

Research Article:

Softening Without Sharing: Teachers’ Speech Acts, Interactional Space and Learner Engagement in Indonesian EFL Classrooms Under the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

Across Asia and the wider Global South, curriculum reforms have asked English teachers to replace teacher-centred instruction with student-centred and dialogic learning, yet research has rarely examined how such reforms are realised in classroom talk. Indonesia’s Merdeka Curriculum, so far studied mainly through perceptions and policy documents, is a timely case. This study examines the speech acts English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers perform, the pragmatic strategies through which they realise them, and the consequences of these choices for learner participation. Nine audio-recorded lessons taught by three EFL teachers in schools implementing the curriculum in Bantaeng Regency, South Sulawesi, were analysed by coding each teacher utterance for speech act type and politeness strategy and each following learner turn for the kind of response it contained. Directives made up nearly half of teacher talk, followed by expressives and representatives, while commissives and declarations were rare. The teachers consistently softened their authority through indirect requests, praise, humour and inclusive language. They seldom, however, handed interactional control to learners: open questions were closed by praise, learners’ questions were answered by the teacher rather than returned to the class, and roles and rewards were decided by the teacher. I conceptualise this pattern as softening without sharing and propose a framework that separates relational mitigation from the redistribution of interactional rights. The study shows that reform can change the tone of classrooms before it changes who takes part, with implications for teacher education and curriculum monitoring.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, English language education across Asia and much of the Global South has been reshaped by a succession of reforms that ask teachers to move away from transmission-oriented instruction towards communicative, student-centred and, more recently, dialogic forms of learning. These reforms have travelled widely, but the evidence on what happens when they reach classrooms is sobering. In China, communicative language teaching met resistance because its assumptions about

the roles of teachers and learners conflicted with long-established educational values (Hu, 2002). In Turkey, teachers implementing a communicative curriculum interpreted it in very different ways, and much of their practice remained closer to transmission than to the interactive teaching the curriculum envisaged (Kirkgöz, 2008). In Singapore, a system with strong policy support for dialogic and student-centred pedagogy, teacher talk in pre-university classrooms was still found to be predominantly monologic and transmissive (Teo, 2016). Meanwhile, large-scale research in the United Kingdom has strengthened the case for reform by showing that classroom dialogue in which students are invited to elaborate, query and build on one another's ideas is associated with better student outcomes (Howe et al., 2019). This work points to a persistent gap between the intentions of reform and the interactional realities of classrooms.

Indonesia is currently one of the largest sites of this kind of change. The Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), introduced in stages since 2022, places learner agency, differentiated instruction and active learning at the centre of schooling and gives teachers considerably more freedom in designing their lessons than earlier curricula did (Rohmah et al., 2024). For English, the reform implies a shift away from the familiar routine in which teachers explain language forms and students practise them, towards lessons in which students use English to interpret texts, express opinions and work collaboratively. Research on the curriculum has grown quickly, but it has concentrated on the conditions and discourses surrounding implementation rather than on implementation itself. Studies have examined the support schools provide for the curriculum (Rohmah et al., 2024), the competences teachers need to lead and sustain it (Kusumawati et al., 2025) and the ideological agenda embedded in its policy texts (Putri, 2026). These studies tell us what teachers and policymakers think about the reform rather than what it looks like in classroom exchanges, a significant omission given the international evidence that reform intentions and classroom talk can diverge sharply.

The Indonesian case is also theoretically important because it brings into view a problem that international research has not resolved. Indonesian classrooms, like many in Asia, operate within strong norms of respect for teachers and well-developed conventions of politeness. When teachers in such settings are asked to adopt a more student-centred pedagogy, one readily available response is to soften their authority through indirect requests, praise, humour and inclusive language. Classroom pragmatics research has often treated this kind of friendly, mitigated style as a sign of learner-centred teaching. Yet politeness theory distinguishes between attending to another person's face and respecting their rights in an interaction, including the right to speak, to decide and to evaluate (Spencer-Oatey, 2002). A classroom can therefore be warm and polite without giving learners any greater share of the talk. Whether the politeness that accompanies reform actually redistributes interactional rights, or merely makes teacher control more comfortable, is a question that neither the Indonesian nor the international literature has examined directly. There is also a normative risk in asking it. Reform discourse often presents dialogic teaching as self-evidently superior, which makes it easy to judge teachers in non-Western settings against imported ideals and to overlook the cultural reasons behind their practice (Hu, 2002). Any credible account of classroom change in Indonesia must therefore be able to identify constraints on learner participation without reducing teachers' practice to a deficit.

Against this background, three gaps can be identified. The first is empirical: there is little interaction-level evidence of how the Merdeka Curriculum is being enacted in

English classrooms, particularly outside the large urban centres where much educational research is conducted. The second is conceptual: research has tended to conflate politeness with participation, so that the softening of teacher authority is read as evidence of its redistribution. The third is methodological: speech act analyses of classroom talk have largely been concerned with identifying and classifying the acts teachers perform, whereas research on classroom interaction shows that the meaning of a teacher's move depends on the sequence in which it occurs and on what it allows learners to do next (Lee, 2007; Waring, 2008). This study addresses these gaps by analysing nine audio-recorded lessons taught by three EFL teachers in schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in Bantaeng Regency, South Sulawesi. It links each teacher speech act to the learner turn that follows, distinguishes between the softening of teacher authority and the sharing of interactional rights, and considers alternative explanations for the patterns found. The study asks what types of speech acts these teachers perform and what functions they serve, what pragmatic strategies they use to realise them, and how these choices open or limit learners' participation in ways that reveal the progress of the shift from teacher-centred to dialogic teaching that the curriculum promotes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech act theory provides the starting point for this study because it treats utterances as actions rather than as vehicles for information. In Searle's widely used taxonomy, representatives assert what is the case, directives attempt to get the hearer to do something, commissives commit the speaker to a future action, expressives convey the speaker's attitudes or feelings, and declarations change an institutional state of affairs by being uttered. Dalton-Puffer (2005) showed how the taxonomy can be applied to naturally occurring classroom talk, finding that the directives produced by teachers and students in content-and-language-integrated classrooms were shaped by their institutional roles, and that the choice between direct and mitigated forms carried interpersonal meaning about the relationship between speakers. At the same time, the framework has limitations that are particularly serious for classroom research. It classifies individual utterances from the speaker's point of view, whereas meaning in classrooms is built across sequences of turns and depends on how each turn is taken up by others. Research on the teacher's third turn in classroom exchanges illustrates the problem well. Lee (2007) showed that the third turn is not a fixed slot for evaluation but a contingent position in which teachers respond to what learners have just done, and Waring (2008) demonstrated that an explicit positive assessment in this position can reward a learner and close the exchange at the same moment. Classroom utterances are also frequently multifunctional, so that a single turn may praise, evaluate and bring a sequence to an end. For this reason, the present study uses speech act categories as a descriptive layer but evaluates each act in terms of its sequential consequences.

The way speech acts are performed is the concern of politeness research, which offers a second set of tools but also its own critical debates. The face-based model of politeness distinguishes positive politeness, through which speakers claim common ground and solidarity by means of praise, humour and inclusive forms such as "let's", from negative politeness, through which they reduce the imposition of a request by means of indirect forms such as "Could you...?". It has also been criticised for assuming an individualistic notion of the self that fits many Asian and collectivist settings poorly, where relational and group-oriented concerns may be more salient than individual autonomy. Spencer-Oatey (2002) responded to these criticisms with the notion of rapport management, which separates face, understood as a person's concern for their

public worth, from sociality rights, understood as the entitlements people believe they have in an interaction, including rights to fair treatment and to an appropriate degree of involvement. This distinction is especially useful in the classroom. A teacher may be highly attentive to learners' face while keeping every interactional right for herself, choosing the topic, deciding who speaks and judging every answer. Conversely, giving learners more rights, for example to speak at length or to comment on one another's ideas, may expose them to face risks, particularly in settings where speaking out in front of peers is culturally sensitive. Politeness and participation are therefore related but distinct, and the relationship between them is shaped by culture rather than fixed.

The question of how teacher talk affects participation has been addressed most directly in research on classroom interactional competence (CIC), which concerns the ability of teachers and learners to use interaction as a means of mediating and assisting learning. Walsh (2002) showed that features of teacher talk such as scaffolding, direct repair and extended wait time helped learners contribute, while turn completion, teacher echo and interruption reduced their involvement, even when these moves were well intended. Subsequent work has described how teachers create "space for learning" through wait time, planning time, scaffolding and paraphrasing (Walsh & Li, 2013), how they shape learners' contributions by reformulating, extending and building on them (Can Daşkın, 2015), and how they manage learners' claims of insufficient knowledge in ways that either close or reopen opportunities to participate (Sert & Walsh, 2013). Waring (2009) added an important perspective by showing how a learner and teacher together moved out of the conventional initiation–response–feedback (IRF) sequence into exchanges initiated by the learner, demonstrating that alternative participation structures can emerge within ordinary whole-class teaching. Research on dialogic teaching makes a related argument on a broader scale. It contrasts talk in which students are invited to explain, query and build on one another's ideas with monologic, transmissive talk in which the teacher controls content and evaluation (Lyle, 2008), grounds this contrast in sociocultural theory (Mercer & Howe, 2012), and has developed coding schemes that allow dialogic features to be identified across very different educational settings (Hennessy et al., 2016). Two qualifications nonetheless need to be kept in view. The IRF sequence and evaluative feedback are not harmful in themselves and may be efficient, contingent responses to what learners have said (Lee, 2007). In addition, dialogic ideals developed largely in Western schools may be resisted, reshaped or only partly adopted where they conflict with local expectations of teachers and learners (Hu, 2002; Teo, 2016). A critical study of reform must therefore examine whether teacher talk opens space for learners without assuming that every closed exchange is a failure.

The consequences of teacher talk for learners are usually discussed in terms of engagement, a construct that has proved both useful and difficult to pin down. In general educational research, engagement is understood as having behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004), and in language learning it has been extended to include a social dimension tied to interaction with others and with the language itself (Svalberg, 2009). Reviewing two decades of research in language learning, Hiver et al. (2024) found considerable variation in how engagement is defined and measured and called for clearer definitions and for methods that capture engagement as it unfolds in context. Research on motivation adds a further critical layer that is directly relevant to teacher talk. Praise is commonly assumed to motivate learners, but Brophy (1981) showed that its effects depend on whether it is specific, contingent and informative, and that general or routine praise may do little for learning. Tangible rewards that learners come to expect can undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci

et al., 2001), and self-determination theory holds that teaching that supports learners' autonomy, by giving them voice and choice, fosters more durable motivation than teaching that relies on external control (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These insights matter for a curriculum that explicitly places learner autonomy at its centre, because they suggest that friendly teacher talk, however well meant, may not support autonomy if decisions and evaluations remain entirely in the teacher's hands.

Finally, research on curriculum change and teacher agency explains why reforms are rarely implemented as their designers intend. Teachers do not simply carry out curricula; they interpret them through their beliefs and experience and within the possibilities and constraints of their working conditions. Priestley et al. (2012) describe teacher agency as something achieved through the interplay of a teacher's capacities with the cultural, structural and material features of the setting, rather than as a property of the individual, and Biesta et al. (2015) show how teachers' beliefs shape the forms of agency they are able to exercise in response to policy. Research on the Merdeka Curriculum has similarly pointed to teacher competence and school support as conditions for implementation (Kusumawati et al., 2025; Rohmah et al., 2024), and critical policy analysis has examined the ideological work that the curriculum's discourse performs (Putri, 2026). What this literature has not yet provided is an account of how the reform is mediated through the pragmatic choices teachers make in classroom interaction.

Drawing these strands together, this study analyses teacher talk at three linked levels: the speech act performed, the politeness strategy through which it is realised, and its consequences for what learners do next. Building on Spencer-Oatey's (2002) distinction between face and sociality rights, it separates two dimensions of teacher talk that are usually conflated. The first, softening, refers to the extent to which teacher talk protects learners' face and builds rapport. The second, sharing, refers to the extent to which it gives learners the right to hold the floor, elaborate, question, evaluate and make decisions. A move towards dialogic pedagogy, in this view, requires change on the second dimension and not only on the first. The framework is intended to describe rather than to rank, since the appropriate balance between softening and sharing is likely to depend on learners' proficiency, the purpose of an activity and the cultural setting in which teaching takes place.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative design based on pragmatic discourse analysis, with particular attention to how classroom talk unfolds turn by turn. This design was chosen because the research questions concern how actions and relationships are accomplished in real classroom interaction, which requires close analysis of naturally occurring talk in its sequential context rather than elicited, reported or simulated data. Then, the research was conducted in three public schools in Bantaeng Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia: one junior high school and two senior high schools. All three schools were implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at the time of data collection. Bantaeng is a semi-urban regency in which English is learned almost exclusively as a school subject, so that classroom interaction provides learners with their main opportunity to use the language. One English teacher from each school participated. The teachers were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their teaching experience, their communicative competence in English and their willingness to be observed and recorded. Pseudonyms are used for all teachers and students. Because the teachers were experienced and confident users of English, the lessons are likely to show the reform under relatively favourable conditions rather than at its weakest, and any constraints on learner participation found in these classrooms are therefore

unlikely to result from limited teacher proficiency.

Data were collected through non-participant observation over three weeks. Each teacher was observed in three lessons, yielding nine lessons in total. The lessons were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, including audible non-verbal behaviour such as laughter, and field notes recorded what the recordings could not capture, including gestures, seating arrangements, the activity in progress and the general atmosphere of the class. I was present in the classroom but did not take part in the lessons. Furthermore the analysis proceeded in four steps. Teacher talk was first divided into utterances, each performing an identifiable speech act; where an utterance performed more than one act, as when praise also functioned as an evaluation, each act was coded and the one most consequential for the following turn was treated as primary. Each act was then coded for speech act class, following Dalton-Puffer's (2005) classroom application of Searle's taxonomy, and for subtypes such as command, request, elicitation, praise and promise. In the third step, the realisation of each act was coded as negative politeness (for example, indirect requests, modal verbs or "please"), positive politeness (for example, praise, inclusive forms, humour or use of a learner's name) or unmitigated. In the fourth step, the learner turn that followed each teacher act was coded as no verbal response, a minimal response (a single word, formulaic reply or short display answer) or an extended response (an explanation, question, justification or self-initiated contribution). Where the teacher spoke after an extended learner turn, this move was further coded as closing, when an evaluation or confirmation ended the exchange, or opening, when the teacher asked for elaboration, passed the contribution to other learners or reformulated it so that it could be developed further. These final categories were adapted from research on classroom interactional competence and classroom dialogue (Hennessy et al., 2016; Walsh & Li, 2013). The third step thus captures softening and the fourth captures sharing. Proportions of speech act types are reported to give an overall picture of the data, while the analysis of learner responses is qualitative and is illustrated through excerpts. Most excerpts were selected because they were typical of patterns that recurred across the lessons, but two (Excerpts 4 and 8) were selected because they departed from the dominant pattern, which made it possible to test the limits of the interpretation.

Several procedures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. A second coder independently coded part of the data using the coding frame; the two sets of codes were compared, differences were discussed until agreement was reached, and category definitions were refined before the rest of the data were coded. In qualitative research, such comparison serves mainly to make coding more transparent and consistent rather than to establish objectivity (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Interpretations were also discussed with peers, transcripts were reviewed repeatedly, the teachers were invited to comment on transcripts and preliminary interpretations of their own lessons, and field notes were used to check interpretations of tone and atmosphere. The principals of the three schools gave permission for the study, and informed consent was obtained from the participating teachers and students after the purpose of the research and the recording procedures had been explained. As an Indonesian EFL practitioner familiar with local schools, I was able to gain access easily and to interpret culturally embedded forms of politeness, but this familiarity also carried the opposite risks of being too sympathetic to the teachers or too quick to judge them against imported standards. I therefore based claims about engagement on what learners actually said and did, examined alternative explanations explicitly and sought the teachers' own views of their lessons.

FINDINGS

Speech Acts and Their Functions

All five types of speech act appeared in the teachers’ talk (Table 1). Directives were by far the most frequent, accounting for nearly half of all teacher utterances, followed by expressives at about 30% and representatives at about 20%. Commissives and declarations were infrequent but pedagogically significant. In the excerpts, T refers to the teacher and S to a student, and the coding is shown in brackets.

Table 1. Distribution and functions of teachers’ speech acts

Speech act class	Main subtypes observed	Main functions	Approx. share
Directives	Instructions, requests, open and closed elicitations, suggestions	Organising activities, directing attention, inviting contributions	Nearly half
Expressives	Praise, encouragement, thanking, empathy, humour	Building rapport, sustaining motivation, reducing anxiety	About 30%
Representatives	Explanations, clarifications, confirmations, informative statements	Explaining content, linking learning to real-world use	About 20%
Commissives	Promises, commitments, offers	Linking effort to outcomes, showing teacher responsibility	Infrequent
Declarations	Role assignment, opening and closing activities, ratifying answers	Structuring the lesson, allocating roles	Infrequent

Note. Proportions are approximate and cover nine lessons taught by three teachers. Utterances with more than one function were counted by their primary act.

Directives were used to organise activities, focus attention and invite contributions, and their form varied with their purpose. Directives that managed the class were frequently phrased indirectly, as in Excerpt 1, where the teacher’s first request is softened with “could” and “please”. Once the student has complied, however, the next instruction is given directly, so that the sequence moves from a mitigated opening to an unmitigated command. Questions that asked students to interpret a text worked differently. In Excerpt 2, the teacher’s question is genuinely open and the student answers with a complete interpretation, an extended response in the terms of this study. The teacher then responds with warm praise. The student is not asked how she arrived at her reading, and no other student is invited to offer a view; the praise marks the exchange as complete and the lesson moves on.

Excerpt 1

T: Could you please open your book to page 35? (Directive: request; negative politeness)
S: Yes, Miss. (Uptake: minimal)
T: Thank you. Now, read the first paragraph aloud. (Expressive: thanking; Directive: command, unmitigated)

Excerpt 2

T: What do you think the writer means by this line? (Directive: open elicitation)
S: I think she means we should be grateful. (Uptake: extended)
T: Excellent interpretation! (Expressive: praise; closing move)

Expressives were the teachers’ main means of building rapport, and they were used frequently and skilfully. In Excerpt 3, praise is addressed to a named student and attributes her success to effort, after which the teacher extends encouragement to the whole class. Excerpt 4 is one of the two cases selected because it departed from the main pattern. The teacher’s joke at her own expense removes the embarrassment of a grammatical difficulty, and a student responds with a spontaneous question, one of the few self-initiated learner turns in the excerpts. The teacher then turns the moment into

a shared undertaking with “let’s”. The field notes describe laughter and a more relaxed atmosphere after such moments.

Excerpt 3

T: That’s a very good answer, Rani. I can see you’ve been studying hard. (*Expressive: praise; positive politeness*)

S: Thank you, Miss! (*Uptake: minimal*)

T: Keep it up, everyone. I’m proud of your progress. (*Expressive: encouragement*)

Excerpt 4

T: Don’t worry, even I forgot the past tense once in my life! (*Expressive: humour, self-deprecation*)

S: (laughs) Really, Miss? (*Uptake: self-initiated question*)

T: Yes! So let’s all remember it together. (*Directive: inclusive instruction*)

Representatives were used to explain and clarify content, and they were also the point at which the teachers’ role as the source of knowledge was most visible. In Excerpt 5, a student responds to the teacher’s explanation with a question that overgeneralises the rule. Because “go/went” is itself an irregular form, the question offered an opportunity for the class to work out the difference between regular and irregular verbs together. The teacher instead confirms the rule and adds a reminder, so that the explanation remains with her. In Excerpt 6, a representative act frames English mainly in terms of its usefulness for future opportunities.

Excerpt 5

T: When we use the simple past tense, the verb takes the second form. For example, “go” becomes “went.” (*Representative: explanation*)

S: So, we always change the verb? (*Uptake: self-initiated question*)

T: Exactly. That’s the rule, but don’t forget the irregular verbs. (*Representative: confirmation; closing move*)

Excerpt 6

T: English is used worldwide, especially in technology and education. So mastering it opens many opportunities. (*Representative: informative*)

Commissives and declarations were rare, but they concerned matters that bear directly on learner autonomy. In Excerpt 7, completion of a project is tied to bonus points decided by the teacher, and the student’s response (“Really, Miss?”) is brief. Excerpt 8, the second case selected because it departed from the main pattern, commits the teacher to reading students’ drafts and presents the next lesson as a joint discussion (“we can discuss”), so that responsibility for progress is framed as shared. Declarations were used to assign roles and to open and close activities. In Excerpt 9, the student becomes group leader at the moment the teacher says so, and the teacher’s subsequent justification, phrased as praise, makes the decision appear less one-sided. In Excerpt 10, the end of an activity is announced together with praise for the whole class.

Excerpt 7

T: If you complete this project today, I’ll give you bonus points tomorrow. (*Commissive: conditional promise*)

S: Really, Miss? (*Uptake: minimal*)

T: Of course. Hard work deserves reward. (*Representative: assertion; Commissive: reaffirmation*)

Excerpt 8

T: I’ll check your drafts tonight so we can discuss them tomorrow. (*Commissive: commitment*)

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Excerpt 9

T: Okay, from now on, you're the group leader for this task. (*Declaration: role assignment*)

S: Me, Miss? Thank you! (*Uptake: minimal*)

T: Yes, because you showed responsibility last week. (*Representative: justification; Expressive: implicit praise*)

Excerpt 10

T: That's the end of our discussion for today. Excellent work, everyone. (*Declaration: closure; Expressive: praise*)

Pragmatic Strategies and Learner Responses

Three strategies ran through the teachers' talk across all types of speech act. The first was mitigation, in which modal verbs, "please" and hedges were used to reduce the imposition of directives. The second was solidarity, in which inclusive "let's" and "we", praise, humour and the use of students' names reduced social distance between teacher and class. The third was adjustment to context: according to the field notes, teachers were more direct during transitions between activities and more indirect when inviting contributions, and they adapted their tone and vocabulary to students' proficiency.

The learner responses that followed these strategies, however, present a more limited picture. Across the nine lessons, most learner responses were minimal, consisting of formulaic acknowledgements such as "Yes, Miss", brief display answers or thanks. Extended responses and self-initiated questions were comparatively uncommon and occurred mainly after open questions (Excerpt 2) or after humour and explanations that prompted learners to ask something of their own (Excerpts 4 and 5). The recurring pattern was that when learners did produce extended turns, the teacher's next move closed the sequence, either through evaluative praise (Excerpt 2) or confirmation (Excerpt 5), rather than asking for elaboration, passing the contribution to other learners or inviting learners to build on one another's ideas. Decisions about roles (Excerpt 9) and rewards (Excerpt 7) were made by the teacher. The two contrasting cases (Excerpts 4 and 8) show that moves towards shared participation were part of the teachers' repertoire, but in the data these moments were brief and were not followed up.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the Findings

The dominance of directives in the data is unsurprising given that teachers are institutionally responsible for organising classroom activity (Dalton-Puffer, 2005). What is more noteworthy is how much effort the teachers invested in making this directive talk feel supportive. Indirect requests reduced the sense of imposition, while praise, humour and inclusive language brought teacher and students closer together, and the field notes consistently describe a friendly atmosphere in which, as Excerpt 4 shows, a well-timed joke could prompt a learner's spontaneous question. These patterns are consistent with research linking teachers' relational talk to the emotional dimension of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Svalberg, 2009), and they suggest that these experienced teachers have taken up the Merdeka Curriculum's call for more learner-friendly classrooms.

The analysis of what learners did next, however, shows that the teachers' politeness changed how their control felt more than how much control they retained. Open questions were often closed by praise, and Excerpt 2 corresponds closely to the pattern described by Waring (2008), in which an explicit positive assessment in the third turn is affiliative but signals to everyone that the exchange is over. From the

perspective of classroom interactional competence, the teacher could have shaped the learner's contribution by asking her to justify her reading or by inviting other learners to respond (Can Daşkın, 2015; Walsh & Li, 2013), and the generality of the praise, which recognised the answer without saying what was good about it, limited its value as feedback (Brophy, 1981). Learners' own questions were similarly answered rather than opened up. In Excerpt 5, the learner's overgeneralisation could have become the starting point for a short collective inquiry into regular and irregular verbs, but the teacher's "Exactly. That's the rule" kept the role of knower with the teacher. Walsh (2002) showed that moves of this kind can limit learner involvement even when they are accurate and helpful in content, and Waring (2009) found that moving beyond IRF often depends on the teacher treating a learner's initiative as a legitimate contribution to the class's inquiry rather than as a request for information. Decisions about roles and rewards also remained with the teacher. The role assignment in Excerpt 9 and the promise in Excerpt 7 were both softened and warmly received, but in each case the teacher alone decided who would lead and what effort was worth. Bonus points are a tangible, expected reward of the kind that research suggests can weaken intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2001), and they sit uneasily with a curriculum whose central aim is to support learner autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Excerpt 8, by contrast, shows commissives being used to share responsibility.

Spencer-Oatey's (2002) distinction between face and sociality rights provides a coherent explanation for these patterns. The teachers attended carefully to learners' face and rarely put it at risk. What changed much less were learners' rights within the interaction: to take the floor, to extend or challenge an answer, to comment on classmates' ideas and to make decisions about their own learning. Politeness, in other words, made an essentially teacher-led interaction more comfortable without altering who led it. This finding parallels Teo's (2016) observation that classroom talk in Singapore remained largely monologic despite strong policy support for dialogue, and Kirkgöz's (2008) finding that teachers implementing a communicative curriculum in Turkey often remained close to transmission teaching. It extends these studies by identifying a specific pragmatic mechanism, namely the use of politeness as a substitute for, rather than a vehicle of, participation, through which reform can appear to be taking hold while the underlying structure of classroom talk remains largely unchanged.

Three alternative explanations could account for the same patterns, and each deserves careful consideration. The first is cultural. In classrooms where speaking at length in front of peers carries a risk of losing face, closing a learner's extended contribution with praise may protect the learner from further exposure, and assigning roles may spare learners the discomfort of volunteering. The data partly support this reading, since the teachers' praise clearly protected learners' face. The cultural explanation does not, however, account for all of the evidence. In Excerpts 4 and 5, learners asked questions without being prompted, which indicates that at least some were willing to take interactional risks when the opportunity arose. What the cultural explanation shows, therefore, is that sharing needs to be introduced with appropriate face protection, for example through pair discussion before whole-class talk, rather than that it should be avoided (Hu, 2002; Spencer-Oatey, 2002). The second explanation is pedagogical. An evaluative third turn can be a quick and appropriate response to what a learner has said (Lee, 2007), and a grammar question may reasonably be closed if the lesson has other aims. This is fair for individual exchanges but less persuasive for a pattern that recurred across lessons and teachers, and it does not fit Excerpt 2, where the question was explicitly interpretive. The third explanation is structural. Teachers' agency is achieved within particular working conditions (Priestley et al., 2012), and time

pressure, syllabus coverage, assessment demands and class size can all favour teacher-led talk. This explanation complements rather than contradicts the interpretation offered here, because it helps to explain why softening is easier to adopt than sharing. Politeness can be added to existing routines at little cost, whereas sharing requires changes to lesson design, time allocation and assessment that individual teachers may not be able to make alone. These explanations qualify the interpretation without overturning it.

The findings can be summarised in a two-dimensional framework of teacher talk during reform (Table 2). One dimension is softening, the degree to which teacher talk protects learners’ face and builds rapport; the other is sharing, the degree to which it extends learners’ interactional rights. Combining the two produces four profiles of teacher talk.

Table 2. A framework of softening and sharing in teacher talk

Profile	Characteristics	Typical moves
Transmissive control (low softening, low sharing)	Teacher holds all interactional rights; talk is direct and evaluative	Unmitigated commands; closed questions; bare evaluation (“Wrong. Next.”)
Benevolent control (high softening, low sharing)	Warm, face-sensitive climate; teacher still allocates turns, evaluates and decides	Mitigated requests; open questions closed by praise; teacher-decided roles and rewards (Excerpts 1, 2, 5, 7, 9)
Unsupported delegation (low softening, high sharing)	Learners are given rights without relational support; risk of anxiety and silence	Handing over tasks or evaluation abruptly, without rapport or modelling
Dialogic partnership (high softening, high sharing)	Warm climate in which learners hold and use interactional rights	Praise followed by requests for elaboration; questions returned to the class; negotiated roles; joint commitments (glimpsed in Excerpts 4 and 8)

Note. Profiles describe patterns of talk, not types of teacher. The same teacher may move between profiles within a lesson, and the appropriate balance may depend on learners’ proficiency and the aim of the activity.

Most of the talk in this study fell within the benevolent control profile, with brief movements towards dialogic partnership in Excerpts 4 and 8. I describe this pattern as softening without sharing: the warmth associated with student-centred teaching has arrived before its participatory structure. The framework does not assume that more sharing is always better. The unsupported delegation profile is a reminder that handing learners control without relational support can produce anxiety and silence, particularly in settings where face concerns are strong, and in this sense the teachers’ skill in softening is a resource on which sharing can be built rather than an obstacle to be removed. The framework also makes the trajectory of reform easier to see. Benevolent control is better understood as a stage in a process of change than as an individual failing, because politeness is already well developed in Indonesian social life and can be deployed readily in response to a reform that emphasises warmth and wellbeing, whereas extending learners’ talk requires new interactional skills, a reconsideration of the teacher’s role as the source of knowledge and supportive working conditions (Biesta et al., 2015; Kusumawati et al., 2025).

The study contributes to knowledge in four related ways. For classroom pragmatics, it provides empirical evidence that attention to face and the distribution of interactional rights can vary independently, so that a lesson can be highly polite while offering learners little room to participate. For speech act research, it shows that the

frequency of act types is an insufficient basis for judging whether teacher talk supports engagement, because the same directive or expressive can open or close participation depending on its position in the sequence and on what follows. For research on curriculum reform, it identifies a specific mechanism through which reform can change the tone of classrooms before it changes participation, and it explains this mechanism through cultural, pedagogical and structural pressures rather than through teacher shortcomings. Finally, it adds evidence from a semi-urban setting in the Global South to international research on dialogic teaching, much of which has drawn on schools in Western and East Asian cities (Howe et al., 2019; Teo, 2016).

Implications for Practice and Policy

The main practical implication is that teachers can be helped to move from softening towards sharing without giving up the warmth they already bring to their classrooms. In practice, this means building on existing moves rather than replacing them. A teacher who closes an open question with praise, as in Excerpt 2, can keep the praise and add a follow-up such as “What in the text made you think so? Does anyone see it differently?”. A teacher who confirms a learner’s rule, as in Excerpt 5, can return the question to the class by asking learners to test it against verbs such as “play”, “go” and “eat”. Group leaders can be chosen by the groups themselves using agreed criteria and then confirmed by the teacher, and bonus points can be replaced or supplemented by success criteria negotiated with learners and by specific feedback on their progress. Such moves are most likely to succeed when introduced with some face protection, for example by letting learners discuss in pairs before speaking in front of the class. Pre-service programmes and the Teacher Professional Education programme (Pendidikan Profesi Guru) can teach these moves through transcript analysis. For teachers already in service, analysing recordings of their own lessons is a practical way of developing the kind of noticing that change requires, and research on video clubs shows that structured collective viewing can redirect teachers’ attention towards students’ thinking (van Es & Sherin, 2008).

Indonesia’s subject teacher forums (Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran, MGMP) provide an existing community structure through which such professional learning could be organised. Forums could run short cycles in which one teacher records part of a lesson, the group analyses a single exchange using the softening–sharing framework, a sharing move is planned and tried, and the outcome is discussed at the next meeting. Building on teachers’ own expertise in this way may reduce the resistance that imported methods often meet (Hu, 2002). Because school support is a key condition for implementing the curriculum (Rohmah et al., 2024), principals can contribute by protecting time for this work and keeping it separate from teacher appraisal. For policymakers, the findings caution against treating a warm, polite classroom as evidence that learners are participating. Monitoring of the Merdeka Curriculum could include a small number of interactional indicators, such as how often learners initiate turns, how long their contributions are and how often teachers follow a learner’s answer with a request for elaboration rather than an evaluation. Since the findings also point to structural pressures, policy should attend to the conditions that make sharing possible, including time for discussion-based activities and forms of assessment that reward learners’ reasoning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how three EFL teachers in South Sulawesi used speech acts and pragmatic strategies while their schools were implementing the Merdeka

Curriculum, and what these choices made possible for learners. Directives made up nearly half of the teachers' talk, followed by expressives and representatives, while commissives and declarations were infrequent but bore directly on roles, responsibilities and rewards. The teachers used indirectness, praise, humour and inclusive language to keep their classrooms warm and relaxed, and in this respect they had clearly responded to the curriculum's call for more learner-friendly teaching. When learners' responses were examined, however, it became clear that this politeness rarely gave learners more control over the interaction: open questions ended with praise, learners' questions were answered by the teacher rather than opened to the class, and roles and rewards were decided by the teacher. Cultural, pedagogical and structural explanations help to account for this pattern and indicate where support is needed, but they do not alter the overall finding that the reform has so far changed the tone of these classrooms more than the distribution of talk within them.

The distinction between softening and sharing is the study's central contribution. It suggests that curriculum reform in English language education may first change the relational surface of classroom talk and only later, and with deliberate support, change who takes part in it. It may also help explain why student-centred reforms elsewhere appear to be adopted while classroom interaction remains teacher-led. The study also has limitations. It is based on nine lessons taught by three purposively selected teachers in one regency, so its findings cannot be generalised statistically, although the processes it describes are likely to be recognisable in comparable settings. The proportions of speech act types are approximate, and the analysis of learner responses is qualitative, so larger studies should quantify learner responses and teacher follow-up moves. Audio recordings miss much non-verbal behaviour, engagement was inferred from what learners said rather than from their own accounts, and the presence of an observer may have made teachers more polite than usual. Future research could combine video recordings with stimulated-recall interviews with teachers and learners, compare schools at different stages of implementation and in urban and rural areas, and test through intervention studies whether professional development based on the softening–sharing framework changes how talk is shared in classrooms over time.

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AI USE AND DISCLOSURE

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Claude (Anthropic) to help restructure the manuscript to the journal's guidelines, identify relevant literature and edit the language. The data, analysis and interpretations are the author's own, all references were checked against their original sources, and the author takes full responsibility for the content of the article.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND INFORMED CONSENT

The study was not reviewed by a formal institutional ethics committee. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the principals of the participating schools, and informed consent was obtained from the participating teachers and students after the purpose of the study and the recording procedures had been explained. Participation was voluntary, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms, and identifying details have been removed from the transcripts.

CRediT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

- Andi Ashlihatul Fuada: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The recordings and transcripts contain information that could identify teachers and students and are therefore not publicly available. Anonymised transcript excerpts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to participant consent.

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