Functions of Teacher Echoing in an EFL Class Delivered via Videoconferencing

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Abstract

Language teachers' Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) has been a popular research area in that language teachers use interaction as a tool to mediate teaching and learning at the same time. Among many moves that language teachers make during the interaction, this study focuses on teacher echoing, which briefly refers to a language teacher's exact verbatim of the self or student utterance. Though language teachers' echoing has sparked interest in studies conducted in face-to-face EFL settings, how it is influenced by online platforms is an under-researched area. With an attempt to fill in this gap, in this study, teacher echoing was observed in an EFL classroom taught at tertiary level via a videoconferencing application. The analysis showed that along with commonly mentioned functions of teacher echoing in the existing literature, which was confirming a correct answer or correcting error, the teacher echo served also several other functions. Among them, the only one that was observed as directly resulting from online teaching environment was teacher repetition that was made to compensate for unintelligible utterances arising from poor internet connection.

Keywords: *Teacher echo, Classroom interactional competence, EFL, Videoconferencing*

Introduction

Classroom discourse relies on the understanding that each language classroom is unique. Research of classroom discourse relies on the assumption that teachers use the interaction as a tool which functions as an aid for learning as well as for managing teaching (Walsh, 2006). As such, EFL classrooms deserve to be researched as a form of educational setting in that the language used in EFL classrooms is the main functional tool that both organizes task flows and establishes interpersonal relations among participants (Kaanta, 2010). Given the multifunctional role of teacher talk in language classrooms (Walsh, 2011), teacher talk has been the focus of research in several other studies (Can Daşkın, 2015; Girgin & Brandt, 2020; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005). In this article, the nature of teacher echoing (a teacher's repetition of what has been just said) has been investigated by sticking to commonly observed classroom interaction pattern that takes place in initiation-response-feedback (IRF) cycle (Walsh, 2002). Teacher echo is taken granted to occur mainly in the feedback turn of IRF sequence (Urhahne, Zhu, & Wagner, 2020). What specific functions this feedback move achieves has been discussed in several other studies. One of the widely known functions of a teacher's verbatim repetition of students' answers is to implicitly signal students that an error is detected, which is also accompanied by the teacher's intonation change that aptly indicates the error detection

(Lyster et. al., 2013). In this kind of error-signalling teacher echo, teachers may choose to repeat not the whole student utterance but only the erroneous part (Yoshida, 2008, p. 83). As in the study of Yoshida (2008, p. 88), if the teacher does not provide the explicit correction or other types of corrective feedback along with a verbatim repetition of a student-error, this may be because the teacher believes in that student's potential to notice and correct the mistake at hand. It is possible for a teacher to add another form of corrective feedback such as recast or explicit correction to teacher echoing to provide combined corrective feedback. Contrary to negative evidence, teacher echo may also be used for highlighting positive evidence. Teachers may aptly employ teacher echo with two simultaneous functions: confirming and amplifying a correct answer by a student (Walsh, 2002). In this case, an immediate teacher echo may turn to be a positive but implicit praise for that student (Urhahne, Zhu, & Wagner, 2020). One other employment of teacher echo is said to be accompanied by a rising intonation in order to seek clarification upon the semantic content of a student's response (Lyster, 1998). Lyster (1998) also mentions two other roles of teacher echo: 'to provide or seek additional information related to the learner's message' (p. 64) by teacher echoes that are usually inserted either into a declarative or an interrogative phrase. Along with this strategic value attributed to teacher echo, it is also possible to mention the existence of a negative attitude toward it, in which teacher echo is seen to be resulting particularly from a teacher's lack of experience (Bittner, 2006 cited in Urhahne, Zhu, & Wagner, 2020, p. 337). Since the teacher observed in our study is a 13-year experienced teacher and the researcher of this study has not observed any tokens of that kind of incompetence in her employment of teacher echo, there is no evidence to build on this criticism. The existing literature discussing teacher echo seems to be quite limited because the discussions mostly revolve around roles assigned to teacher's verbatim repetition of student answers and cases illustrating a teacher's echoing her own utterance are rare. Because our data set revealed exemplary instances where the teacher repeated her own utterance, this study will hopefully reveal promising evidence for the motivations underlying a teacher's self-echoing by answering the following questions:

1- What are the functions of language teacher echo that appears in the form of teacher' self-echo?

2- What are the functions of language teacher echo that repeats students' utterances?

Method

The data of this study was gathered from an intensive but optional summer course designed for a group of university students who proved B1 level English proficiency in in-house assessments and were getting prepared for an in-house proficiency exam administered by the university they were enrolled in. Though the course lasted for two weeks and was taught by a group of EFL instructors, the data used in this study comprises of a two-day class taught consecutively by the same instructor. The EFL instructor in this study is a 13-year experienced female teacher in the context of higher education and she is holding her BA from the English language teaching program. The data is comprised of 4 hours of recordings, each of which lasted between 30-40 minutes. The data was recorded via a video-conferencing application that allowed all participants to join the classes simultaneously. As such, these were classes held via synchronous online teaching.

In order to analyse the functions of teacher echo in the data set, the researcher first transcribed all 4 hours of video recordings. The researcher conducted this analysis with inspiration from the Self Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) proposed by Walsh (2006). Accordingly, SETT is a descriptive framework and approaches to classroom interaction with the assumption that what teachers say in the classroom can accomplish quite a facilitative role for learning to happen if teachers notice this potential of their talk. SETT is used around four different classroom modes which are managerial mode, materials mode, skills and systems mode and classroom context mode (Walsh, 2006). Though there is not a fixed order, managerial mode generally appears at the beginning of the class and the teacher directs learners to the learning mode (Walsh, 2006, p. 68). In materials mode, the teacher leads learners' attention to the teaching material to be used (Walsh, 2006, p. 70). Skills and systems mode covers the instances where language practise is done while classroom mode creates instances for students reflection on what has been done through the class (Walsh, 2006, p. 73-79). By relying on this framework, the researcher decided on teacher echo as the move to be analysed. In order to pinpoint the cases of teacher echoing, a working definition was developed by relying on the related literature. Then the transcriptions were revisited for the identification of teacher echoing and the function(s) each echoing case fulfilled. Regarding the definition of teacher echo, based on the studies of Urhahne, Zhu and Wagner (2020) and Walsh (2006), a working definition of teacher echo has been arrived:

a) A teacher utterance that is comprised of the teacher's exact or slightly changed repetition of a learner's previous utterance

b) A teacher utterance that is comprised of the teacher's exact or slightly changed repetition of his/her previous utterance

The aim of this study is to identify functions of the teacher echo detected in the data set and the findings are thought to offer valuable insights into the nature of EFL teaching done through synchronous online platforms as the data set is comprised of recordings made in an EFL setting where all the classes were held via an application allowing synchronous online teaching. In order to ensure reliability of the functions identified by the researcher, the researcher invited a second-rater to analyse the functions of teacher echo detected in the data set. Since there were many instances, the second-rater randomly analysed one scene from categories predetermined by the researcher. Both raters agreed on the functions associated with the cases of teacher echo.

Findings

The analysis of teacher echoing in this study was conducted on two perspectives: one was on the cases in which the teacher echoed herself while the other cases consisted of the ones in which the teacher repeated the student's utterances. In both perspectives, the teacher echo was identified by following utterances repeated a second time consecutively. The first subsection below involves only cases where the teacher repeated herself. It is important to clarify that the functions discussed in the following sections were not listed according to frequency criterion. The criterion for structuring the findings was identification of a different function of teacher echoing cases. As she got through the data set from the first class hour to the last one, she categorized the teacher echoing cases according to their functions and the following functions were all identified in this data set.

Teacher's Self-Echoing

As can be seen in the tables below, the cases of teacher echo were presented not only with transcription but also with brief descriptions about the moves and the classroom modes identified. It is essential to state that the design and illustration of tables in which extracts were supported by explanations into the mode and move were adopted from the way the data was presented in the study of Chin (2006) who investigated teacher questioning types and feedback in a science class.

Table 1

Compensation Function of the Teacher's Echo

Speaker	Utterance	Move	Type of utterance	Function of echoing	Mode(s) identified
Teacher	*Ok, are all the bookstores same for you? Or do you prefer some of them more than the others? (the question gets less and less audible toward the end of the teacher's talk)*	I	Question		Classroom-Context Mode
Student	*Sorry?*	R	Request		
Teacher	*Do you think all the bookstores are the same for you? Or do you prefer some of them more than the others?*	I	Question	To compensate for technical problems	

As can be seen in Table 1, the first echoing of the teacher's self in the data set was done upon the request of a student. Accordingly, in the video, the teacher was seen to be preparing students for the new unit of the course book. Before starting the new unit, the teacher asked a referential question that aimed to lead the students into the activity. The question was seen to be taking place in meaning and fluency context as it aimed to elicit students' feelings and thoughts about the unit's theme. However, the teacher's first attempt was undermined by a technical problem resulting from the poor internet connection that made the teacher's sound less audible and one learner indicates the need for the teacher's repetition by saying 'Sorry?'. As in the very next move the teacher repeated her previous question by using the same vocabulary, though with a slight change in the sentence structure, this was interpreted as a case illustrating the teacher-echoing done for compensating a technical problem. One other use of teacher echoing was observed again in Managerial Mode where the teacher echoed her previous utterances with slight changes in order to encourage students to answer the question that she had already asked, a way of seeking more participation from learners.

Table 2

Encouragement Function of the Teacher's Echo

Speaker	Utterance	Move	Type of utterance	Function of echoing	Mode(s) identified
Teacher	*Ok. What things do people generally lie about? (5 seconds of silence)*	I	Question		Managerial Mode
Teacher	*Yes, What things do people generally lie about? Why do people lie? About what?*	I	Question	Encouraging student participation	
Teacher	*Any ideas? If it is not a good thing, why do people lie? What do they lie about?*	I	Question		
Student 1	*Some..*	R	Reply		
Student 2	*sometimes*	R	Reply		
Teacher	*Ok, Al..., is that you?*	I	Question		

In Table 2, the teacher was seen to echo herself for the sake of seeking some reply from the students. The scene took place in the Managerial Mode where she was setting the stage for the next exercise, which was a reading activity. In her first move, she did not take any response from the students and her second move, which came after a five-second silence, appeared to be her self-echoing which was again followed by another move of self-echoing. This last move was comprised of some small changes in the sentence structure. The teacher changed the question word 'what' into 'why' and she shortened the question by removing the adverb 'generally' and the preposition 'about'. In the next moves, what was seen was the occurrence of slightly different structural forms of this very first echoing until she got a response from the students. As such, the explicit function of teacher echoing here was to seek participation from the students. Additionally, the slight changes identified in the sentence structure were apparently moves aiming to make the meaning clear for the learners. The third occurrence of the teacher's self-echoing was observed in the following excerpt. Here the teacher is seen to echo herself verbatim for the purpose of reshaping her instruction flow.

Table 3

Instruction Improvement Function of the Teacher's Echo

Speaker	Utterance	Move	Type of utterance	Function of echoing	Mode(s) identified
Teacher	*Thank you very much. Now, we have two sentences here. Exercise 3, and third question. We have two sentences here. First one is there are two main dangers and disadvantages to buying things on the Internet. And second one, on the other hand, shopping for certain things on the Internet has several points in its favour. What is the purpose of these two sentences? Why did the writer write these sentences?*	I	Question	To improve the clarity of the task-instruction	Material Mode

In Table 3, it is seen that the teacher started giving the task-instruction first by focusing on a detail about a task they had already commenced. Then, the teacher is seen to repeat the phrase 'we have two sentences here' to add details about the sentences. One final observation made into the teacher's self-echoing is that fillers such as *right* might have different functions in the teacher's idiolect even though these very same items are repeated once after another. The following excerpt shows how teachers used the very same word, which is 'right', with two different functions.

Table 4

Multiple Functioning of Fillers in the Teacher's Echo

Speaker	Utterance	Move	Type of utterance	Function of echoing	Mode(s) identified
Teacher	*You have some time to read the questions, right? Right↓.*	I	Explanation + Question	Filler	Material Mode

| Students (more than one talking simultaneously) | yes, yes | R | | | |

In Table 4, it is seen that the first time the teacher used the word 'right', she used an intonation pattern suggesting that it was checking confirmation from the students. It functioned as a kind of a confirmation check question. After she gave a task-instruction, she employed the first 'right' with a questioning tone. The very next 'right' word, on the other hand, was apparently a filler that the teacher used to signal that she ended her utterance at hand, which was clearly indicated by the falling intonation accompanied by the word.

Teacher Echoing Students' Utterances

When the teacher echoed what a student said, several recurring functions were noticed in the data set. Among them, the most frequent was the teacher echo that was done for confirming students' answers while also amplifying them for other learners as exemplified in the following table.

Table 5

Confirmation Function of the Teacher's Echo

Speaker	Utterance	Move	Type of utterance	Function of echoing	Mode(s) identified
Teacher	*Could you find three methods?* *Ok, the first one? In the first paragraph, is there a method in the first paragraph?*	I	Question		
Student 3	*Getting people slow down.*	R	Reply		
Teacher	*Yeah, getting people slow down. Hı hı. What else?*	F & I	Confirmation + Question	To amplify the student answer & to confirm the student answer	Material Mode

In Table 5, the most dominant function of teacher echoing, which is confirming and amplifying the student answer, is displayed. The exchange between a student and the teacher is seen to be taking place in the Material Mode. The interaction pattern under the scrutiny perfectly fits into Initiation- Response- Feedback (IRF) sequence. The teacher attracted the students' attention to the reading text that they had just read. The scene in Table 5 describes the phase where the teacher asked reading-comprehension questions and the students were required to show their understanding by answering the questions. In Table 5, one student answered the teacher's question correctly and as the feedback, the teacher repeated and confirmed the student's answer verbatim without explicitly using any confirmation phrase. As such, this case is accepted to be a sample in which the teacher's echoing of a student utterance aims both to confirm and amplify a correct answer by students. Additionally, when the teacher echoed to confirm and amplify a student's utterance, it was sometimes seen to have a dual function: firstly, to confirm the student's answer and then to deploy it as a herald for the teacher's extension of what the student had just said as in the following excerpt:

Student 2: I think hocam, a friendly welcome.

Teacher: (approves) hı hı. Yeah, very good, a friendly welcome (2 seconds of silence). So that they do not steal from the supermarkets. Yes, what else? They make promotion at the entrance of the markets, right?

The instructor repeated the student's utterance verbatim, that is ', a friendly welcome' and after having waited for two seconds, she offered a further explanation, that is 'so that they do not steal from the supermarkets' which worked as the extension of the learner utterance. In this case, teacher echo both confirmed the student's utterance and set the scene for the teacher extension on the student's contribution. One other use of the teacher's echoing of students' utterances is seen to be the teacher's response to the students' inquiry. This can be taken as a kind of approval movement that is slightly different from the confirmation function. The confirmation function was detected in the F move of the I-R-F sequence where the 'I' move was launched by the teacher. On the other hand, the approving response function was detected to happen in the 'I' move of an I-R sequence where the 'I' move was launched by students and 'R' move was done by the teacher, as can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6

Positive Response Function of the Teacher Echo

Speaker	Utterance	Move	Type of utterance	Function of echoing	Mode(s) identified
Student 4	*Sorry! In book? (she is showing a different book to teacher on the screen)*	I	Question		
Teacher	*It's not our book. No, not it's not. Yeah.*	R	Reply		
Student 4	*IELTS book?*	I	Question		
Teacher	*IELTS book, yeah. We sent it to the Google classroom.*	R	Reply	Responding to the student's inquiry	Classroom Setting Mode
Student 4	*Yes, I have it, yes. I have it sorry.*	F	Confirmation		

The case illustrated in Table 6 was experienced in the very first minutes of the lesson. In this scene, a student seemed to be confused about which book to follow and she consulted the instructor. She found out that she was looking at the wrong book and she used a short phrase, which is 'IELTS book?' with an intonation of questioning. Upon this question, the teacher repeated verbatim what the student said. Here, this echoing done by the teacher was explicitly a response to the student's inquiry. It can be also counted another form of confirmation done for student's answer, though this time teacher-echo did not confirm a student's response to a question but a student's correct understanding a case. One other use of the teacher echo is seen to be its employment in order to point at students' errors. The specific feature of this echoing style was seen to be that it was accompanied by a response token 'hımm'.

Table 7

Error Indicating Function of the Teacher Echo

Speaker	Utterance	Move	Type of utterance	Function of echoing	Mode(s) identified
Teacher	*Okay, second Picture. Did you say he is happy?*	I	Question		Material Mode
Student 1	*no*	R	Reply		
Student 2	*No, he is angry, teacher.*	R	Reply		
Teacher	*Angry. Hımmm.*	F	Repetition	Indicating student error	
Student 3	*Angry and thoughtful and bored.*	R	Reply		
Teacher	*Bored, yes he is. How about the third picture?*	F	Confirmation		

In the excerpt shown in Table 7, the teacher asked a question and two different students answered consecutively. The teacher responded to the second student's reply by echoing the key word from the student's utterance. In the next turn, another student attempted to improve the answer by adding another adjective. And the next teacher utterance was seen to be an example of the previously illustrated 'confirmation' function. She again echoed a key word from the third student's answer to confirm and amplify that answer. The final function of the teacher's echoing of students' answers was observed in relation to Yes/No questions for which students gave only the answer of a Yes or No. For this kind of situations, the teacher's echoing of the word Yes or No was a clear indication of her expectation for longer utterances from the students as in the following situation. This attempt can be counted also as a way of seeking clarification from the student.

Table 8

Signalling the Expectation for Longer Student Contribution

Speaker	Utterance	Move	Type of utterance	Function of echoing	Mode(s) identified
Teacher	*Argumentative. So can you say 'the woman is being argumentative'?*	I	Question		
Student 4	*yes*	R	Short answer		
Teacher	*Yes? Okay. So what sort of conversation do you think they are having? What sort of conversation? A happy conversation?*	F & I	Repetition + Questioning	Signalling dissatisfaction	Material Mode
Student 4	*no*	R	Short answer		
Teacher	*No? What sort of, what kind of conversation do you think they're having? You can choose one of these words, argumentative conversation or an irritating conversation?*	F & I	Repetition + Questioning	Signalling dissatisfaction	Material Mode

As illustrated in Table 8, in the first move, the teacher directed a Yes/No question and a student answer with only one word, which is 'Yes'. In the feedback move, the teacher echoed the word 'Yes'. Her second initiation also got only a one-word answer, which was 'No'. Similar to the previous turn, she again echoed the word 'No' that was immediately followed by another wh-question. As such, teacher echoes of the words 'Yes' or 'No' were clear indications of a combined response-initiation moves.

Discussion

Our study confirms that in EFL classroom, repetition appears to be a pedagogic means in the structure of teacher echo where the teacher repeats her/his utterance or a student's utterance with context-oriented functions. The first group of teacher echo described in this study

comprised of the cases where the teacher repeated herself. The first function identified in this category was a completely technology-bound one because the teacher was seen to repeat her question in order to compensate for the low sound quality in the videoconferencing tool. Similar to our study, experiencing a sound problem occasionally has been also reported by the participants in Archibald et al. (2019) whose research suggested that this problem with audio can be prevented by adjusting the audio settings of the equipment used by participants as long as it is not so serious to interfere with the flow of communication. The second use of the teacher's self-echoing was for encouraging student participation by allocating more time for students to think when they displayed no willingness to participate in the class. This finding is confirmatory of using teacher echo as a tool to allocate more thinking time for students as reported by Li (2011) who also described a very similar classroom case where an EFL teacher repeated a referential question to create thinking space for the learners to share their attitudes during a general class discussion. One common diagnosis that has been made in relation to the samples of the teacher's self-echoing in this study, regardless of what function it is fulfilling, is that teacher echoing does not necessarily happen through the exactly same words. Both in the sentence structure and vocabulary choice, there can be slight changes, which typically appear as a form of reformulation, a category of scaffolding (Walsh, 2006). Though Walsh took reformulation that is done on the student utterance as scaffolding, it can be easily suggested that a teacher's reformulation of her very own utterance fulfils the function of scaffolding as this form of the teacher aims to improve learners' understanding of what the teacher says. So, the definition of teacher echo may be revised. This study suggests that a teacher's self-echo refers to cases where a teacher produces a verbatim repetition of her/his previous utterance or comes up with a reformulated utterance of self for scaffolding learning process. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that the scope of scaffolding should be widened to include teacher echo as well.

The second category of teacher echoing was comprised of samples where the teacher repeated a student's utterance. This is a phenomenon that research on teacher echo has mainly investigated (Ekinci, 2020; Lyster, 1998; Urhahne et al., 2020). The first two functions of teacher echo in this category was the confirmation and error-indication functions that has been reportedly mentioned in the literature (Li, 2011; Urhahne et al., 2020; Walsh, 2002). Regarding the confirmation function, teachers' repeating student utterances for confirmation and amplification can be especially frequent in the online class as the teacher may feel that this kind

of amplification is needed by students who may have technic problems and also students' sound quality is not equally good for everybody and the answer should be made audible for all students' reach. Another use of teacher echo was for signalling that the teacher was expecting a longer utterance when a student's answer was comprised of only either of the words 'yes & no'. Though this finding is partly similar to a finding reported by Lyster (1998) who says that teacher echo may be a form of seeking more information from learner, our finding is different in that the teacher's echo functions as a call for longer response and shows the teacher's dissatisfaction with a student's one word short answer. One observation made via this study points at the pervasive occurrence of teacher echo in different classroom contexts. Though it was associated mainly with 'skills and systems mode' in Walsh's description of four-main classroom contexts (2003), our study points at a more prevalent employment of teacher echo by diffusing into other contexts as well, particularly into Material Mode and Managerial mode depending on the function it fulfils.

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