers neglect students’ contributions in order to maintain authority, but reduce opportunities for student learning?

Research method

While there are many theoretical and methodological suggestions as to how to study and describe classroom interaction (see Green & Dixon, 2002 for a review of classroom discourse studies), the present analyses take a conversation analysis approach, paying close attention to whether the teacher fronted IRF construct or reduce students’ opportunities for learning by describing their local contexts and their interpretations of what goes on. One way to describe and analyze how teachers and students produce and make sense of their verbal actions is through sequential analysis. Developed by conversation analysts (e.g., Sacks, 1992), sequential organizations refer to “units” and “structures” of language use. Central to conversation analysis is the concept of turn-taking which can be described as a set of rules with ordered options. These options operate on a turn-taking basis as a locally and sequentially managed system. This system enables speakers to maintain conversation in temporally evolving and sequentially regular ways. A turn is constructed with turn-constructional units (TCUs) that are mapped onto syntactic, lexical, pragmatic units. Each next turn displays how the speaker of the turn understands the previous turn; what it means, what it calls for, and/or what work it is doing. That is to say, the next turn is one of the basic means through which speakers display their understanding of the prior turn their talk is tied to.

Thus, looking into the sequential contexts allows us to retrieve the interactional work of understanding: how certain knowledges/concepts are occasioned and made sense to the students in the very course of interaction. Because we examine triadic dialogues produced by the teacher and students, the phenomenon of understanding is understood as a local and interactional act or turn. Also an analysis of the sequential structures or units enables us to explore whether teachers use the units or structures such as student turns, TCUs, teacher’s evaluation, reformulation, repetition and repair organization either systematically to provide opportunities for student learning or use the units to hinder student learning.

In what follows, we analyze two excerpts of classroom interaction where variations of IRF pattern are identified in the actual course of interactions. We describe what they do within the evolving sequence of talk and analyze how teachers ask questions, how students make sense of them and how teachers deal with student contributions. We transcribed the data by using the software, Transcriber, following its transcribing convention. An approximate English translation for each turn is provided right below the actual turn and the salient paralinguistic features are marked with CA convention (see Appendix). Ethnographic notes are provided before each excerpt in brackets to describe the contexts where the interactions took place.

Construction: providing learning opportunities

From our classroom observations and the data transcribed, we found that some teachers consistently create opportunities for learner involvement because their organization of activities, use of language, and pedagogic purpose are well integrated. As the space is limited in this paper, we centre our analyses around only two longer excerpts: the first in which the teacher facilitates maximum learner involvement by constructing a context in which learners are maximally involved, but the second in which the teacher appears to obstruct or hinder. It should be noted that the intention is not to evaluate the instructional skills of the individual teachers, but merely to comment on the differences in opportunities for learning created by teacher fronted IRE interactions. In the excerpt that follows, there is clear evidence that the teacher, by matching pedagogic and linguistic goals, by encouraging students to produce longer utterances, and by tolerating longer wait-time, facilitates and promotes reformulation and clarification, leading to greater involvement and language use on the part of the students.

Excerpt 1
(There are totally 40 students in this class. At the very beginning of the observed unit, the teacher organizes 12 students into two groups lining up at each side of the classroom for a classroom demonstration. One group consists of 6 boy students and the other 6 girl students. The teacher gives each sentence to the first student of each group and asks him/her to relay orally in low voice the sentence as quickly as possible to the next student until to the last student in line. Hardly have the activity finished than the following interaction ensues. All the names are pseudonyms)

1 老师：好了吗？好，停！我们现在听阳饶讲，他听到的那句话是什么？好，阳饶，告诉大家。大声一点！
T: Are you OK? All right, stop! Now let’s listen to Yangrao. What did he hear? Well, Yangrao, tell all of us what you heard! Speak loudly!

2 阳饶：(.) 回家找到一个人。
S1: …Went back home and found a man.

3 学生们：哈哈哈……。
Ss: Ha, ha, … nearly all the students are laughing

4 老师：好！停！停！现在 Yangrao 讲的是，他听到的那句话是。回家找到一个人。 Xinran, 你讲，你那句话是什么？
T: Good! stop! Stop laughing! Now what Yangrao said is; what he heard is ‘went back home and found a man’. Xinran, you say what your sentence is.

5 Xinran: 丁家打了一口井，得了一个女人。
S2: Ding’s family dug a well, and therefore got an extra man(power).

6 老师：好！Xinran 讲的是 (?) . 丁家打了一口井，得了一个女人。 (?) 到，到阳饶这边是，回家找到一个人。很好！谢谢你。
( ?) 女生，女生，你听到的是什么？% % 来！
T: Good! Xinran said, that sentence is ‘Ding’s family dug a well, and therefore got an extra man(power). (…) when it comes to Yangrao, it has become ‘went back home and found a man’. Very good, thank you. (…) girl students, girl students, what did you hear? (6sec) Come on!

7 学生：在别人的背后讲别人的坏话，真了不得！
S: To speak something bad behind others is really terrific!

8 老师：在别人的背后讲别人的坏话，真了不得！好，$ % 真了不得！好， Shiye 讲，你那句话说的是什么？
T: To speak something bad behind others is really terrific! Ha, Ha laughing, really terrific! Well, Shiye say, what is your sentence?

9 Shiye: 在别人的背后说别人的坏话是真了不得。 % % 在别人的背后说别人的坏话是真了不得的。
S3: To speak something bad behind others cannot be tolerated. (8sec) To speak something bad behind others cannot be tolerated.

10 老师：好！ ShiYe, 你声音要大一点啊！好， Shiye 讲他说的那句话是：在别人的背后说别人的坏话是 真了不得的。要不得到那边了不了得了。哈，% %，坐回座位。% % 坐回座位。看哪个组又快又安静。
T: Good, Shiye, you should have spoken louder! Well, Shiye said: what he said is ‘To speak something bad behind others cannot be tolerated’ on the other side (pointing to the one end of the student line). Ha, ha, (6sec) still amused, return to your seats. (8sec) return to your seats, to see which group faster and quieter.

11 (no speaker) % % 学生回座位
Ss: ((6sec)) students return to their seats with good spirit

12 老师：哦，好，注意听！(.)我想请问学来告诉我，为什么我的那两句话到最后(…)不一样了？
T: oh, well, listen carefully! (4sec) I’d like you to tell me, why were the two sentences I gave to you changed (…) in the end?

13 学生：% %有变% % 乱(…)
S: [(2sec)changed ((5sec))shì (…)]

14 老师：说。举起手来，ShiYong 说。
T: Put up your hand and speak! Come on, ShiYong, you say something.

15 ShiYong: % % Can not % %.
S4: ((4sec)) Can not ((6sec)). S spoke English

16 老师：说华语！
T: Speak Chinese!
S: See him, he said, he said (...) said two words, (...) then, then, (6sec) afterwards stopped talking. Could not hear clearly (...)

18. 老师: 好, 听不清 (...) 一个一个的说, 好, 再找一个同学。女生们说一人, 为什么会到最后和我刚才说的那句话不一样了? %

Ss: 29

T: Good! Now what I 'd like to ask you is: what do you think has happened (...) in the process of our language communication? What changes have happened (...) in the process? Do you think what was said by the last student of the group can be believed?

20. T: Very good, (...) You did not hear clearly what she said, correct? Then you thought it out. Anything else? Come on!

21. Ss: cannot be believed!

24. T: Good, now today we learn a new text. Jieyun put the CD in. well, others take out your textbook put the CD in. well, others take out your textbook and feedback.

25. T: Rumor is something like we just passed from one to another. In the process the sentence has been changed. It is not reliable at all. How can we believe it? Just now we passed a sentence from one to another in the process the sentence has been changed. It might be I did not hear it clearly, or it might be someone liked to add to it his own imagination. Like just now Dung's family’ is changed to 'went back home'; 'cannot be tolerated' becomes 'really terrific'. You added to it something out of your imagination. So in the end the words are not reliable. Well, good, now today we learn a new text. Ha ha, nearly all the students are laughing. Can you tell us why my sentence has been changed in the end? (4sec) Think it over. Did you hear clearly what someone said before you? Who did not hear clearly? Come on!

26. S: I did not hear clearly, so I thought it may be...
to promote learner involvement. Feedbacks on the message rather than its form are also more conducive to genuine communication and appropriate in the setting outlined here.

There is considerable evidence from previous studies (e.g., see Hall and Walsh for a review) that teachers who constantly reformulate their elicitation, seek clarification, check for confirmation and who always explicitly acknowledge and encourage student contributions are more likely to maximize student learning potential than those who do not. In Excerpt 1, the instances of the teacher reformulating her elicitations (e.g., Turns 18, 23, 27), repeating student contributions (Turns 4, 6, 8, 10, 18, 25, 27, 30), allowing extended wait-time (e.g., Turns 10, 13, 18, 23) do serve to maintain the natural class discourse flow and keep channels open. This observation is clearly very much in line with the well-established findings (see Hall and Walsh, 2002 for a review) concerning the need for meaning to be negotiated in the language classroom.

One of the most striking features of the Excerpt is the turn-taking structure. Different from the 'standard IRFs' where student responses and affirmations of student responses are short, the students in this excerpt provide comparatively longer responses (at a full sentence length at least) and the teacher elaborates on their responses and further probes students’ understandings by asking additional open questions. Moreover, when student responses were not very clear (e.g., 听不清 in turn 17), the teacher does not overtly challenge or evaluates them with statements like ‘no’ or ‘It's not clear’. Instead, she acknowledges the students’ contributions (e.g., 好, 很好), and then offers interpretations relevant to the task at hand (e.g., 好, 听不清... 想一想... 你... 听清楚了吗? your sentence is not clear... think... you... did you hear it?) or by directing her questions to the whole group/class (Turns 1, 4, 7, 14) or by directing her questions to the whole group/class (Turns 12, 20, 23). When an individual student is nominated to answer the question, the teacher always engages the whole class attention to the answer either by words (e.g., ‘告诉大家 Tell all of us!’ in Turn 1) or by eye contacts or body posture. More importantly, she provides positive feedbacks (好! 很好!) nearly in every turn of her feedback and repeats (e.g., 现在Yangrao讲的是, 他听到的那句话是... in Turn 4; Xinnan讲, 那句话是... in Turn 6) or reformulates the student contributions (e.g., Xinnan讲, 那句话是... in Turn 6; 好, 你没有听清楚他说的话, 对不对? 然后你自己想的... in Turn 20) for the whole class to understand the intended meaning.

Another striking feature is that the teacher allows extended wait-time for students to answer a question, which results in longer answers (e.g., Turns 17, 21) and leads to an increase in students’ uptake and their comprehensive output. Silence, to many teachers, may be a sign of weakness, or an indication that they are simply ‘not doing their job’. In fact, it is the converse which is true in classroom contexts like this one where students are given enough time to think and formulate their responses. For example, the teacher recognizes student contributions and tolerates student’s disfluent language and code-switching. In this case, the student’s responses (17, 21) to the teacher’s questions (16, 20) appear disfluent — filled with perturbations (他讲, 他讲, 他... 讲... 两个字... in Turn 17; 我, 我... in Turn 21), pauses within TCU, code-switching (then, then, ...), and repairs (he, 他, 我问你 here in Turn 21). Since the students are ready to continue (e.g., 好, 听不清 in Turn 17, 21), the teacher does not take over the talk and does not indicate any dissatisfaction with the students’ performance. Instead, the teacher waits for them to finish their turns and gives positive assessments ( 好! 很好! in Turn 18; 好! 现在... in Turn 23) because the propositional contents of the answers provided by the two students are plausible, even though there are some grammatical problems in their utterances. However, the teacher does not tolerate and quickly intervenes the student code-switching (Turn 15) by a bold directive (说华语!) in Turn 16, because the use of English here does not contribute to student understanding and it is very likely to derail her pedagogic purpose. Therefore, this teacher confirms the importance of maintaining harmony between language use and pedagogic aim, and the teacher’s use of language, consciously or subconsciously, is very much in tune with her specific aim at this stage of the lesson.

Disorder or breakdown of communication is a very common feature of language classrooms. Often it occurs because students compete to express their opinions or understanding or do not know a particular word or phrase or do not know how to express what he/she want with appropriate language. To pre-empt disorder or breakdown, it is the role of the teacher to intervene and control the turn taking or feed in the missing language. Timing and sensitivity to student needs are of utmost importance and many teachers intervene too often or too early or totally dominate the interaction (as shown in Excerpt 2 below). Scaffolding involves more than simply error correction or getting the message clear. It requires the ability to listen actively and make economical use of language. The examples in this excerpt illustrate this important practice very well. When the teacher asks an open question to the whole class, I would like to tell you... (in Turn 12 indicated as [ ] ) occur in the same turn, where different opinions are offered. If it is a small group discussion, it would be not conducive for the teacher to intervene, but in a classroom of 40 students, it will be very likely for the ‘overlapped utterances’ to turn into disorder. So the teacher quickly intervenes and models the turn-taking by asking students to raise their hands for
their turn. The teacher’s nomination of turn succeeds in maintaining the interaction order and at the same time engaging students, promoting longer, more complex turns.

Throughout much of the Excerpt, there is clear evidence that the teacher’s turn control, language use and pedagogic purpose are appropriately integrated; and the teacher’s stated goal of promoting text comprehension is consistent with her use of language and turn control strategy. Although she always controls the turn-taking, her verbal behavior allows students to engage in a sustained discourse, producing more complete, more natural responses. As far as the student contributions are concerned, it is evident from this Excerpt that students and teacher are actively engaged in constructing a piece of discourse which, in many respects, resembles an adult and children conversation. This observation again coincides with the teacher’s pedagogic goal and reaffirms the need for further weight to the coincidence of IRF and pedagogic purpose. It is not our suggestion that this teacher is in any way “better” than the one in the following Excerpt 2 to be analyzed in the next section. What is striking from Excerpt 1 is that the context of the classroom is well organized where the teacher constructs understanding of the task at hand with students and the teacher’s control is well in tune with her teaching purpose and language use. What is more important is the appropriacy of language used in relation to the context of the moment and task in hand.

**Obstruction: reducing learning opportunities**

In the discussion that follows, we present a context in which language use and pedagogic purpose do not coincide and attempt to suggest reasons for this occurring. On the surface, what follows resembles the IRE sequences we discussed earlier, but upon close inspection, we find fundamental differences. In the excerpt that follows, there is clear evidence that the teacher, by maintaining knowledge authority, by asking questions but refusing to acknowledge student contributions, and by not tolerating wait-time, prohibits involvement and language use on the part of the students, leading to very limited learning opportunities for students.

**Excerpt 2**

*(There are totally 38 students in this class. At the very beginning of this observed unit, the teacher has a quick check verbally on who did not do their homework by asking students to raise their hands and asks the students to hand in their homework. After the students hand in their homework, the teacher starts the new unit in the following way. All the names are pseudonyms.)*

1. 老师：%好，今天呢，老师要讲一篇新的课文。同学们请把课文的题目讲一遍。
   T: ((4sec)) Well, today (…) Teacher (I) will talk about a new text. Students (you) read the title once please.

2. 学生：花医院。
   Ss: Flower Hospital. All the students read the title loudly.

3. 老师：再来一次，一，二，三。
   T: Read it again. One, two, three!

4. 学生：花医院。
   Ss: Flower Hospital. All the students read the title again loudly.

5. 老师：唉，我们都知道，医院是什么地方?
   T: eh, we all know, what is hospital?

6. 学生：医院。
   Ss: Hospital. Several students answer in English.

7. 老师：英文是 Hospital. 那么，你去医院做什么？看电影吗？什么时候你会到医院去?
   T: It is Hospital in English. Then, what are you going to do in hospital? To see a movie? When will you go to a hospital?

8. 学生：=生病=
   S1: =got sick=

9. 老师：=生病的时候啊，你生病的时候，或者呢，你受伤的时候，有紧急事件的时候啊，你都会到医院去。那为什么这间医院那么特别？它前面有一个花字，是不是说这间医院，啊，长满了花草树木？还是这间医院呢，到处都是花?
   T: =when you’ve got sick! When you’ve got sick, or, when you’ve got injured, when there is an emergency, you will go to the hospital. Then why is this hospital special? There is a character ‘flower’: does it mean, oh, there grow a lot of flowers, grass and trees in this hospital? Flowers are everywhere?

10. 学生：=到处是花=
    S2: =Flowers are everywhere=

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There are similarities between this excerpt and the one discussed earlier: both classes are similar in size, composition and level, and the teachers’ aims are more or less the same, focusing on helping students better understand the text before looking into the text and at the same time acquainting students with some new words and idiomatic expressions that students are required to learn through the text in question by the curriculum. Moreover, both excerpts are identified as an initiation phase of a new unit with subsequent listening comprehension of the concerned texts. Yet, there are significant differences in the turn-taking mechanisms, length of student turns and overall quantity and quality of teacher and student contributions. While recognizing that there are some variables to make direct comparison difficult – teacher beliefs and teaching styles, different texts in terms of content (the former is a traditional Chinese folk story about morality while the latter is a modern story about a specific choice of language use and turn-taking control which contribute or even determine the different discourse patterns. In particular, we would argue that the teacher’s choices of language use and turn-taking control in Excerpt 2 restricts student involvement and obstructs learning opportunities for students.

One of the striking features of the excerpt is the tight turn control structure and the impoverished evaluation or confirmation. Different from the IRFs in Excerpt 1 where the students provide comparatively longer responses and the teacher repeats or elaborates on student responses and further probes students’ understandings by asking additional questions, in this excerpt, the teacher seems to ask questions without particular pedagogic purpose and very often to ignore student contributions. The many examples (Turns, 9, 11, 13, 15) of latching (indicated by =) in this excerpt indicate that this teacher virtually does not permit students to offer longer contributions and worse still her latched turns give no confirmations or evaluations to the student responses or contributions. Her many initiations seem to be rhetorical questions rather than elicitations, merely smoothing over the discourse in an effort to advance her monologue-oriented interaction. In other words, the teacher’s questions are mysterious rather than scaffolding to the students. There are several students who offer seemingly appropriate responses or responses which could be used at least for further negotiation of the meaning or pedagogic task at hand (e.g., Turns, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16), but the teacher gives neither acknowledgements nor builds upon them to probe student further understanding. Instead, she moves on to ask another similar question. Therefore, we assume that she may be doing the student a disservice as there is no negotiation of meaning, no clarification, no confirmation checks. There is a sense of the student being dragged in the turns instead of being allowed enough time and space to formulate his/her understanding.

As shown in Excerpt 2, by not attending to the student responses that underlie question-answer adjacency pairs, the teacher suppresses student learning opportunity. In Excerpt 2 students responses (Turns 8,
10, 12, 16, 18) evidently constitute interactional spaces for the negotiation of what to learn in the next moment (the text) where flower gardens are a key concept and illnesses are treated with flower fragrances, but they receive no uptake from the teacher for engagement. For example, in Turn 10, Student 3 offers a relevant and also an appropriate response (=到处是花=) to the teacher’s question (还是这间医院呢，到处都是花?), but receives no uptake from the teacher (11). Instead, she interrupts the student’ turn and explicitly asks another question on the same topic (=还是它的医院的名字是花?), a question that the student already denies. Ignoring this student contribution, she directs her question to the whole class to answer it. When another student attempts to answer in the next turn (12, =是医院的花=) which again structurally requires a confirmation in the immediate next turn, but the teacher does not explicitly acknowledges it either, as if Students 3 and 4 have never answered her questions. In other words, in Students 3 and 4’s speaking turns after the teacher’s questions, there is no indication that this stretch of interaction is disjunctive. By not providing confirmations or acknowledgements to the students’ turns, the teacher in effect interactionally deletes the students’ involvement. In so doing, we would argue, the teacher effectively stops the students’ pursuit of the topic concerning different kinds of interpretations and may lead the class to giving up their contributions.

Another striking feature of this excerpt is that the teacher’s stated goal of promoting text comprehension is inconsistent with her use of language and turn control strategy. Although she asks a series of questions which seems relevant to the text (A Flower Hospital), her turn control strategy does not allow students to engage in a sustained discourse where the main theme of the text or the background knowledge of it could be negotiated. As far as the student contributions are concerned, it is evident from this Excerpt that students are deprived from constructing a piece of discourse conducive to learning. This observation again contradicts the teacher’s pedagogic goal for helping students better understand the text in the next moment of learning. Without appropriate evaluation, acknowledgement or reformulation of students’ responses, the teacher’s questions appear to lead to nowhere, mysterious to the students rather than facilitating any understanding of the text in hand. Therefore, we would argue that the teacher’s language use and turn-taking control is not ‘in tune’ with her pedagogic aim as the interaction unfolds. Throughout this excerpt, the dominant turn control, frequent latches, and lack of acknowledgement of students’ contribution are all features which are totally different from those of naturally occurring conversation and do not serve the pedagogic purpose. The point we wish to make here is not whether it is right or wrong for the teacher not to attend to the student’s contributions, but rather that the teacher’s acknowledgements or confirmations can be powerful resources for the teacher to use in shaping students’ participation and performance in class. In addition, appropriate acknowledgements, elaboration or simple repetition of students’ contributions can lead to a highly interactive quality (as shown in Excerpt 1) when examined in the context of what the teacher and the students do jointly and sequentially. In fact, by building on students’ responses, teachers may invite students collaboratively to negotiate the meaning. Specifically important is that the teacher gives student enough wait-time in order to achieve sustained student production of an utterance. In so doing, he or she may invite and coordinate more meaningful interactions by the class as a whole.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, current pedagogic discourse in Singapore calls for a learner centred orientation in Chinese language classrooms. This is generally interpreted as a call for group work and project work in their classrooms, because it is believed that peer interactions provide scaffolding for student learning and opportunities for negotiation of meaning (e.g., Nystrand, 1997; Westgate & Hughes, 1997). In this paper we examine scaffolding from a different perspective. The analyses of IRFs in teacher fronted instruction show that teachers can provide or not provide scaffolding for student learning. We argue that whether scaffolding is provided for students largely depend on how teachers appropriate their language use, turn-taking strategies and the third part of IRF (e.g., feedback, acknowledgement or elaboration).

As shown in the above analyses, there are at least two versions (of course may be more) of IRF pattern that are used and that the versions produce qualitatively different language learning opportunities for students in Chinese language classrooms. The fundamental difference lies in the part of follow-ups to student contributions. In the IRF pattern of Excerpt 1, the teacher values student contributions by providing acknowledgements, reformulations, elaboration or enough wait-time. This promotes student involvement and creates effective language learning opportunities. On the contrary, the IRF pattern (as shown in Excerpt 2) looks similar to Excerpt 1 on the surface, but the teacher does not recognize student contributions and uses this pattern merely to facilitate teacher control rather than student learning of the content of the lesson. Therefore, it is the teacher not the IRF pattern that serves as gatekeeper to learning opportunities.

If we consider language learning as an active process of problem-solving, a process in which students explore ways to understand certain topic or theme; students experiment with new words and sentence patterns; and teachers evaluate student comprehension of certain propositions with the co-construction of the teacher, then the teacher-directed interactions described (as in Excerpt 1) are not merely teaching activities. They are
also learning opportunities. Consequently, improving the quality of these teacher-directed interactions would mean qualitatively enhancing opportunities for language learning.

From a pedagogic perspective, the study reported in this paper show how the teacher-directed interaction can provide scaffolding for or prohibit student learning, thus helping Chinese language teachers and supervisors with a better understanding of Chinese language classroom interactions. On a theoretical level, it is hoped that this study can contribute to further research by providing insight into how the teacher fronted interaction can be analyzed and studied from a social constructivist perspective. In doing so, we can find more effective ways or classroom interactional patterns to improve Chinese language instruction in Singapore or elsewhere in the world.

References

Appendix: Transcription system
The transcription system used in English translation is adapted from the CRPP transcribing convention.
Language (Chinese version) has not been corrected, the aim being to represent the exchanges as they occurred in the classroom.
T: teacher
S: student (not identified)
S1: S2: etc. identified student
Ss: several students at once or the whole class
[do you understand?] [I see] overlap between teacher and student
= turn continues, or one turn follows another without any pause.
(. . .) pause of one second or less marked by three periods.
(4 sec) silence; length given in seconds
((4 sec)) a stretch of unintelligible speech with the length given in seconds
Yang Rao, Xinran, et al. capitals are used for proper nouns
? rising intonation, not necessarily a question
! indicates that a word is given extra stress
T organizes groups transcriber’s comments (in bold type)