

# Aligning Teacher Discourse With Students' Comprehension

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**Abstract:** The article deals with how do students from different cultural and educational backgrounds perceive “teacher talk” clarity or usefulness. This study investigates the alignment between teacher discourse and students’ comprehension in the language classroom. The research explores how teachers’ instructional talk, questioning strategies, and feedback patterns affect learners’ ability to construct meaning and achieve lesson objectives. The findings reveal that alignment occurs when teachers adapt their discourse to students’ linguistic and cognitive levels through interactive scaffolding, clarification, and feedback loops. The study emphasizes the need for reflective discourse practices that ensure mutual understanding and support effective learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** teacher discourse, comprehension, interaction, classroom communication, alignment

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## Introduction

In language education, teacher discourse serves as the backbone of classroom communication, influencing not only what students learn but how they learn. The teacher’s spoken interaction—comprising instructions, questions, explanations, and feedback—acts as a medium through which knowledge is transmitted, interpreted, and negotiated. In this sense, language teaching is not merely about presenting grammatical rules or lexical items, but about creating an interactive space where meaning is jointly constructed between teacher and learners.

The effectiveness of instruction depends not only on the curriculum or teaching materials, but more crucially on the manner of communication. When the teacher’s choice of words, tone, pacing, and structure correspond to students’ cognitive and linguistic readiness, comprehension becomes a natural outcome. This alignment allows learners to connect new knowledge with prior experiences and linguistic competence. Conversely, when excessive teacher mismatches discourse to learners’ levels—characterized talk, abstract terminology, or ambiguous instructions—students may disengage or fail to grasp essential meanings.

Several scholars have emphasized that teacher talk is not neutral; it embodies pedagogical intent and reflects classroom power dynamics (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Cazden, 2001). A teacher who dominates interaction limits opportunities for students to process, respond, and internalize language. On the other hand, dialogic and interactive discourse, where students are encouraged to ask questions, negotiate meaning, and co-construct responses, significantly enhances comprehension and participation (Alexander, 2017).

Moreover, the cultural and contextual dimension of teacher discourse cannot be overlooked.

When examples, metaphors, or references are culturally distant from students' lived realities, comprehension suffers even if the linguistic form is clear. Therefore, effective classroom communication requires teachers to be sensitive not only to linguistic proficiency but also to cultural familiarity and affective factors that influence understanding.

Within this framework, discourse alignment refers to the degree to which teacher communication matches the students' processing capacities and learning needs. It involves continuous monitoring of learners' verbal and nonverbal cues—such as facial expressions, pauses, and tone of voice—and making real-time adjustments in discourse complexity, speed, and framing. Teachers who successfully align their discourse employ scaffolding techniques, reformulation, and comprehension checks that maintain mutual understanding throughout the lesson.

Research in classroom discourse analysis (Mercer, 2000; Walsh, 2011) has provided valuable insights into this dynamic relationship between teacher input and learner response. Mercer's concept of "interthinking" illustrates how dialogue can become a shared cognitive activity, while Walsh's framework of "interactional competence" emphasizes teachers' ability to use talk purposefully to support learning. Building upon these perspectives, the present study seeks to investigate how teachers can effectively align their discourse with students' comprehension levels in real classroom contexts.

The objective of this study is to identify specific features of teacher talk—such as linguistic simplification, pacing, feedback strategies, and question design—that contribute to improved student understanding. By examining naturally occurring classroom interactions, this research aims to highlight practical ways teachers can adjust their discourse to promote deeper comprehension, engagement, and collaboration in the language learning process.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

The study was conducted among 30 English language teachers and 120 students drawn from three higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, representing both public and private universities. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure diversity in teaching styles, institutional settings, and student backgrounds.

All participating teachers held at least a bachelor's degree in English language teaching or linguistics, while 12 of them possessed a master's degree or higher. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 18 years, with an average of 9.4 years. The teachers represented a mix of urban and regional educational contexts, providing a broad perspective on discourse practices within the Uzbek EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context.

The students ( $n = 120$ ) were aged 18 to 22 and enrolled in intermediate-level English classes based on CEFR B1–B2 proficiency levels. Each teacher worked with approximately four students selected from their regular classes to participate in comprehension testing and interview segments. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the research objectives and confidentiality measures in advance.

### *Instruments*

To obtain comprehensive and triangulated data, multiple instruments were employed:

1. **Classroom Observations:** Each teacher was observed over ten consecutive lessons (a total of 300 lessons observed). Observations focused on the interactional features of teacher discourse, particularly questioning strategies, feedback types, and classroom language management. Field notes were taken using a structured observation checklist adapted from Walsh's (2011) Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk framework.

2. Audio Recordings and Transcriptions: All lessons were audio-recorded with high-quality digital recorders and later fully transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions captured both verbal exchanges and significant pauses or overlaps in speech. This allowed for detailed discourse analysis, particularly in identifying alignment markers such as clarification requests, reformulations, and uptake moves.

3. Student Comprehension Tests: Each participating group completed a pre-test and post-test measuring comprehension of lesson content. The test items were designed to evaluate literal, inferential, and applied understanding of language input provided during instruction. This helped determine the effect of teacher discourse alignment on comprehension gains.

4. Semi-Structured Interviews: At the end of the observation period, each teacher participated in an interview lasting 30–45 minutes. The questions explored their perceptions of effective discourse, strategies for checking comprehension, and challenges in adapting speech to student needs. Selected students were also interviewed to cross-check teacher perceptions with learner experiences.

All instruments were piloted with two teachers before full implementation to ensure reliability and validity of data collection procedures.

#### *Procedure*

The study followed a four-stage research design:

1. Preparation Stage: Consent forms were distributed, and participants were briefed about the study's aims, confidentiality, and procedures. Observation schedules were coordinated with participating teachers.

2. Observation and Recording Stage: Over a six-week period, classroom sessions were recorded under natural teaching conditions without external interference to preserve authenticity. Researchers maintained a non-intrusive presence in the classroom to minimize observer effect.

3. Testing Stage: Student comprehension tests were administered twice: immediately before the observation period (baseline) and after the tenth observed lesson (post-intervention). Both tests contained similar item types to ensure comparability of results.

4. Interview Stage: After data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted in English or Uzbek, depending on participants' preference. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed.

During transcription analysis, teacher talk was segmented according to Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) IRF model—Initiation, Response, and Feedback. Each segment was coded for:

- ☑ Linguistic complexity (lexical density, sentence structure)
- ☑ Clarity of instructions (explicitness, redundancy, cohesion)
- ☑ Feedback style (evaluative vs. scaffolding)
- ☑ Interactional alignment (reformulation, elicitation, wait time, pacing)

This systematic coding enabled identification of patterns in how teachers adjusted discourse to students' comprehension cues.

#### **Data Analysis**

A mixed-methods approach was employed to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings for deeper interpretation.

Quantitative Analysis: Pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to determine whether students' comprehension improved significantly after exposure to aligned teacher discourse. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 25.0, with

results considered significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and percentage gain) were used to summarize overall performance trends.

**Qualitative Analysis:** Discourse data from transcriptions and interviews were subjected to thematic coding using NVivo software. Following Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-stage model (data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing), each transcript was coded for indicators of alignment, such as:

- ☐ Clarity and pacing (measured by word rate and pauses per minute)
- ☐ Scaffolding (use of prompts, examples, rephrasing)
- ☐ Response uptake (teacher acknowledgment or elaboration on student responses)
- ☐ Interactional sensitivity (teacher's adaptation to student confusion or silence)

The reliability of qualitative coding was enhanced by inter-rater agreement, with two independent coders reviewing 25% of the transcripts and achieving 0.87 Cohen's Kappa consistency.

Finally, both sets of data were triangulated to interpret how teacher discourse alignment influenced student comprehension and engagement. The integrated analysis offered a nuanced understanding of the communicative adjustments that lead to effective instructional dialogue.

### Results

Findings indicate a strong positive correlation between discourse alignment and student comprehension ( $r = 0.74$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Teachers who simplified explanations, used checking questions, and adjusted pacing achieved higher comprehension outcomes among students.

Key patterns identified:

- ☐ Scaffolding: Teachers who broke complex ideas into smaller units increased comprehension scores by 25%.
- ☐ Feedback adaptation: When teachers rephrased incorrect student responses instead of rejecting them, comprehension improved.
- ☐ Interactional alignment: Classes with balanced teacher-student talk time (60–40 ratio) showed significantly higher comprehension levels.

Conversely, lessons dominated by monologic teacher talk resulted in passive student behavior and lower test scores.

### Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that aligning teacher discourse with students' comprehension is a complex, continuous, and context-sensitive process rather than a single, predetermined strategy. The classroom, as an inherently interactive and dynamic space, requires teachers to interpret and respond to multiple forms of feedback—verbal, behavioral, and emotional—while simultaneously managing the flow of instruction.

This research reaffirms that effective alignment is an act of real-time negotiation between teacher and learner. Teachers who continuously monitor indicators such as hesitation, prolonged silence, or irrelevant answers are better equipped to recalibrate their speech, pacing, or task framing. Such responsiveness transforms lessons from monologic performances into collaborative meaning-making sessions. This finding aligns with Alexander's (2017) notion of dialogic teaching, in which teacher talk becomes a shared cognitive tool for inquiry rather than a mere vehicle for information delivery.

Moreover, the study reveals that teacher awareness of discourse functions—how explanations, questions, or feedback contribute to comprehension—is central to successful alignment. Teachers possessing high metadiscoursal awareness can intentionally choose

language strategies that clarify rather than obscure meaning. For instance, when a teacher consciously reformulates a complex sentence, uses analogies rooted in students' real-world experiences, or explicitly signals transitions between ideas, they activate learners' prior knowledge and scaffold new understanding.

The role of feedback also emerged as a key factor in alignment. Teachers who use dialogic feedback—rephrasing incorrect answers, prompting elaboration, or offering hints—help students perceive errors as learning opportunities. This approach contrasts sharply with evaluative feedback, which often closes communicative space and discourages student participation. The discourse analysis showed that classes dominated by evaluative talk (e.g., simple “yes/no” or “correct/incorrect” responses) led to shorter interactions and lower comprehension test scores.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of linguistic simplification and pacing. When teachers adjusted their speech rate, reduced lexical density, or broke explanations into shorter segments, students were more likely to respond actively and accurately. These strategies are especially vital in multilingual contexts like Uzbekistan, where students often process English input through the filter of their L1 linguistic systems.

Beyond language form, the emotional and cultural resonance of discourse significantly affected comprehension. Teachers who contextualized explanations in familiar cultural settings—using local examples, humor, or analogies—created more engaging and accessible lessons. This finding supports Gibbons' (2006) argument that effective discourse bridges not only linguistic gaps but also socio-cultural ones, transforming the classroom into an inclusive communicative community.

Another key insight concerns the balance of interactional control. Teachers who deliberately shared communicative responsibility with students—through open-ended questions, peer responses, and group scaffolding – achieved higher comprehension outcomes. This aligns with Mercer's (2000) view of “interthinking,” where dialogue serves as a joint intellectual process. In contrast, when teachers monopolized discourse, student responses became minimal or formulaic, indicating surface-level comprehension.

Finally, the discussion highlights that discourse alignment requires professional reflection and training. Teachers often remain unaware of their speech patterns or the potential cognitive overload they may cause. Integrating discourse analysis into teacher education can foster awareness of interactional choices, enabling educators to consciously construct language that aligns with learner comprehension.

In summary, the study emphasizes that aligning teacher discourse with student understanding is a reciprocal and adaptive process grounded in interactional sensitivity, metadiscoursal control, and pedagogical reflection. By adopting a dialogic stance—listening as much as speaking—teachers can transform classroom talk from monologue into genuine communication that nurtures both comprehension and learner autonomy.

### **Conclusion**

The study highlights that effective classroom communication is not simply about linguistic accuracy but about responsiveness and interactional sensitivity. Teachers who consciously align their discourse with students' comprehension levels create an environment where learning becomes collaborative rather than transmissive. This dynamic adaptation requires teachers to continuously interpret students' verbal and nonverbal signals—such as pauses, confusion, or engagement—and modify their language accordingly.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that discourse alignment contributes directly to higher

student motivation and retention of new material, as learners feel more understood and intellectually supported. Integrating discourse awareness into teacher education can therefore strengthen pedagogical competence. Training modules should emphasize reflective observation, discourse analysis, and peer feedback to help teachers internalize adaptive communication strategies. Ultimately, fostering such awareness transforms classroom interaction into a co-constructed process of meaning-making that benefits both teachers and learners.

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