

Turn-Taking and Classroom Participation: Implications for Language Learning in Nigeria

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Abstract. This article examines turn-taking and classroom participation and discusses their implications for language learning in Nigeria. It focuses on turn-taking patterns, strategies used by teachers and learners to manage speaking turns, the relationship between turn-taking and classroom participation, and the implications of turn-taking for language learning. The article adopts a qualitative review approach and draws on existing studies of classroom interaction, turn-taking and language learning. The review shows that teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher, teacher-to-class and student-to-student patterns shape the distribution of speaking opportunities in the classroom. It also identifies strategies such as asking questions, expressing opinions, using fillers, managing interruptions and sustaining turns as important resources for effective interaction. The article further establishes that equitable and well-managed turn-taking promotes active classroom participation by providing learners with greater opportunities to speak, negotiate meaning and practise the target language. In the Nigerian context, effective turn-taking supports communicative competence, learner confidence and more inclusive language-learning environments. The article concludes that teachers need to deliberately manage speaking turns and employ interactional strategies that increase learner participation and create meaningful opportunities for language use.

keywords: classroom participation, classroom interaction, language learning, Nigeria, turn-taking

I. Introduction

Classroom interaction is central to language learning because language develops through meaningful participation in communicative activities. In the classroom, learners do not merely receive linguistic information from teachers; they negotiate meaning, express ideas, ask questions, respond to others and practise language through interaction. A fundamental mechanism through which such interaction is organised is turn-taking, which refers to how speakers manage the distribution, sequencing and transition

of speaking turns. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) establish turn-taking as a systematic feature of conversational organisation in which participants coordinate who speaks, when a speaker yields the floor and when another participant takes a turn. Although classroom discourse is shaped by pedagogical purposes, the organisation of speaking turns remains central to effective classroom communication.

In language classrooms, turn-taking is particularly important because access to speaking opportunities is closely connected with classroom participation and communicative competence. Effective turn-taking enables learners to contribute ideas, practise vocabulary and grammatical structures, negotiate meaning and develop confidence in using the target language. Al Jebouri (2017) identifies turn-taking as an important component of second-language classroom interaction, while Syafar et al. (2023) demonstrate that teachers and learners employ different strategies to initiate, maintain and transfer speaking turns. Akidah and Halim (2024) similarly show that turn-taking shapes participation in EFL classroom interaction. Thus, classroom participation involves not only whether learners speak, but also how speaking opportunities are created, distributed and managed.

The organisation of turns can also be influenced by linguistic and social characteristics. In multilingual classrooms, differences in language proficiency and familiarity with interactional practices may affect learners' willingness and ability to take turns. Ramadiro (2023) highlights the complexity of turn-taking in multilingual classroom interaction, where participants draw on different linguistic and interactional resources. Gender may also influence participation patterns, as demonstrated by Oktarini and Citraningrum (2025), who examine turn-taking strategies as gender performance in EFL classroom interaction. These factors are particularly relevant in Nigeria, where English operates alongside numerous indigenous languages and functions as a major language of education. Consequently, classroom interaction may involve diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying levels of communicative competence.

The timing and coordination of turns further demonstrate the complexity of classroom interaction. Levinson and Torreira (2015) explain that speakers coordinate turns through linguistic and contextual cues that enable smooth transitions between speakers. In language classrooms, however, this coordination may be affected by teacher questioning, learner hesitation, interruptions, overlapping speech and differences in proficiency. Dozie (2023) demonstrates the relationship between turn-taking and interruptions in discourse, indicating that the management of turns can influence the organisation of interaction. When learners are uncertain about when or how to enter an exchange, they may remain silent, while excessive interruptions or unequal distribution of turns may restrict participation.

Teacher practices are particularly important in determining learners' access to speaking opportunities. Classroom interaction can become teacher-dominated when teachers initiate most exchanges and provide limited opportunities for spontaneous learner contributions. Conversely, practices that encourage learners to ask questions, respond to

peers, initiate discussions and sustain conversations can promote active participation. Gorjian and Habibi (2015) emphasise the relevance of conversation strategies, including turn-taking, to classroom interaction, while Osuchukwu et al. (2019) link effective turn-taking with speaking skills and communication. In Nigeria, Soji-Oni (2026) highlights the importance of classroom interaction in EFL teaching in Lagos State, while Galti and Mustapha (2025) demonstrate the relevance of teaching techniques to learner participation. These studies reinforce the need to examine interactional practices within the Nigerian language-learning context.

The relationship between turn-taking and classroom participation therefore has important implications for language learning in Nigeria. When speaking opportunities are appropriately distributed, learners have greater opportunities to practise the target language, negotiate meaning and develop communicative competence. They also develop pragmatic abilities, including recognising appropriate points for entering a conversation, responding to others, managing interruptions and sustaining interaction. Conversely, restricted participation, excessive teacher control and unequal access to speaking turns can limit opportunities for language practice. Turn-taking should therefore be regarded not merely as a conversational mechanism but as an important pedagogical resource for promoting classroom participation and language learning.

Against this background, this article examines turn-taking and classroom participation, with particular attention to their implications for language learning in Nigeria. It focuses on patterns of turn-taking, strategies used by teachers and learners to manage speaking opportunities, and the ways in which turn-taking can facilitate or constrain classroom participation and language learning. By bringing together perspectives from conversation analysis, pragmatics and language pedagogy, the article highlights the importance of effective turn-taking in creating interactive and participatory language-learning environments in Nigeria.

II. Literature Review

Previous studies establish turn-taking as an important feature of classroom interaction and language learning. Ramadiro (2023) examines turn-taking in multilingual classrooms and finds that classroom interaction is largely teacher-regulated, with learners having fewer opportunities to initiate turns. Syafar et al. (2023) similarly identify various turn-taking strategies used by teachers and learners, including turn-taking, interruptions and silence. Al Jebouri (2017) also demonstrates that turn-taking contributes to the organisation of second-language classroom interaction. These studies show that the distribution and management of speaking turns influence the nature of classroom discourse.

Other studies emphasise the pedagogical significance of turn-taking. Gorjian and Habibi (2015) report that conversation strategies can improve classroom interaction, while Osuchukwu et al. (2019) associate effective turn-taking with the development of speaking skills and effective communication. Akidah and Halim (2024) further confirm

the importance of turn-taking in EFL classroom interaction. Dozie (2023) highlights the relationship between turn-taking and interruptions from a pragmatic perspective, while Levinson and Torreira (2015) explain the importance of timing in the coordination of conversational turns.

Turn-taking is also shaped by social and contextual factors. Otkarini and Citraningrum (2025) examine turn-taking as gender performance in EFL interaction, while Ramadiro (2023) demonstrates the influence of multilingualism on classroom discourse. In Nigeria, Galti and Mustapha (2025) examine teaching techniques and learner participation, while Soji-Oni (2026) identifies issues affecting classroom interaction in EFL teaching in Lagos State. However, these studies largely examine turn-taking, classroom interaction or participation as separate concerns. Limited attention is given to their interconnectedness and to how turn-taking practices influence learners' opportunities for meaningful language learning. The present study addresses this gap by examining turn-taking in relation to classroom participation and highlighting its implications for language learning in Nigeria.

1. Turn Taking Patterns in Classroom Interaction

Turn-taking patterns in classroom interaction refer to the ways in which speaking opportunities are initiated, allocated, exchanged and transferred between teachers and learners. Unlike ordinary conversation, classroom interaction is often organised around pedagogical objectives, with the teacher playing an important role in determining who speaks and when. Sundari et al. (2017) identify different patterns of interaction in EFL classrooms, which provide a useful framework for understanding the movement of speaking turns between teachers and learners. The interaction pattern presented in Figure 1 illustrates these relationships through directional exchanges between the teacher, individual learners and learners themselves.

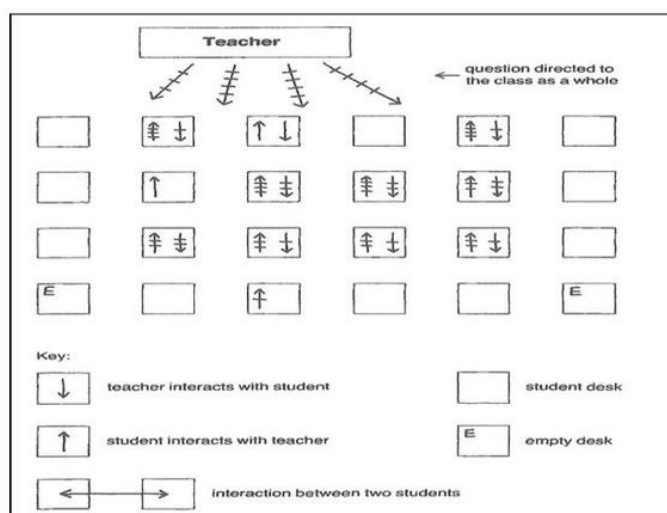


Figure 1: Interaction Patterns in the Classroom

Source: Adapted from Sundari, Rafli, and Ridwan (2017).

The downward arrows from the teacher to individual learners represent teacher-to-student turn-taking, in which the teacher initiates an exchange by asking a question, giving an instruction or inviting a particular learner to contribute. The upward arrows represent student-to-teacher turn-taking, where learners respond to the teacher or initiate an exchange by asking questions, seeking clarification or offering contributions. The arrows extending from the teacher towards different parts of the classroom represent teacher-to-whole-class interaction, in which a teacher addresses the class and several learners have the potential to take the next turn. The horizontal arrows between learners represent student-to-student turn-taking, where one learner's contribution provides an opportunity for another learner to respond. The figure therefore demonstrates that classroom participation is shaped by the direction and distribution of speaking turns. In particular, teacher selection of a learner represents an explicit allocation of the next turn, whereas learner self-selection or peer interaction provides opportunities for more spontaneous participation. These patterns can be discussed as follows.

Teacher-to-Student Turn-Taking

Teacher-to-student turn-taking occurs when the teacher directs a question, instruction or comment to an individual learner, who then takes the speaking turn. This pattern is common in classroom questioning and enables the teacher to assess individual understanding and elicit language production. Al Jebouri (2017) and Syafar et al. (2023) show that teacher-initiated turns constitute an important feature of second-language classroom interaction. While this pattern can provide learners with structured opportunities to speak, excessive teacher control may limit spontaneous participation and result in repeated selection of only a few learners.

Student-to-Teacher Turn-Taking

Student-to-teacher turn-taking occurs when a learner responds to the teacher or initiates an exchange by asking a question, seeking clarification or contributing an idea. It demonstrates learner involvement because the student becomes an active participant rather than simply a recipient of teacher questions. Ramadiro (2023) observes that learner-initiated turns may be less frequent in teacher-regulated classroom interaction. Encouraging student-to-teacher exchanges can therefore promote confidence, initiative and greater participation in language learning.

Teacher-to-Whole-Class Turn-Taking

Teacher-to-whole-class interaction occurs when the teacher addresses several or all learners simultaneously. Questions such as "What do you think?" or "Who can answer this question?" create opportunities for multiple learners to compete or volunteer for the next turn. This pattern allows the teacher to engage the class collectively and can generate broad participation. However, the actual distribution of turns depends on whether learners are encouraged to self-select or whether the teacher selects particular respondents.

Student-to-Student Turn-Taking

Student-to-student turn-taking occurs when learners interact directly with one another through pair work, group discussion, peer questioning or classroom dialogue. In this pattern, one learner's turn creates an opportunity for another learner to respond, question, agree, disagree or extend the discussion. Such interaction is particularly valuable for language learning because it increases opportunities for learners to practise the target language. Gorjian and Habibi (2015) and Osuchukwu et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of interactional strategies and turn-taking for developing communicative competence and speaking skills.

Turn Allocation and Participation

Turn allocation concerns how speaking opportunities are distributed among classroom participants. The teacher may explicitly allocate a turn by calling on a particular learner, while learners may also obtain turns through self-selection or responses to peers. Sacks et al. (1974) establish turn allocation as a central component of the organisation of conversation, while classroom studies such as Ramadiro (2023) show the significance of teacher control in determining participation. Fair and purposeful allocation of turns can increase learners' opportunities to speak, whereas unequal allocation may produce passive participation among some learners. Thus, turn allocation is central to understanding how classroom interaction translates into actual opportunities for language practice.



Figure 2: Seven Turn-Taking Strategies

Source: BusyTeacher (2026)

2. Strategies Used by Teachers and Learners to Manage Speaking Turns

Effective turn-taking requires both teachers and learners to use strategies that facilitate the initiation, maintenance and transfer of speaking turns. In language classrooms, such strategies are important because learners may hesitate to speak, interrupt others, struggle to sustain a turn or remain silent when they are uncertain about what to say. The use of appropriate turn-taking strategies can therefore create smoother interaction and increase opportunities for learners to participate in spoken language activities. Figure 2 presents seven strategies that can be used to support turn-taking and learner speaking.

The strategies presented in Figure 2 emphasise the practical linguistic resources that learners can use to initiate and sustain interaction. *Speak, then Ask* encourages a learner to express an opinion and subsequently ask a question, thereby creating a natural opportunity for the partner to take the next turn. *Use Conjunctions* helps learners extend their contributions by connecting ideas rather than producing isolated statements. *Phrases for Agreeing or Disagreeing* provide learners with expressions for responding appropriately to another speaker and maintaining interaction. *Asking for and Giving Opinions* enables learners to initiate exchanges and invite others to contribute. *Fillers for Pauses* such as *let me think* and *let me see* allow learners to maintain their turns while formulating their responses. *Avoiding Interruptions* provides linguistic resources for maintaining a speaking turn without unnecessarily disrupting another speaker. Finally, *Fluency over Accuracy* encourages learners to sustain communication without excessive interruption for immediate correction. These strategies can be discussed in relation to teacher and learner practices as follows.

Initiating and Extending Turns

Teachers can encourage learners to initiate and extend speaking turns by providing tasks that require students to state an opinion and ask follow-up questions. The *Speak, then Ask* strategy is particularly useful because the learner's contribution automatically creates an opportunity for another participant to respond. Similarly, the use of conjunctions enables learners to connect ideas and produce longer turns. Gorjian and Habibi (2015) emphasise the value of conversation strategies in promoting classroom interaction, suggesting that learners benefit from explicit support in managing spoken exchanges.

Using Interactional Expressions

Expressions for agreeing, disagreeing, asking for opinions and giving opinions provide learners with readily available linguistic resources for managing interaction. Such expressions enable learners to respond to previous turns and initiate new ones without relying exclusively on teacher intervention. Osuchukwu et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of turn-taking in effective communication, while Syafar et al. (2023) demonstrate that participants employ different strategies to manage turns during classroom interaction. Teaching these expressions can therefore make learners more confident and capable of participating in sustained classroom exchanges.

Managing Pauses and Hesitation

Learners may experience difficulty maintaining a turn when they need additional time to formulate their ideas in the target language. Fillers such as let me think, let me see and the thing is provide learners with additional processing time without immediately surrendering the floor. This is particularly relevant to second-language learning, where hesitation may result from limited vocabulary, grammatical uncertainty or difficulties in organising ideas. Levinson and Torreira (2015) demonstrate the importance of timing in turn coordination, making the management of pauses an important aspect of successful interaction.

Managing Interruptions and Overlap

Interruptions and overlapping speech can disrupt the orderly progression of classroom interaction when learners enter another speaker's turn inappropriately. Teachers can therefore establish interactional norms that encourage learners to wait for appropriate points of transition while also teaching expressions that help speakers maintain their turns. Dozie (2023) identifies interruption as closely connected with turn-taking and discourse organisation. Appropriate management of interruptions can consequently promote respectful interaction while ensuring that learners have sufficient time to complete their contributions.

Promoting Fluency During Turn-Taking

Teachers can also manage speaking turns by prioritising communicative fluency during particular classroom activities rather than interrupting learners constantly to correct linguistic errors. Allowing learners to complete their turns can help them maintain interaction, develop confidence and communicate ideas more spontaneously. Feedback can subsequently be provided after the activity. This approach is particularly relevant to communicative language teaching because excessive correction during a learner's turn may interrupt the interaction and discourage further participation.

Teacher Scaffolding of Turn-Taking

Teachers play an important role in modelling and scaffolding effective turn-taking. They can demonstrate appropriate expressions, provide prompts, establish pair and group activities, allocate turns fairly and gradually encourage learners to manage exchanges independently. Ramadiro (2023) shows the importance of teacher regulation in classroom turn-taking, while Akidah and Halim (2024) demonstrate the relevance of turn-taking to EFL classroom interaction. Effective teacher scaffolding can therefore shift classroom interaction from predominantly teacher-controlled exchanges towards more balanced learner participation.

3. Relationship Between Turn-Taking and Classroom Participation

Turn-taking and classroom participation are closely related because the organisation of speaking turns determines learners' access to opportunities for verbal participation. When teachers distribute turns fairly and learners are encouraged to initiate, respond to and sustain exchanges, classroom participation is likely to increase. Syafar et al. (2023)

show that teachers and learners use different turn-taking strategies to organise classroom interaction, while Ramadiro (2023) indicates that teacher-controlled turn allocation can limit learner-initiated participation. Thus, the frequency and direction of speaking turns can influence whether learners remain passive recipients or become active participants in classroom discourse.

The relationship is also evident in the interaction patterns through which learners participate. Teacher-to-student and student-to-teacher exchanges provide opportunities for individual responses, while student-to-student interaction creates opportunities for learners to participate without constant teacher mediation. Sundari et al. (2017) demonstrate that different classroom interaction patterns determine the flow of communication between teachers and learners. Similarly, Gorjian and Habibi (2015) show that conversation strategies can support more active classroom interaction. This suggests that participation is strengthened when turn-taking moves beyond teacher-led questioning to include learner-initiated and peer-to-peer exchanges.

Turn-taking can, however, also constrain participation when speaking opportunities are unevenly distributed. Learners who are repeatedly selected by teachers may dominate classroom discourse, while quieter or less confident learners receive fewer opportunities to speak. Interruptions, hesitation and uncertainty about when to enter an exchange can further discourage participation (Dozie, 2023). In language learning, such restricted participation is particularly significant because learners require regular opportunities to produce and negotiate meaning in the target language. Effective turn-taking therefore provides a practical means of widening participation and creating more inclusive classroom interaction.

4. Implications of Turn-Taking for Language Learning in Nigeria

Turn-taking has important implications for language learning in Nigeria because effective language development requires regular opportunities for learners to use English in meaningful interaction. Appropriate management of speaking turns can increase learners' exposure to spoken English and provide opportunities to practise vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency and pragmatic competence. Osuchukwu et al. (2019) emphasise the relationship between turn-taking and effective communication, while Akidah and Halim (2024) demonstrate its relevance to EFL classroom interaction.

In the Nigerian context, effective turn-taking can also support more learner-centred language teaching. Rather than concentrating classroom talk around the teacher, teachers can use pair work, group discussions, questioning, peer interaction and learner-led activities to increase opportunities for students to initiate and sustain turns. This is particularly relevant to Nigerian classrooms where large classes and diverse linguistic backgrounds may affect opportunities for individual participation. Soji-Oni (2026) highlights challenges associated with classroom interaction in EFL teaching in Lagos State, reinforcing the need for deliberate interactional practices.

Turn-taking strategies can further enhance learners' communicative confidence. Teaching learners how to ask for opinions, express agreement or disagreement, manage pauses, maintain a speaking turn and respond appropriately to others can equip them with practical resources for communication. Such strategies can help learners move beyond producing isolated answers towards participating in sustained interaction. They also develop pragmatic competence by enabling learners to understand when and how to enter, maintain and yield a conversation.

Finally, effective turn-taking can contribute to more equitable classroom participation. Teachers who consciously distribute speaking opportunities can involve quieter learners, reduce excessive teacher talk and encourage peer interaction. However, turn-taking should be adapted to learners' proficiency levels, classroom size and linguistic backgrounds. In Nigeria, this approach can contribute to language classrooms in which learners have greater opportunities to practise English, develop communicative competence and participate actively in the learning process.

III. Conclusion

Turn-taking is a fundamental component of classroom interaction and has a direct bearing on learners' participation and language learning. The review shows that the organisation and distribution of speaking turns determine the extent to which teachers and learners engage in meaningful classroom exchanges. Teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher, teacher-to-class and student-to-student patterns provide different opportunities for participation, while strategies such as asking questions, expressing opinions, using fillers, managing interruptions and prioritising fluency can support effective interaction. When speaking opportunities are fairly distributed, learners are more likely to participate actively, practise the target language and develop communicative and pragmatic competence.

In Nigeria, where English language learning occurs within diverse linguistic and classroom contexts, effective turn-taking can help reduce passive participation and create more interactive learning environments. Teachers should therefore deliberately employ turn-taking practices that promote learner initiation, peer interaction and equitable participation, thereby making classroom interaction a more effective resource for language learning.

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