A Socio-Cultural Study of Pedagogical Practices inside Syrian EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper reports on an exploratory study that explores the instructional patterns within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) secondary school classrooms in Syria. Recently, the Syrian Ministry of Education (MoE) has introduced a new national curriculum which recommends a shift in EFL teachers' instructional practices. Despite this costly innovation, there has been no attempt to check whether it was working. Adopting a socio-cultural perspective on learning, the study looks at teacher-student interaction and the discourse taking place during teacher-fronted whole class talk. To help in the identification of teachers' training needs, teacher beliefs and classroom practices are investigated using a mixed-methods approach comprising classroom observations and interviews. Detailed discourse analysis revealed a traditional teacher-controlled mode of teaching focusing on mechanical practices rather than meaningful interactions. Students were afforded few opportunities to participate meaningfully in classroom interactions, as teachers controlled the topics of academic learning. The study highlights the need to invest in teachers' professional development, particularly during the critical phase of curriculum innovation, to promote interactive and dialogic teaching in the Syrian educational system.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the Syrian MoE has gradually begun to update the English language provision by introducing a new national curriculum which recommends a shift in EFL teachers' instructional practices. It took the MoE around 8 years to fully adopt the new curriculum starting from year 1 upwards. The new curriculum is called *English for Starters* and it recommends a shift in EFL teachers' instructional practices away from being teacher-centered, towards more student-centered approaches. The curriculum guidelines suggest that, the appropriate and effective implementation of language-based activities cannot be achieved unless student engagement and active participation are established. Under the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) oriented curriculum, teachers are recommended to break away from being knowledge transmitters in favor of adopting the role of a facilitator (Savignon, 2007).

As a result of the introduction of the new curriculum, the professional development of the Syrian EFL secondary teachers has received more attention. British teacher trainers have, for example, been invited to train and help teachers deliver the new curriculum. Disjointed one-off training workshops were organized for selected EFL teachers to attend in one of the teacher training centers that are spread throughout the country. After a few years of implementation of the curriculum, there was a need to see whether there was any significant change in teachers' pedagogical practices. Also, personal observation suggested that, the instructional approaches of many Syrian EFL teachers in secondary schools are still teacher-centered, even though teachers claim that they are adopting student-centered approaches. Because the policy for secondary English teaching in Syria has been built on anecdotal, unsystematic evidence, there is a need to conduct empirical research to inform Syrian policy on educational reforms.

Taking a socio-cultural approach to language teaching and learning, the present study positions teachers at the core of the teaching and learning process, in which knowledge is co-constructed between students and teachers. The driving force for this study emerges from the fact that the first step to providing professional training for teachers begins by identifying their current classroom practices through empirical research. Hence, teacher-student interaction is central to this study as a lens for exploring whether there is a mismatch between the guidelines of a newly-adopted national curriculum and teacher beliefs and pedagogical practices in the classroom. International research into classroom processes recognizes that, managing the quality of teacher-pupil interaction is one of the most important factors in improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in contexts where learning resources and teacher training are limited (Alexander, 2008; Hardman et al., 2015). It, therefore, suggests that, intervening at the school and classroom level through school-based in-service education and training will be crucial in raising the quality of teaching and learning in Syrian secondary English teaching. Ultimately, educational quality is obtained through pedagogical processes in the classroom: through the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and commitments of the teachers in whose care students are entrusted (Hardman & Abd-Kadir, 2011).

Given the centrality of the teacher's role, there is a need to know more about what teachers actually do in the classroom when charged with implementing a curriculum innovation (CI), on what basis they resist or accept it, and the extent to which they see themselves as agents of change (Carless, 2001). Fullan (1991) echoes the centrality of the teacher in raising the quality of education when he states, "educational change depends on what teachers do and think, it's as simple and complex as that" (p. 117). With the paucity of systematic empirical studies to the pedagogical practices prevailing in the Syrian EFL classrooms, this study can be a baseline that will provide a rich evidence base needed for the making of the development of educational policy in EFL teaching in the country and other similar contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework is built on the interplay and integration of several discourses such as curriculum innovation, effective teaching, classroom interaction, and teacher professional development. The

following discussion will touch on these areas in some detail.

2.1. Curriculum Innovation

Markee (1997) defines CI as "a managed process of development whose principal products are teaching-testing materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values that are perceived as new by potential adopters" (p. 46). He views CI as a qualitative change not only in pedagogical values, but also in the materials and approaches used by teachers. As a process, CI goes through different stages of an overlapping progression. For example, Fullan (2013) differentiates between three stages of the CI process, namely adoption (i.e., approving CI), implementation (i.e., putting it into effect), and institutionalization (i.e., integrating it within the educational system). Given the context of the present study, the 'implementation stage' will be the focus of the study as the MoE is in the process of implementing it.

As with any educational process, the implementation of a CI is often challenged by a number of obstacles and barriers. Three major barriers are identified and discussed in the literature. The first one is the *psychological* barriers which refer to the human tendency for stability and the need for security, and people's resistance to change or modify their beliefs, values, and established routines (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Schumann, 1994). The second barrier is the teachers' *attitudes and beliefs* which are mostly influenced by the values and philosophy of the educational system of which the teacher is a part. Finally, there are the *educational-cultural* obstacles defined as "the way we do things and relate to each other around us" (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992, p. 83). Although the implementation of a CI is often faced with several barriers, there are a number of generally applicable factors that facilitate and accelerate its implementation. These factors include good communication amongst stakeholders, positive teacher attitudes, the practicality of a CI, sufficient resources, and most importantly the quality of in-service training (INSET).

A number of studies have examined CI in EFL contexts (e.g., Al-Khwaiter, 2001; Chang, 2011; Lahlali, 2003; Vaish, 2008). The majority of accounts have recognized the obstacles that EFL countries face in adopting teacher-centered approaches. These studies found that, the absence of INSET and inadequate learning resources contributed significantly to the overall poor pedagogical practices. It was also found that, there was little variation in whole class teacher-pupil interaction across the three subjects. In the Syrian classroom, however, there is no empirical evidence to prove or disprove the existence of such pattern, hence the need for the current study cannot be more emphasized.

2.2. Effective Teaching

Research suggests that, the successful implementation of a CI in a given context will help to raise the *quality* of learning and teaching (Fullan, 1991; Markee, 1997). However, several studies conducted in contexts similar to Syria revealed one common finding: changing or reforming the curriculum in a country cannot by itself bring about educational innovation (e.g., Chang, 2011; Vaish, 2008). From a pedagogical perspective, achieving the quality in the Syrian EFL classrooms requires more than introducing a new national curriculum and leaving it to the teachers to apply it. Rather, the curriculum is one amongst many factors that can bring about improvements in student's achievement, attainment, engagement, and motivation. To this end, Stones (1994) argues that, the departure point for achieving quality is through examining the pedagogical processes that happen inside the classroom. This necessarily leads to the question of how *quality* education is defined.

Although predominantly Eurocentric in nature, most previous studies on effective teaching have highlighted the importance of interactive teaching. For example, Muijs and Reynolds (2001) view effective teaching through the lenses of direct instruction in which interactive teaching and classroom management are at the core. Likewise, Hardman, Abd-Kadir, and Smith (2008) identified effective teaching to be interactive, encouraging, expecting, and extending pupils' contributions, arguing that, what ultimately matters for enhancing the quality of education is the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom.

However, classroom observational research from many parts of the world has revealed the following picture: "classrooms are full of talk, but [there is] little collaborative talk between learners" (Lyle, 2008, p. 225).

In EFL classroom contexts, many researchers believe that, effective teachers are those who give their students the floor to speak in the target language by using a language that facilitates students' output (Cullen, 1998; Mackey, McDonough, Fujii, & Tatsumi, 2001; Mercer, 2010). Instead of dominating the verbal utterances in the classroom depriving students of opportunities to speak, a good teacher should allow his/her students to participate in conversations and initiate topics for discussion (Nikel & Lowe, 2009). Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, and Prendergast (1997) summarize the issue by stating that: "ultimately the effectiveness of instructional discourse is a matter of the quality of teacher-student interactions and the extent to which students are assigned challenging and serious epistemic roles requiring them to think, interpret, and generate new understandings" (p. 6). In the same vein, Walsh (2006, 2002) argues that, teachers' awareness of their use of the target language inside the classroom is crucial in achieving quality in the EFL classroom. He suggests that, teachers can improve both the quantity and quality of learners' output by more careful language use and by understanding the nature of classroom discourse.

2.3. Classroom Interaction

The importance of interaction in learning finds its basis in the Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) which views learning as a social activity mediated through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Within SCT, it is interaction that lies at the core of learning, and it is the formal or informal instruction performed by more knowledgeable people that is the main tools of transition of the knowledge of a particular culture. Talk in SCT has three interrelated functions; namely cognitive, social, and pedagogical (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999; Rogoff, 1990; Wells, 1999).

Previous research on CLT has shown that, most EFL and ESL teachers produce

interaction which features examples of the strict IRF cycle (Initiation–Response–Follow-up) with display questions as a typical traditional classroom interaction mode. Such interaction patterns fail to come up with genuine or natural communication (Alexander, 2014; Hardman, 2008; Nunan & Choi, 2009; Nystrand et al., 1997).

O'Sullivan (2006) suggests that, classroom observation can provide illuminating insights into the current state of educational quality in schools as it "leads to the area of teacher thinking, which is also critical to improving quality" (p. 245). Drawing on the importance of classroom observation to identify the quality of teaching, several studies have used classroom observation to measure the quality of teaching inside the classrooms (e.g., Ackers & Hardman, 2001; Moyles, 2003; Nunan, 1991; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2005). Using video clips of lessons selected by the teacher can be a powerful means of promoting critical reflection on professional practice.

It has also been found that, a monologic style of discourse dominates classroom talk between teachers and students. It constitutes up to 60% of the teaching and learning process inside classrooms including EFL (Coulthard & Sinclair, 1992). Research has also revealed that, when teachers interact with students, one kind of talk predominates: the so-called *recitation script* which consists of closed teacher questions, brief student answers, and minimal feedback which requires students to report someone else's thinking, rather than to think for themselves (Hardman & Abd-Kadir, 2011, p. 36).

3.4. Teacher Professional Development

Hardman's (2008) research into professional development of teachers suggests that, monitoring and self-evaluation will need to become a regular part of in-service training so as to give teachers "a degree of ownership of the process of school improvement" (p. 261).

Unlike monologic pedagogies, teacher should be encouraged and trained to use dialogic teaching where they move away from the rigid recitation script in favor of adopting effective questioning and feedback strategies (Hardman

& Abd-Kadir, 2011; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Alexander (2008) identified the essential features of 'dialogic talk' as being collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful.

From this quick review, a number of key points essential to this study emerge of the literature:

- the significance of analysing the teacher's actual pedagogical practices in response to an educational reform;
- the importance of understanding of how teachers' attitudes, past experiences, their pre-service, and in-service training shape their response to an innovation;
- the centrality of classroom interaction in the act of teaching;
- the role of context in determining how teachers' beliefs are translated into practice;
- finally, the necessity of providing a baseline study on the prevailing classroom interaction patterns within Syrian EFL context, given the paucity of empirical research on this matter.

Given the lack of empirical evidence on whole-class teaching in Syria, this study sets out to explore the following research questions:

1. What interactive and discourse practices do Syrian secondary level EFL teachers currently use in their whole class teaching?
2. To what extent do teachers feel equipped to implement interactive approaches in the classroom as advised by the Syrian MoE and the guidelines of the newly adopted national Syrian curriculum?
3. What can be done to address the training needs of Syrian secondary level EFL teachers in order to promote a wider repertoire of interactive and discourse practices in whole class teaching?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

For the classroom observation and interviews, 6 teachers took part in the study working in 3 secondary schools in the District of Homs. All teachers together with their schools were given pseudonyms (e.g., Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Zeta, and Eta). Apart from one teacher, all teachers had a wide experience in teaching English subjects in the Syrian schools with minimum of 4 years. Table 1 provides a breakdown of observed teachers and lessons.

Table 1
Profile of Participating Teachers and Observed Lessons

Teacher	Teaching experience	Secondary school	Grade	Observed lessons
Alpha	28 years	Urban	10	4
Beta	19 years	Urban	10	4
Gamma	21 years	Urban	11	4
Delta	23 years	Rural	10	4
Zeta	3.5 years	Rural	11	4
Eta	5 years	Rural	11	4

3.2. Procedure

In order to fully address the complexity of the research questions, a mixed methods research design using both quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted. This allowed for methodological triangulation to achieve greater validity and reliability in the study. Each of the research methods was designed to be closely

related to the other method to ensure a fully integrated research design with a central focus on classroom processes. Classroom observation together with stimulated recall using critical moments selected by the teachers was identified as the most effective of answering the first research question. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with the observed teachers to explore their beliefs

about their classroom practices and what facilitated and inhibited their teaching of the subject. The second and third questions were investigated through the use of structured interviews.

Classroom observation included video recording of the participating teachers and the analysis of data obtained by means of MacLin and MacLin (2005) Observational Data Coding System (ODCS) transcripts. Observation was preceded and followed by semi-structured interviews which further probed the participating teachers' points of view. An observation protocol was constructed to gather data on the instructional and interactional patterns of EFL teachers in regard with the effectiveness of the implementation of CLT methods in Syrian classrooms. Multi-model observational strategy was applied where the observation of the 4 lessons of each of the 6 teachers over 4 months generating a total of 20 observed lessons. Observations were carried out as the following:

- First session: taking field-notes
- Second session: systematic computerized observation
- Third session: digitally video-audio recorded observation
- Forth session: interviews audio-recorded

3.3. Data Analysis

Systematic observation and discourse analysis

(DA) have been chosen for analyzing the observational data. Taking an advantage of the technological advances in the field of computer-aided observational coding schemes, the study used the ODCS software for collecting and coding the data. Choosing this software was guided by various factors. For example, it is flexible, customizable, free, user-friendly, and Windows-based. Added to this, it can read a variety of media files such as audio-video recorded data. It can also be used in real time while collecting data on field observations (MacLin & MacLin, 2005).

Coulthard and Sinclair (1992) first put forward DA to analyze teacher-pupil talk in the classroom. According to them, the classroom setting is linguistically rich and well-defined. They built on the notion of a teaching exchange consisting of an initiation-response-feedback sequence. They also proposed that, the lesson is the highest unit of classroom discourse. Lessons are made up of a series of transactions and exchanges which in turn have moves that are composed of acts. Seen as the fundamental unit of discourse in the classroom, exchanges are divided into two major classes: boundary exchanges and teaching exchanges (see Table 2 and Appendix 1 for more details). Because it is a well-established, simple-to-use, and comprehensive analysis system, DA was the limelight choice of several studies of language classroom interaction patterns (e.g., Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007).

Table 2
Coulthard and Sinclair's (1992) Adapted System of Analysis

Exchanges		Moves	Acts
Teaching	**Free**	Teacher-Inform (i) Teacher-Elicit (el) Student-Inform (si) Student-Elicit (sel) Teacher-Direct (d) Teacher-Check (chk)	Marker (m) Starter (s) Elicit (el) Inform (info) Direct (d) Reply (rep) Repeat (rpt) Comment (com) Clue (cl) Prompt (p) Aside (z) Loop (l) Nomination (n) Accept (acc)
	Bound	Re-initiation (re-i) Repeat (rpt) Reinforce (reinf) Reading (reading) Listing	

Moves column label: Initiation- Response –Feedback (IRF)

		Metastatement (ms) Conclusion (con)
Boundary	Framing Focusing	Framing (Fr) Focusing (Fs) Raised intonation (^)

4. Results

The study sets out to explore the pedagogical practices of a group of Syrian EFL secondary school teachers by examining the patterns of classroom interaction and discourse in an attempt to provide insights into how teachers can be helped to improve their pedagogical practices though in-service education and training. Teacher-student interactional exchanges were, therefore, analysed to see whether there was any variation in teaching approaches across the whole sample. In addition to the interactional and discourse practices operating in these classrooms and the effects on students' expression and cognition, teacher perceptions of the impact of the new curriculum on classroom practices were explored.

Classroom observation together with stimulated recall using critical moments selected by the teachers was identified as the most effective of answering the first and second research questions. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with the observed teachers to explore their beliefs, about their classroom practices and what facilitated and inhibited their teaching of the subject. The third research question was investigated through the use of structured interviews. The next sections will discuss the findings from the empirical study. These findings will be set within the wider context of research evidence.

4.1. Systematic Observation

This section presents the results of the data collected by the ODCS classroom observation. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the teaching exchanges of the six participating teachers. The overall teaching pattern is marked by teachers' overwhelming predominance of the talk time in the classroom in the form of providing extensive explanations, provoking elicitations, imparting knowledge, and giving directions. As shown in Table 3, teacher informing acts whereby teachers impart information onto students are by far the most frequent occurring exchange. The second most frequently occurring pattern is teacher's elicitation moves often in the form of both cued elicitation and display questions. This shows clearly how teachers monopolized the talk time creating little space for students to take part in the different activities inside the classroom. Another salient feature of teachers' classroom discourse was the giving of disciplinary or managerial directions urging students to 'open the book', 'look at the paragraph', or order the class to be quiet. The less frequently occurring acts and moves were repeating words, re-phrasing a question, or 'checking' that the students had got the right meaning or the translation of a word, phrase, or sentence. Thus, students' informing and elicitation acts did not, metaphorically, outnumber the fingers of the hand.

Table 3
Overall Patterns of Teaching Exchanges for Participants

Teaching exchange	Teacher inform	Teacher elicit	Teacher direct	Student elicit	Student inform	Repeat	Re-initiate	Listing	Check
Total	420	285	129	31	4	24	14	36	43
% score	43	29	13	3	0	2	1	4	4
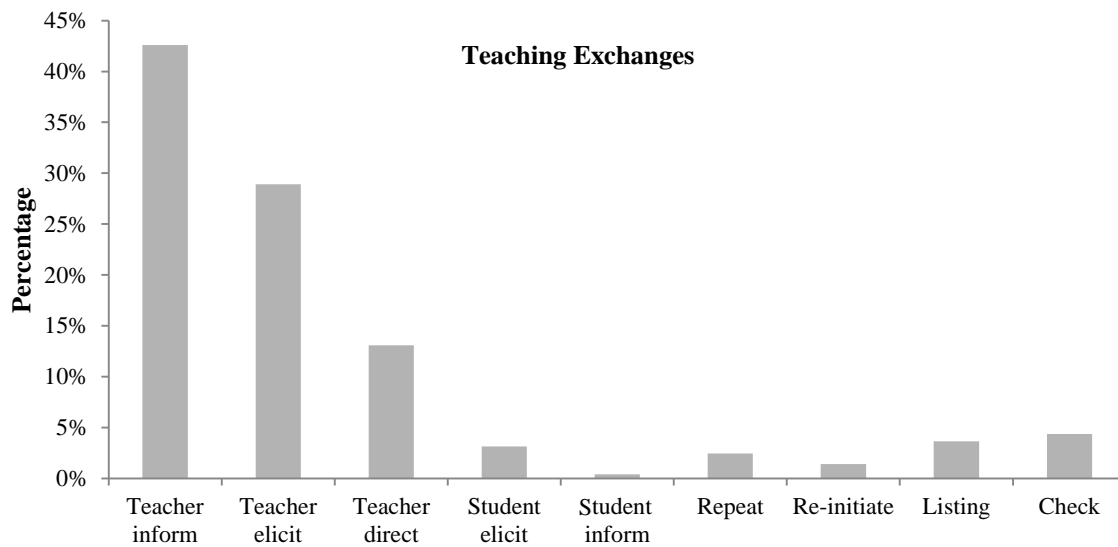
Figure 1
*Patterns of Teaching Exchanges for Participants*

Throughout the sample, teachers' elicitations usually took the form of teacher-led presentations and teacher-controlled question-and-answer exchanges. Therefore, similar teaching styles of all observed teachers have been discerned after analyzing the teaching exchanges. On the other side, students' participation contributed less than 6% of the whole classroom activity. The quality of this contribution, however, was very low both cognitively and linguistically as it usually took the form of checking the translation or re-stating the teacher's exact words and sentences. This finding supports Cazden's (2001) viewpoint that rigid classroom teaching patterns reduce students to passive learners and kill any possible input from them. Although there were slight differences in the teaching practices between the participants (e.g., Teachers Gamma and Beta), teachers largely followed similar patterns.

4.1.1. Questioning Move

The overall results of teachers' questions showed that, the prevalence of classroom dictation and recitation created a poor questioning medium as shown in Figure 2. Teachers' questions were characterized by being largely text-based, short-and-quick, and comprehension-oriented. With a few exceptions, students were hardly asked genuine questions that put high cognitive demand on them. Because the teaching framework for the six teachers was the strict IR/F pattern, the overwhelming majority of teachers' questions were closed where one possible answer was usually pursued. In addition to giving direct questions, teachers used to cue elicitations through raising their intonation at the end of statements. As a result, choral responses were noticeably common in classes. In fact, the systematic observation findings are in tandem with what was found in the questionnaire where the majority of teachers confirmed that the principal purpose behind their classroom questions is to check students' overall comprehension and progress.
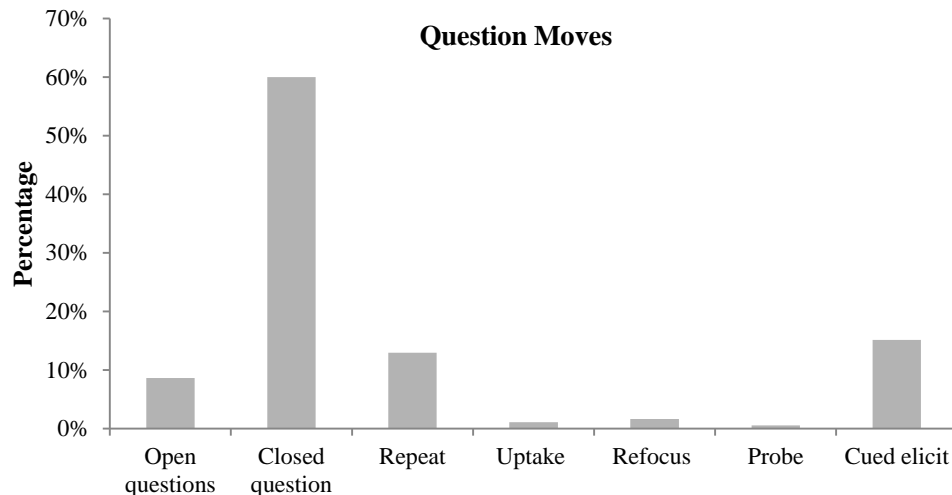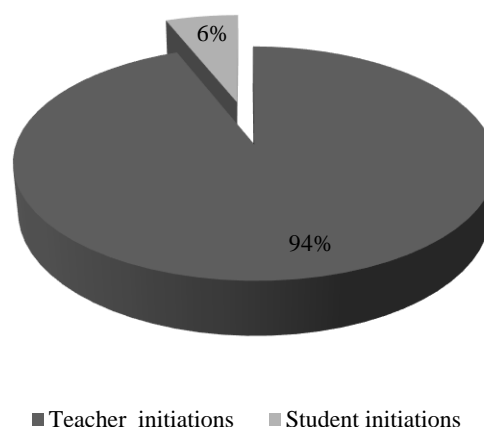
Figure 2
Question Types for Participating Teachers, Aggregated (ODCS)

4.1.2. Initiation Move

The data inputted into the ODCS shows that, teachers' initiation (T-ini) moves overwhelmingly dominated in classrooms. As depicted in Figure 3, 94% of the initiations were made by teachers. The initiations were usually manifested in closed questions, comprehension checks, translation checks, elicitation, explanation, and progression checks. Teachers frequently asked text-based questions with superficial and low cognitive impact. Although closed questions were the most commonly type of initiations used, some teachers used orders and information requests to get the students speaking. Students only contributed to 6% of the overall initiatives. Their responses did not even last for more than a few seconds containing few words where they re-produced the information just given in the class.
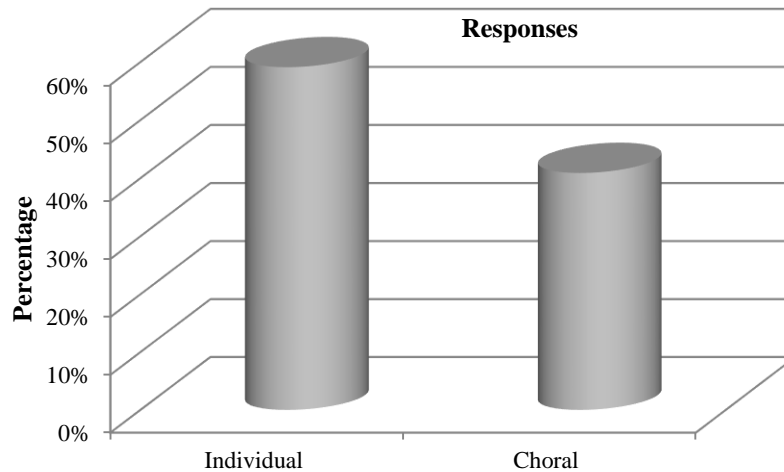

Figure 3
ODCS, Initiation Moves, Aggregated.

4.1.3. Response Move

With the exception of 2 teachers, students' individual responses generally surpassed the choral ones as illustrated in Figure 4. Both Teachers, Zeta and Eta, teach in peripheral areas where students' English proficiency is considerably poorer than those in central areas. More, it was noticed that, in peripheral schools, students usually tended to resort to various avoidance-behavior techniques. For example, they used to repeat the teacher's answer or pretend trying to answer a question. In doing so, they were trying to convince their teacher (and themselves) that 'everything is going well'.
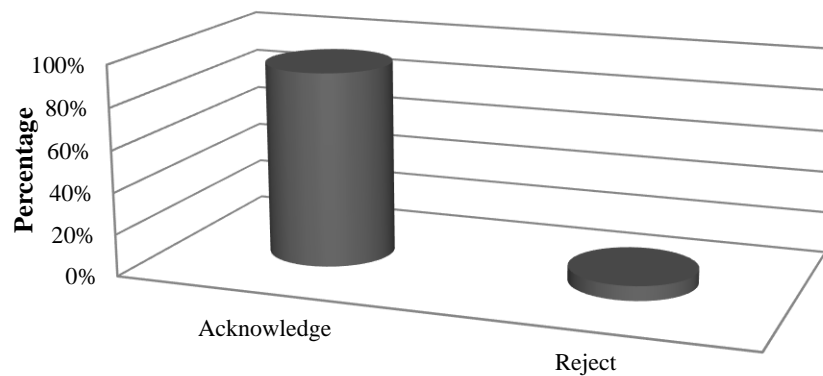

Figure 4
Response Moves, Aggregated

However, in some classes, there were obvious individualistic variations in the students' level of language proficiency. Comparatively speaking, this created a competitive environment inside the class with the more able students attempting to capture the teacher's attention.

4.1.4. Feedback Move

The feedback moves across the whole sample presented a similar picture to what was found in each individual case. That is, the moves of accepting students' answers/responses outnumbered the rejection move as illustrated in Figure 5. Although the percentage of accepting students' answers is very high, it was found that, there was a slight difference between the feedback moves for teachers. In general, teachers used to accept/repeat/ translate a student's answer with some degree of reformulation. The 'reformulation' used to cover mostly the pronunciation and the grammaticality of utterances, i.e., recasts the ill-formed or incomplete utterance (Lyster, 2004; Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

Figure 5
Feedback Moves, Aggregated

4.2. Discourse Analysis

Based on the system of analysis espoused in this study, this section discusses the findings from the empirical study of the individual teachers identifying the overall trends of classroom discourse shared by the study participants. Patterns of teaching exchanges are outlined and discussed. The adopted analysis framework proved useful for analyzing the nature of the teacher-student talk that took place in the lessons.

Across the whole sessions, teacher Alpha's teaching style showed little variation in terms of delivery style. For example, he communicated with the whole class so that students were all working on the same activities at the same time under his tight management. This structure was replicated across the sessions that proceeded the filming session. The analysis of Mr. Alpha's discourse was marked by a heavy use of directive instructional forms of teaching. Turn-taking was strictly framed within the IRF structure. This is typical of directive lessons and is in line with the findings of similar studies in similar contexts (Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 2006; van Hees, 2011; Walsh, 2006). Students' responses were not by any means innovative or belonging to the out-of-the-box answers' pool. This can be seen from the analysis of the following extract taken while Mr. Alpha was speaking on Japanese prints:

Extract 1
Teacher Alpha, EFS Transcript.

Exchange				Moves	Acts
Teaching		T:	*TAYYB** (okay)	I	m
			look at the foreground of the picture		d
			we have the foreground^		el
	2	Ss:	*MUKADDEMEH* (foreground)	R	rep
	3	T:	*EL MUKADEMEH* (the foreground) okay	F	e
			and background of the picture	I	s
			the background is the depth of the picture		s
			OUMK ELSOURA (picture depth)		
	4	T:	Now, what do you see in the background	I	el
	5	S:	Forests	R	rep
	6	Ss:	Trees	R	rep
	7	T:	Yeah	F	e

		and in the foreground^	I	el
8	Ss:	Bridge	R	rep
9	T:	Yes we can see bridge	F	e
10	T:	This is called the Ohashi Bridge in Japan		com
11	T:	Some workers are coming back	I	s
12		from factory or from the fields.		el
		What do you think?	R	el
13	Ss:	Fields	R	rep
14	T:	Yes fields	F	e
		because they are women, children and old men		com
15	T:	They are coming from the fields	I	s
		What fields?		el
		What do they grow?		el
16	Ss:	Rice	R	rep

*words in upper case letters are the originally uttered Arabic words followed by translation in parenthesis.

As shown in Extract 1, there is a strong and clear emphasis on the use of IRF structure throughout the extract. At the core of this structure is the teacher's choice of pedagogical questions. Most questions belong to the closed display questions whose answers are pre-known to the teacher. Such questions demand little cognitive effort from students to give answers to. For example, the questions in turns 4, 7, 12, and 15 substantiate this fact as the teacher attempts to elicit the students' answers using low-order closed questions whose answers are completely text-based. More specifically, turn 7 illustrates how the teacher used to steer his students to get a required answer for his question on 'what is seen in the foreground of the picture?'. For this, he used the cued-elicitation technique where he raised his voice intonation in a bid for students' participation (Hardman & Abd-Kadir, 2011; Mercer, 2010). Few cases of reformulation of the questions were present. For instance, the teacher used to rephrase the question to simplify it to the whole class hoping this will invite more students' participation. Reformulating questions morphologically or syntactically is a common technique that EFL teachers use in order to get the students around the answers especially when following grammar-translation approach (Seedhouse, 1996). The extract also shows that, students' responses are regularly judged, evaluated, and commented on by Mr. Alpha who has the authority to determine what is relevant within his pedagogic map. The teacher in the above extract, in his feedback move, principally relied on the following strategies: response approval, repetition, and translation. However, Mr. Alpha resorted to implicit feedback techniques such as 'recasts' where he implicitly reformulated some of the ill-formed utterances made by his students, mainly pronunciation (Panova & Lyster, 2002). Similar teaching patterns were found in other teachers' classes where teachers listed the new vocabulary of the lesson, recited them chorally with the whole class, and then read the text. While reading the lesson, whenever a new word comes up, reading stops so that the teacher comments on it. Generally, the teacher keeps working within the IRF structure where he asks questions and then accredits students' responses.

Because Mr. Delta was less authoritative in his classes, the patterns of the teaching exchanges were little different from other teachers. That is, the teacher did not consistently work within the IRF framework of interaction with the students. In many places, it was noticed that, the teacher did not comment on the students' responses giving no feedback. However, the teacher controls the discourse by constantly imparting language information to students. Taken altogether, the teacher's use of the IRF format dominates his interactions with the students with the teacher informing and elicits exchanges making up nearly 85% of the whole teaching exchanges in the lesson as this extract reveals:

Extract 2
Teacher Delta, EFS Transcript.

Exchange				Moves	Acts
Teaching					
1	T:	today we'll speak about the library of Alexandria		I	s
		you know Alexandria in Egypt^		I	el
		YA3NEE HEE MADENEH SHA6AEH BE MASER 3ALA BAHE ELMOUTAWASE6 (it is a coastal city in Egypt that looks out on the Mediterranean, very big, very nice city)		R	rep
2	T:	okay			m
		anyone visited Alexandria^		I	el
		nod heads with no		*R*	*rep*
3	T:	nobody^		F	e
		okay neither me			com
		long… long time		I	s
		ago Alexandria had the biggest the largest library in the world			i
4	T:	it was not only library it was also science scientific and learning centre for all sorts of knowledge			i
		clear^			el
		confused but nod heads with yes sign		*R*	*rep*
		In Arabic, teacher asking students about their knowledge of libraries around			
5	T:	who visited a library?		I	el
		anyone visited any library here in Homs or in Syria?			el
		come on			p
6	T:	yes Majed			n
7	S:	*ANA RE7ET 3ALA ELMARKAZ EL THAKAFEE W SHUFT 2ASDEE KREET KUTB HUNEEEK* (I went to Homs Cultural Centre and watched sorry read several books there.)		R	rep

Extract 2 is typical of the teacher's use of the IR as in Turn 2 where the teacher asks if students know anything about the city of Alexandria in Egypt. For this, he gets a complete response in Arabic. The teacher, however, does not acknowledge, comment, or even evaluates the answer. Rather, he moves on to the next question. As a direct result of his use of the IR structure, Mr. Delta feels that, students did not get his message. Therefore, he switches to speak slowly and solely in Arabic explaining that the lesson will be about libraries. His attempt to reflect on students' personal experiences with local libraries seemed more rewarding as some students began to talk about their visits to the local library. At this stage, the interaction patterns took the form of IRF as shown in the exchanges starting with 'Who visited a library,

any library here in Homs or in Syria?'. This resulted in a positive lengthy response from the student though in Arabic language. This indicates that, students can produce more than one or two word response if they are encouraged to by choosing better contextualized information.

5. Discussion

The study set out to explore the pedagogical practices of a group of Syrian EFL secondary school teachers by examining the patterns of classroom interaction and discourse in an attempt to provide insights into how teachers can be helped to improve their pedagogical practices though in-service education and training.

Findings will be discussed next and will be set within the wider context of research evidence as well as the context of the ongoing war in Syria. That is, the research strongly believes that, the traditional pedagogic practices that have been found to be prevailing in Syrian classrooms can be, in part, responsible for what the country is currently witnessing. In other words, teachers inside their classrooms were little 'dictators' and never created a 'democratic' or safe learning environments for their learners to grow as mature citizens. The following discussion sheds more light into the aspects of this culture of teaching and learning.

5.1. Teaching and Learning Relations

With regards to the first research question, the findings revealed that, the teaching mode in the Syrian secondary EFL classroom was marked by a culture of recitation and dictation characterized by authoritarian, memorization-based practices with emphasis on transmission and knowledge-testing. Such a mode of teaching contrasts a growing culture of classroom discussion-oriented learning based on collaboration, innovation, reciprocity, knowledge-construction, and dynamic interaction (Alexander, 2014; Hardman, 2008; Walsh, 2002). The study also found that, teachers were poorly implementing whole-class interactive teaching styles. This can be attributed to the lack of harmony amongst the components of delivery, i.e., teachers' discourse/practice, teacher training programs, teaching materials, the curriculum, and the assessment modes. These elements were found to be not working towards fulfilling the educational goals advised by the Syrian MoE and the guidelines of the new Syrian curriculum.

Teachers' inability to implement interactive teaching practices mostly finds its roots in their lack of the basic, yet, fundamental pedagogical understanding of the importance of the meaningful classroom practices. Teachers also lack other indispensable elements such as solid 'language capabilities' and positive attitudes to the new curriculum. Further, classroom observations showed that, teacher's perceptions mismatched their practices as students were rarely encouraged to ask questions or to talk to each other or even

speak out their minds. These practices contradict the new curriculum guidelines as well as the MoE recommendations that advocate interactive whole class teaching, emphasis on the development of students' communicative competence in English and promote dialogical approach for teaching.

The influence of modes of assessment on teachers' teaching styles was another important finding of the study. Interviews with teachers showed that, they were preoccupied with students' final examinations and that directly impacted and compassed the way they prepared material, presented information, and practiced teaching. Because of the exams structure-focused nature, the teaching styles of teachers were geared towards serving this end. This naturally led to more grammar-centered and teacher-cantered teaching styles while the new guidelines advise that teachers modify their teaching to become more of student-centered. One of these modifications is simplifying the information.

5.2. Interactional and Social Relations

Addressing the first and second research questions, the analysis of the lessons revealed that, the patterns of interaction varied little across the sessions with IRF as the dominant social and participation structure with the IRF structure characterizing teacher-fronted classroom discourse. It was also found that, the teachers' authoritarian traditional teaching activities were responsible for hampering students' opportunities to participate in the class activities and use English language for meaningful and communicative purposes. The class talk time was overwhelmingly managed, controlled, and filled by teachers. Classes were teacher-fronted with teacher information in the form of explanation and elicitation exchanges as the dominant interaction patterns. Teachers used to ask display questions whose answers are known to the teacher and whose cognitive demand on the students is low. The frequency of questions was another interesting side where it has been found that some teachers (e.g., Alpha, Beta, and Eta) used double the amount of questions when compared with other teachers. Such teachers were aware of the fact that questions carry the power of disciplining students and that was why they used to ask many quick short questions to keep

noisy students in check. However, teachers' feedback to students' responses is of low quality and quantity and is ensuing as a direct result to the poor questioning techniques. Speaking about the quality, the teacher feedback was mostly evaluativly marked by the use of short words such as 'good, yes, right, ok'. Also, simplifying language information to students was one of the most recurrent points raised by almost all participants. In other words, a culture of cosseting students' learning dominated lessons through simplifying information. Teachers' overuse and over-reliance on the mother tongue, i.e., Arabic, inside the classroom is one of the prominent findings of the study. With the exception of one teacher, the degree of using Arabic inside other teachers' classes was very high.

5.3. Professional-Training and Contextual Relations

With regards to the third research question which examined how the training needs of teachers can be addressed, an array of contextual considerations came to play when investigating EFL in Syria. For example, the Syrian rigid centralized educational policy-planning left little margins for schools and teachers to work beyond the confines of the prescribed guidelines. It also deprived classes of any attempts by active and creative teachers to design customized materials that suit their students' needs. The classroom big size coupled with hard-to-move seating arrangements contributed to hardening the application of group work techniques that facilitate sharing ideas amongst students. There were also teachers who did not get proper professional development to modify/update their conduit-based of language teaching and learning. The aforementioned factors significantly informed and influenced teacher-student interactions. It has been found that the Syrian MoE did not invest enough in training them on how to teach interactively. Teachers criticized the short ill-designed training program run by the MoE. Some participants, a minority, thought they were both capable and trained enough to fulfill the expectations of the new curriculum. They re-directed the blame to students' low English standards. Therefore, it can be inferred that, the lack of systematic training has led to a sketchy and usually fragmented understanding

of the new CLT-based curriculum. Teachers were reluctant to move away from their *comfort zones* and take the risk of attempting unfamiliar teaching methods.

The examination of the pedagogical practices and the interactional discourse conditions operating in the Syrian EFL secondary school teachers showed that, there is little variation in teaching style across the whole sample. In order for teachers to address these issues, teachers should instill in their students the importance of *using* English language. They can start by creating some opportunities for students to use English in life-like situations through adopting strategies that stimulate students to engage in genuine-like conversations. For instance, students can be asked to contextualize and/or personalize the various textbook activities and then share them with classmates in English using pair/group work techniques. Toprak and Aksoyalp (2015) found positive "correlation between the level of the coursebooks and the types and frequencies of cultural elements" (p. 100). In order for teachers to increase students' output, there should be a conscious selection of open referential questions whose answers are not predictable or pre-known to the teacher. Closed questions used to display knowledge should be reduced to a minimum. The culture of cosseting students learning by simplifying questions or information provided to students should be eliminated in the favor of challenging students' linguistic skills. Modifying the teacher questions and feedback will naturally improve the interactivity between students and teachers. Finally, equipping EFL teachers with the high-quality professional training is the most effective strategy in order to fulfil the goals of an educational reform and to materialize it in practice.

This study, like any other, has its limitations. This concerns the timing of the data collection as the study was carried out a few years after the implementation of the new curriculum and just before the recent crisis that engulfed the country. Follow-up studies are needed to see the developments and changes in Syrian secondary school teachers' perceptions and practices in the light of recent developments in the country.

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Appendix 1

Sinclair and Coulthard's (1992) Adapted Teaching Exchanges

Exchange	Description
Teacher Inform	occurs when the teacher delivers facts, opinions, and information to the students
Teacher Elicit	proposed to get students to produce verbal utterances and say things.
Teacher Direct	happens when the teacher asks students to do something, rather than say it (e.g., 'close the window')
Teacher Check	teacher usually checks the students' progress, their understanding of the point under discussion, (e.g. 'did you get the last point?')
Student Inform	occurs When the student offers relevant information
Re-initiation	occurs when there is no student response to a teacher's elicitation
Listing	occurs when the teacher holds back an evaluation until some more answers are given
Reinforce	happens when the teacher re-explains or re-states something
Repeat	occurs when the teacher asks for the answer to be repeated for some reason or another