



WHEN THE TOKENS TALK: IRF AND THE POSITION OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT TOKENS IN TEACHER-STUDENT TALK-IN-INTERACTION

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Abstract: In classroom settings, students' competence is regularly evaluated through a default practice named Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) or Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE). In the feedback or evaluation turn, the teacher normally uses acknowledgement tokens (such as uhm, yeah, okay). These tokens perform an active role of maintaining listenership as well as helping the speakers to buy the necessary time to prepare the right answers or expressions, especially in 'response' (R) turns. The aim of this paper is to study how the 'acknowledgement tokens' are placed within the framework of teacher-nominated IRF sequences and to explore the recognizable pattern of 'okay' responses within an IRF framework. The findings suggest an interesting distribution of these tokens, especially with the classifications of 'strong acknowledgement tokens' (such as: yeah or okay) and 'passive reciprocity tokens' (such as: uhm, uhhm, or hmm). Moreover, the findings suggest that the usage of 'ok' responses invites further talk as well as an imminent closure. The findings of this study could be used to create a learner-friendly and inclusive classroom.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, classroom interaction, acknowledgement tokens, IRF

Özet: Sınıf ortamında öğrencilerin yetenekleri IRF (Başlatım-Cevap-Geri Bildirim) veya IRE (Başlatım-Cevap-Değerlendirme) olarak isimlendirilen varsayıma dayanan bir uygulama ile değerlendirilmektedir. Geri bildirim veya değerlendirme sıralarında, öğretmen genellikle alındılama işaretleri (uhm, yeah, okay gibi) kullanmaktadır. Bu işaretler dinleyiciliği korumada aktif bir rol oynadığı gibi konuşmacılara da, özellikle cevap sıralarında, doğru cevapları veya ifadeleri hazırlamaları için gerekli olan zamanı sağlamaktadır. Bu çalışma öğretmen tarafından başlatılmış IRF (Başlatım-Cevap-Geri Bildirim) dizileri yapısında 'alındılama işaretlerinin' nasıl yer alacağını incelemektedir ve bu yapıdaki 'okay' cevaplarının modelini araştırmaktadır. Bulgular, özellikle 'güçlü alındılama işaretleri' (yeah veya okay gibi) ve 'pasif alıcılık işaretleri' (uhm, uhhm veya hmm gibi) sınıflandırmaları ile birlikte bu işaretlerin ilginç bir dağılımını ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Ayrıca, bulgular 'ok' cevaplarını kullanmanın ilave konuşmaları ve olması yakın kapanışları davet ettiklerini göstermektedir. Bu çalışmanın sonuçları öğrenci-dostu ve kapsayıcı sınıfların oluşturulmasında kullanılabilir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Konuşma çözümlemesi, sınıf içi etkileşim, alındılama işaretleri, IRF (Başlatım-Cevap-Geri Bildirim)

1. Introduction

There is a long established tradition of research on classroom talk with varying foci and perspectives. The paper is a systematic study of "acknowledgement tokens" within the framework of IRF/IRE(henceforth IRF) (Initiation-Response-Feedback/Follow-Up/Evaluation)sequences in a classroom. The study aims at contributing to assessing the positioning of acknowledgement tokens in IRF sequences as well as contributing to understanding an inclusive, collaborative,

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participatory and learner-friendly classroom. Moreover, this study highlights how 'student agency' (Jacknick, 2011) manifests itself in pedagogic talk.

In classroom interaction studies, the three-step sequence called IRF or IRE (see for instance, Mehan 1989; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) has been the center of many pedagogical investigations. These triadic dialogues, often seen as a default classroom discourse, assure a space for the participants to provide answers, questions and further evaluations. These sequences also provide an opportunity for the teacher to put a question to the students, then the students' response. IRF plays an important role in shaping the classroom interaction.

In classroom contexts as well as in every day conversations, acknowledgement tokens have been the focus of many studies (e.g. Jefferson, 1978; Schegloff, 1982). Acknowledgement tokens (e.g. 'yeah', 'okay', 'uh mm' or 'alright') are widely used by the participants both in institutional as well as non-institutional settings. These tokens are often minimal and brief and may reveal a number of interpretations. A strong, intonated 'okay', for example, may give a different meaning to the turn than a simple, brief 'ok'. A 'yeah' may acknowledge the previous turn of the participant or invite further talk (Guthrie, 1997; Jefferson, 1981; Schegloff, 2010) to the present turn of the participant. This study aims at examining the following questions about acknowledgement tokens: First; how 'acknowledgement tokens', especially 'ok', 'yeah' and 'uh hm', are positioned in an 'IRF' sequence. Is there any recognizable pattern to the usage of these tokens in relation to a sequence like 'IRF' in classroom teacher-student interaction? Second; if an acknowledgement token like 'yeah' invites 'topic shift' as well as 'speakership initiation' to the turn, how does a token like 'okay' functions in an IRF sequence? A systematic study of these tokens' position in IRF sequences may reveal the functionality of these items in classroom interaction. In order to conduct this study, a brief overview of IRF and acknowledgement tokens will be conducted in the following sections.

2. Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF)

An IRF sequence comprises of three fundamental parts, namely initiation, response and feedback. This first turn, initiation, brings in a new question or issue to the turn and it may extend into 'elicitation' of the previous topic or possibly 'directive' or 'informative' (Hellermann, 2003, p.80) responses. In the second turn, the participant utters a response. The third turn is feedback, a form of evaluation of the response. It can be 'acceptance', 'rejection', 'evaluation' or 'commentary' on the response of the participant's second turn (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975, p.48). However, the response and further 'elicitations' on the turn can take place in subsequent turns ensuring a 'space' for the participant's talk and extend into 'multi-unit turns' ensuring 'cohesive segments of talk' (Hellermann, 2005, p.125).

The third turn, namely feedback, sometimes termed follow-up (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975), hosts participant's views or opinions in response. Contrarily, the third turn is also sometimes termed as evaluation (Mehan, 1979) thus terming the sequence as I-R-E (Initiation-Response-Evaluation). However, the evaluation slot may invite different possibilities. Radford et al (2006) argues there are numerous possibilities to evaluation slot, like extension (Wells, 1993), revoicing, both in the form of repetition and re-formulation (Cazden, 2001), and elaboration (Nystrand et al., 1997). These triadic sequences are a way to generate the pedagogical knowledge by asking,

receiving and evaluating. Cazden (2001) terms IRF as the ‘most common discourse’ in all ‘grade levels’ and most contentiously used as a traditional lesson in ‘formal Western-type schooling’ (p.30).

IRF sequences are usually in a Teacher-Student-Teacher sequence (Bellack et al, 1966; Cazden, 1986; Cazden, 2001). Most often, IRF sequences are viewed as a “a monolithic structure, a controlling device of teachers, and a means to perpetuate the mode of education as transmission” (Li, 2013, p. 70). Students are hardly in the position of initiating these sequences and the pedagogical practices indicate a teacher’s ‘response’ is never followed by an evaluation by the student (see for example, Cazden, 2001). However, other researchers have pointed towards the efficiency and usefulness of IRF sequences (Mercer et al, 2009; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Wells, 1993). Moreover, it is argued (Mercer, 1992) that these sequences are a useful means of ‘monitoring children’s knowledge and understanding’, and eventually it guides their ‘learning’ as well as creates ‘educationally significant or valuable’ ‘knowledge and experience’ (p.218). As a teacher is both a ‘facilitator’ as well as a ‘manager’ of the classroom talk-in-interaction (Nassaji and Wells, 2000, p.377), IRF has always been a preferable rhetorical structure for educators. Some recent studies have also challenged this myth of teacher-nominated, monolithic perspective on IRF (cf. Jacknick, 2011; Li, 2013; Waring, 2009;).

3. Acknowledgement Tokens

Interlocutors use ‘verbal and non-verbal’ ‘behavioral tokens’ and ‘minimal verbalizations’ (e.g. ‘uh huh’, ‘okay’, ‘mm hmm’, ‘yeah’ and so forth) during interactions which helps to manage the interaction in an economic way (Schegloff, 1982, p.77). In fact, to maintain an interactive listening behavior, the participants need to use brief responses instead of lengthy, elaborate turns. In doing so, the co-participant helps the speaker achieve a fluent continuation of the talk and ensures ‘communicative economy’ (McCarthy, 2003) of the talk. Indeed, listenership is an important part of interaction and response tokens play a significant role to maintain the interactional architecture of talk.

Acknowledgement tokens, however, have often been categorized using different terminology. Over the decades, researchers have termed acknowledgement tokens in different terms. In this paper, acknowledgement tokens are termed as ‘acknowledgement tokens’ inspired by Gail Jefferson’s seminal studies. Jefferson’s studies (1981, 1983), mainly focused on everyday telephone conversations, made an early attempt to discover this unclassified class of items and made systematic observations about tokens. However, many studies indicate the difficulty of classifying these items. Schegloff (1982) indicated the difficulty of categorizing these tokens. In some cases, it is rather difficult to understand whether a token is ‘idiosyncratic’ (Jefferson, 1983, p.9) as the participants can often use the items as behavioural expression rather than content-specific item. The tokens may also appear as ‘free-standing’ (Guthrie, 1997; Schegloff, 1982;) independent, non-content verbalizations.

Nonetheless, researchers have also sought to find some ‘identifiable core forms and core uses’ (Gardner, 2001, p.8) of acknowledgement tokens. Some researchers observed that there should be ‘systematicity’ (Guthrie, 1997; Heritage, 1984; Jefferson, 1981) to these occurrences, especially within the ‘sequences’ where

these items are 'employed' (Heritage, 1984, p.335). These 'messy' and 'unpredictable' (Guthrie, 1997, p.399) verbalizations can be analyzed as something orderly and organized. This is in common with CA's principle of 'order at all points' (Sacks et al., 1974). Jefferson's studies (1981, p.11) have explored the relation between topic shifts and acknowledgement tokens.

To understand the functional dimension of acknowledgement tokens, some scholars (e.g. Gardner, 1997; Jefferson 1983, 1993) use the term-'passive reciprocity' and 'speakership'. Jefferson's single case study on Emma and Lottie (1983), for example, suggests acknowledgement tokens such as 'yeah' mostly pop up in the sequences where there is a 'topic-shift' (p.4) in the ongoing talk. In fact, tokens, such as 'mm hm' or 'uh hmm', work as items indicating 'passive reciprocity' (p.4). The idea of 'passive reciprocity' is that the expressions are usually 'non-content turn preface items' (McCarthy, 2003) or 'weak acknowledging tokens' (Gardner, 1997, p.23) which helps the participants to go further through the 'course of talk' (Jefferson, 1983, p.5). The reason it is termed as 'passive' is its indirect, non-interfering stance as the response tokens, such as 'mm mm' or 'uh hm', do not initiate new turn content, rather they confirm the ongoing talk as valid and agreeable. A passive recipient token, such as 'mm hmm', generally does not project any 'speakership continuation or change', any kind of 'activity' or any 'topic shift' (Gardner, 1998, p. 210; also Gardner, 2001). This is the 'most minimal response' to any 'prior talk' (ibid.). The idea is quite close to Schegloff's 'continuer' (cf. Gardner's classification on 'continuer'). It means a token, for example 'uh huh', signals that 'an extended talk is underway' and the present turn 'is not yet complete' (1982, p.88). Schegloff states the discourse is not a 'single speaker's, and a single mind's product' (Schegloff, 1982, p.74), rather a collaborative talk-in-interaction where both participants help each other to continue the talk and successfully accomplish the exchange of turns. During the talk-in-progress, these continuers, in fact, help to continue the talk. If they are uttered by the listener, the tokens such as 'yeah', 'mmm', or 'uhh' help the main speaker to understand listener's 'orientation' or 'affiliation' (Wong, 2000). The production of these tokens assures a 'space' (Wong, 2000) for the current speaker and helps the speaker to continue the talk. At the same time, it also foreshadows the recipient's 'further talk', the expected 'talk in progress' (Wong, 2000) in the coming turns from the co-participant. Indeed, 'continuers' as well as 'passive reciprocity tokens' are mostly 'collaborative' and 'interactive' during the 'co-construction of talk' (Gardner, 2001, p.4). Passive reciprocity tokens, thus, indicate a listener's passive agreement, aligning stance, or affiliation with the current speaker's turns.

The tokens (e.g. 'yeah', 'yes', 'yea' or so), which are mostly related with 'topic shifts', 'agreement' and 'speakership' (Gardner, 2001; Jefferson, 1983) are termed as 'acknowledgement tokens'. Other than the usage of 'yeah' as an 'adjacency pair' to 'yes/no' questions (Schegloff, 1988) or displaying simple 'affirmative' agreements (Drummond & Hopper, 1993b; Gardner, 1997), the token is widely used for acknowledging or claiming the understanding of the previous turn. Jefferson (1983, 1993) claims that 'strong' acknowledgement tokens such as 'yeah' bring an imminent 'shift' from 'passive reciprocity' to 'incipient speakership'. Jefferson (1981) claims that it is most likely that token 'yeah' invites an imminent 'topic shift' and the probability is ten out of nine (p.12). However, a 'mm hmm' may only invite a topic shift once out of ten chances (ibid.) to an ongoing talk. Guthrie's work on the usage of 'okay' and 'mm hmm's in teacher counseling sessions of young children also projects

similar findings suggesting ‘okay’ as a similar item such as ‘yeah’ or any other ‘affirmative response to a yes/no question’ (1997, p.398) usually invites the participants to extend the turns in ongoing talk if compared to other continuers such as ‘mm hmm’ (Guthrie, 1997, p.398; also Gardner, 1998, p.210). As it is most likely that a ‘recipient of some ongoing talk will at some point neither simply shift topic nor talk on the topic in progress, but will produce an acknowledgement token and follow that with a shift in topic’ (Jefferson, 1983, p.4). Drummond and Hopper (1993a, 1993b), also, shared the idea that it is most likely that an acknowledgement token like ‘yeah’ will be followed by ‘further talk’. There is, also, a relation between ‘upward intonated yeah’ and further talk (Jefferson, 1981, p.30). It is more likely that an upward intonated ‘yeah’ will invite more talk. Finally, acknowledgement tokens are mostly aligned with ‘topic shifts’ and are used by participants for acknowledging, agreeing or claiming an understanding of the previous turn.

It is quite important to understand the distributional selections of acknowledgement tokens as they not only foreshadow ‘speakership’ and ‘passive reciprocity’ but also shape the entire ‘interaction’ (Jefferson, 1983, p.18). In the context of IRF sequences, these tokens, as a pertinent part to well-woven interactional organizations, can reveal interesting phenomena. Some longitudinal studies have been conducted which focus on acknowledgement tokens (e.g. Gardner 2001; Jefferson, 1981, 1993; MaCarthy, 2003; Schegloff, 2010). A few studies have also been conducted which explore the relation between these tokens and listenership behaviors’ (e.g. Drummond and Hopper, 1993a; Gardner, 1998). The usage of single tokens, such as ‘yeah’ or ‘no’, in everyday conversations is also the focus of some researcher’s attention (e.g. Drummond and Hopper, 1993b; Jefferson, 1978, 2002). A comparative study between two types of tokens, ‘okay’ and ‘mm hmm’, is also conducted (Guthrie, 1997). Some significant studies have also been done regarding IRF sequence and third turns (Lee, 2007; Waring, 2009). However, the positioning of acknowledgement tokens in IRF sequences in classroom settings can produce some addition to current understanding of these tokens.

4. Method of Analysis

The method of analysis in this paper is Conversation Analysis (hereon CA). CA gives in-depth examinations of interactions using detailed transcription. The TalkBank³ (2003) database has been used to access the data. It is an international platform for sharing data on social interactions from different institutional and non-institutional settings. Data from children interactions is available from the CHILDES⁴ project (Child Language Data Exchange Systems) which was supported initially by grant received from the MacArthur Foundation and further supported by grants from the National Institute of Health (NICHD) (MacWhinney, 2000; MacWhinney, 2001). The entire project is protected under the regulations of GNU Public License (General Public License, GPL) (MacWhinney, 2001) and elaborated, maintained and coordinated by Carnegie Mellon University, University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University. The database has been used by the researchers to share the data for the purpose of varied social interactional researches generating an online access to use, preserve, analyze and make critical study of the archives.

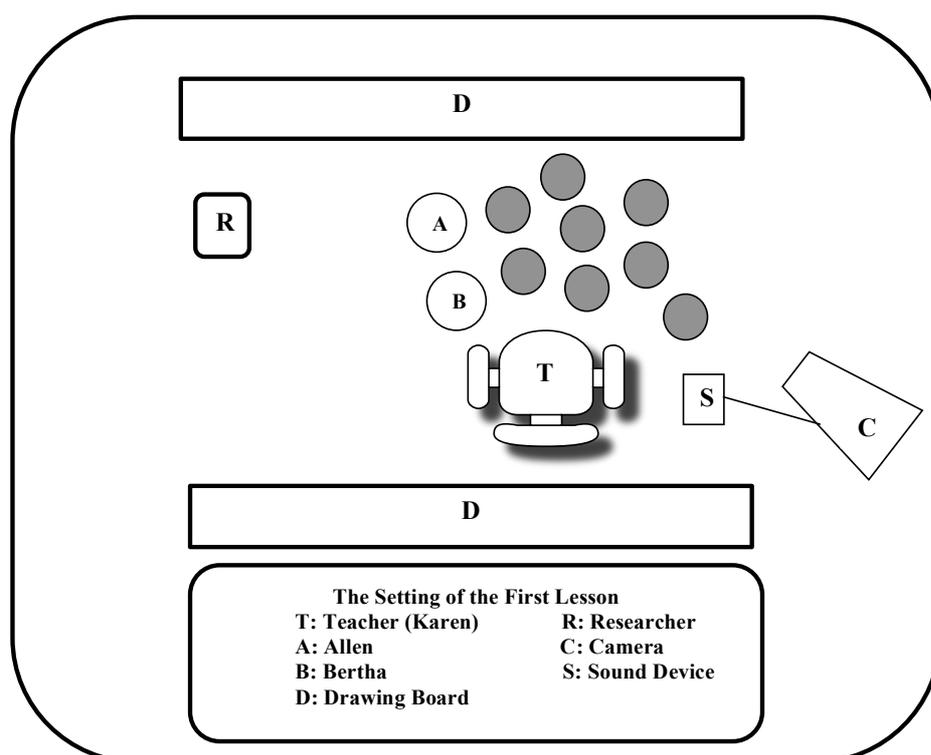
³ TalkBank : www.talkbank.org

⁴ CHILDES project : <http://childes.psy.cmu.edu>

The TalkBank Corpus contains several sections. The data used in this study is taken from a section named ‘Curtis’. The ‘Curtis’ data is a contribution of a research grant from the Office for Educational Research and Improvement, a project conducted by Richard Lehrer (Peabody College, Vanderbilt University Nashville, TN). The project started in 1992 and ended in 1995 (to see more: Jacobson and Lehrer, 2000; Strom et al, 2001; and Lehrer et al., 1998). The data comes from a video recording of a second-grade learners. In total, the data contains recordings of 14 sessions and teacher teaches ‘Geometry in Design’ (to see more: Watt & Shanahan, 1994). The language of interaction is English, used as the First Language (L1) by all the participants. In this study, two lessons are being selected.

5. Participants and Setting

The sessions take place in a formal, teacher-fronted classroom. Students sitting on the floor, take part in the discussion. The teacher (named Karen) talks about geometrical designs and the shapes of objects. However, participants, from the first lesson, primarily talk about geometrical designs (e.g. flips and turns). On the contrary, participants from the second lesson talk about the conceptualization of geometrical items, e.g. symmetry, identical etc. The overarching aim of the class is to increase the students’ pragmatic knowledge of geometrical shapes, designs and objects.



The aim of this paper is to discover the positioning of acknowledgement tokens in IRF sequences and the functionality of ‘okay’ and other affirmations within the framework of IRF sequences. As it has been found, the student responses have a good number of ‘passive reciprocity tokens’ often helping them to buy the essential time to assure the holding of the interactional floor. By the teachers, however, ‘okay’ is

mostly used by the teacher, both as a ‘feedback’ as well as an initiation of ‘further talk’. Sometimes the end of the IRF sequence is intertwined with a new initiation. However, tokens such as ‘okay’, ‘yeah’ or ‘yes’ are hardly used in initiations. Also, the teacher uses ‘passive reciprocity tokens’ quite frequently as feedback to student responses as well as a tool of supporting students’ responses and maintaining their listenership.

6. 1. Strong and Weak Acknowledgement Tokens

The following Extract 1.1⁵ is taken from the first lesson of the Curtis corpus. The teacher is talking about different geometrical shapes and designs (e.g. ‘flips’ and ‘turns’ etc.). She also invokes previous classroom sessions when they were building model communities. She has been asking the students about what they ‘do know about turns’.

Extract 1.1 What Did We Know More About Flips and Turns

Participants:

Teacher, Karen (K), Bertha (B), Several Students (SV), Raphael (R), Sam (S)

1 K (I)→ fir::st (.) they were talking about (0.50) [flips=
 2 SV °flip°]=
 3 K and turns, which is <what I wanted> you to be doing, I wanted you to get
 4 you::r heads set on the idea of, flips and turns ((creaking sounds)) and
 5 to kind of ask yourself (0.5) hmm mmm (0.2) what is it †exactly that I do
 6 know? about flips and turns (.) beca::use (0.8)((noise))two weeks ago,
 7 when we were building the model communities, did we know a lot about
 8 flips and turns?
 9 SV no. ((several students together)
 10 (0.2)
 11 K (I)→ no. <what did we know> more about, flips or turns? ((teacher’s gaze not
 12 pointing towards any specific student))
 13 SV turns. ((several students at a time))
 14 R flips. ((one student))
 15 S turns. ((another student))
 16 K (are you saying) we knew more about [flips=
 17 S turns turns]=((student interruption))
 18 K when we were building the model communities?
 19 (0.4)
 20 K (I)→ are you say(ing)? we knew more about turns Bertha.
 21 (0.4)
 22 B wel::l, because we, uhm mmm, because, uhm mmm (.) because we used logo
 23 for our turns, and not flips.
 24 (0.2)
 25 K(I)→ OKay. tell me a <little bit> more about how does logo? make use of turns.
 26 B well,((someone coughs)) unhh(.) if you WANTed to make a s::quar::e.
 27 K uh hm
 28 B you have to have turn::s on it.
 29 (1.2)
 30 K(I)→ why do I have to have turns to make a square? tell me more.
 31 (1.1)
 32 B well, because if you don’t just want a– you can’t make a †square with
 33 just a straight line(0.5)you need (1.0) you need FOUR li::ne (0.7)
 34 and, (you)†have to have corners, and you need turns.
 35 K okay=
 36 B so uhm (1.4) †logo‡ uses tu::rns.
 37 (0.6)
 38 K ok, †what kind of‡ turns, did we- lets::s lets someone else, °uanhh° (.)
 39 talk a little bit.

The teacher introduces the topic “flips” followed by a pause and a student interruption. In second turn, she clarifies the aim of the session and asks the students to think about the ideas of flips and turns. The teacher’s initiation is followed by a negative response though the students come into an agreement with teacher’s previous

⁵ TalkBank/ Curtis / Class 1/ Dec01/ folder (a) /0.00 min to 1.24 min

turn. In the first and second sequence (from line 1-11 and 12-18), participants haven't used any acknowledgement tokens.

Next, the teacher reformulates her question asking 'what did we know more about flips and turns' (line 11). In return, a group of students replies that they know more about 'turns' (in line 13). Raphael claims that they know more about 'flips' (in line 14) and Sam suggests that the proper answer should be 'turns' (in line 15). As the question is asked quite generally, the answers came one after another from different individuals (e.g. Raphael and Sam) and a group of other students (collectively SV). However, the teacher reformulates the question again. In line 16, she asks the same question again. Interestingly, Sam, in line 17, interrupts the teacher and claims that the proper answer to the previous question should be 'turns'. Still, the teacher continues her turns and finishes in line 18. After finishing her turn, a short pause (line 19) follows giving the teacher the opportunity to ask the question again. As Sam does not self-select himself with the next turn, the teacher, in line 20, asks this question again to Bertha with the technique of "current speaker selects next".

Bertha takes the turn at this TRP (line 22) with a lot of hesitance and pauses. She starts her turn with a prolonged 'well' with a stretching on the last syllable and repetition of 'because' three times. This 'well' helps her to buy time and provides her the space to think more while she is talking. The passive reciprocity tokens such as "uhm mmm" are used twice in this turn. As a 'passive reciprocity token', it helps her to continue the talk. In feedback, the teacher acknowledges her response with an upward intonated acknowledgement token, 'Okay' (line 25). This can be an acknowledgement of the previous turn or a simple feedback to Bertha's previous response. The 'okay' invites further talk. As it shows, the teacher terminates the previous sequence with this acknowledgement token with a confirmation that she has understood the previous statements. Now, she claims more clarification with a new question that 'how does logo make use of turn'. In response, Bertha's answer (line 22-23) points towards the fact that a logo uses turns instead of flips. So, Bertha's turn (in line 22 to 23) does not explain whether they really know more about turns, rather she explains that 'logo' makes a good use of 'turns'. Bertha (B) starts elaborating her answer with a prolonged utterance like "well" followed by a passive reciprocity token "unhh". In feedback (line 27), the teacher (K) shares a 'passive reciprocity token'-'uh hm'. The token helps in two ways. First, it positions the teacher as a passive recipient, and maintains teacher's listenership. Second, it provides Bertha the space to continue her turn. Thus, the 'uh hm' as a feedback turn in the IRF pattern helps the student to continue the talk and finish the answer.

In the previous sequence, Bertha claims there is a relation between 'turns' and 'square'. Now, the teacher initiates a new sequence (in line 30) asking clarification on 'turns' and 'square'. Following teacher's initiation, Bertha starts her turn (line 32) after a pause. In response (from line 32 to 34), Bertha does not use any acknowledgement token. In feedback, however, the teacher uses one. In line 35, the teacher again uses "okay" as feedback on Bertha's response. The token does not follow further talk from teacher rather Bertha continues her talk. In the next turn, teacher acknowledges with a token again, 'ok' (line 38). Although she starts reformulating the question (line 30), she continues her turn, followed by a self-repair, then selecting another student for the next question. The teacher ends the sequence here and starts a new IRF sequence with another student.

In this part of the extract, the teacher is using strong acknowledgement tokens as a confirmation of student responses. The student, however, is using passive reciprocity tokens as continuers. Teacher uses passive reciprocity tokens both as a ‘continuer’ and a means of maintaining ‘listenership’.

6.2. Passive Reciprocity Tokens and Continuers

This lesson starts with a ‘story time’ where the teacher shares a story with the students while invoking some ideas from the students. After this story session, the students undertake some writing exercises. The following excerpt⁶ pops up right after this writing session. The teacher asks the students what they really understand by ‘symmetrical’ and if symmetrical items are always ‘identical’.

Extract 2.1 Are Twins Always Identical?

Participants:

Teacher, Karen (K) and Bertha (B).

203 K(I)→ Bertha, †what you‡ mean, when you say the word symmetrical. everybody
 204 <right now> what you’re guessing what it might mean (0.3) because we are
 205 not- none of us are sure to get.
 206 B well (.) unnhhh. I think †symmetrical means, unhh(0.4) things ar::e
 207 unlike, >the same<.
 208 (1.3)
 209 K tell me †more †about that, because I don’t know exactly what you mean it
 210 when it says, says th::e same. you mean, you agree with Nichel that the
 211 symmetrical means identical? exactly the same‡ kept them on part.
 212 (1.7)
 213 B †oh you can sort of tell (th)em apart.

214 K(I)→ <how could you> tell them apart if they were exactly the sa::me?
 215 B unhhhh. the identical, is like something, uhmm (0.4) that like if you
 216 had, this time, like, °I m just making myself°, someone just have two
 217 little babies.
 218 K unhuh.
 219 B ummmm, one is a girl and one is a boy. they’d be identical.
 220 (1.2)
 221 K two babies would b::e
 222 (0.3)
 223 B nope, no‡.
 224 (1.8)
 225 K(I)→ †sometimes twins are identical. are twins? always identical.
 226 B no. ((others also))
 227 K °no°.
 228 B †some.
 229 (0.7)
 230 K some are, some are identical. alright.

The extract starts with an initiation by the teacher and other-selection of Bertha as the next addressee (line 203). Teacher asks what the word ‘symmetrical’ means (line 203) but immediately after asking Bertha, followed by a short pause, she addresses the

⁶ TalkBank/Curtis/Class2/Dec05/ folder(c)/from 6.55 min to 7.52 min.

whole class, uttering “everybody”. The teacher’s self-repair not only grabs the pupils’ attention but is also used as a way of giving them food for thought to ponder over the question asked to Bertha. In this IRF, the response by Bertha starts quite hesitantly with an expression ‘well’ followed by a short pause and passive reciprocity token ‘unnhhh’ (line 206). These acknowledgement tokens right after the teacher’s questioning is not only acknowledging the teacher’s prior question but is also acknowledging her speakership endowed upon her by the teacher. The second acknowledgement token ‘unhh’ buys her a little time to answer and to keep the floor. She utters ‘symmetrical’ means ‘unlike the same’ (line 206 to 207). Her emphasis on ‘symmetrical’ with upward intonation is followed by a classic continuer such as ‘unhh’. As Bertha is explaining her ideas in the response section of the IRF sequence, these tokens such as ‘unnhhh’ or ‘unhh’ actually help her to retain the ‘speakership’. As she is trying to find an appropriate answer, the acknowledgement tokens show her hesitancy in producing the idea as she buys a little time. In sum, the tokens help her to retain her speakership (line 206). The sequence ends with the feedback from the teacher (line 209 to 211). Interestingly, teacher’s use of phrasings such as ‘you mean’, ‘you agree’ (line 210) suggests that she is not accepting the ideas wholeheartedly into the ‘learning community’ and asks Bertha to explicate more on the issue.

In the second IRF sequence (in line 214), the teacher gives another question. She starts the turn quite quickly with the phrasing like ‘how could you’. This shows her sense of urgency. The intonation on the word ‘exactly’ and the stretching of ‘same’ (line 214) suggests the emphasis teacher wants to make. Following this initiation, Bertha’s response starts quite hesitantly with a token such as “unnhhh” (215). This passive reciprocity token helps her to maintain her speakership of the turn, and also it buys her some time to produce a response. The turn is also laden with ‘continuing intonations’, one after another. The phrasing such as ‘like’ as well as ‘I am just making myself’ shows her hesitancy in confirming the proposition. At the end of her response (line 216), Bertha starts exemplifying a hypothesis. She says ‘someone just have two little babies’. In feedback, the teacher shares a passive recipient token ‘un huh’ (218). Interestingly, this token helps the sequence in two ways. First, the token shows an acceptance of the previous turn. It serves as a feedback to Bertha’s previous response. Second, the minimal response helps to show her passive reciprocity and ensures a space for Bertha’s speakership. Following the teacher’s feedback, Bertha ends her turn. She claims these two babies (line 219) are identical and her turn starts with ‘ummm’ serving as a classic continuer.

In the next IRF sequence, an acknowledgement token is used quite differently from the previous instances. In the first extract, ‘okay’ is used as an acknowledgement token. It pops up in the beginning of the feedback. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement tokens such as ‘okay’, ‘yes’, ‘yeah’ or ‘alright’ are quite interchangeably used by the participants. In this case, the teacher initiates a new question to Bertha (line 225). Her turn begins with an upward intonated ‘sometimes’ (line 225). With this phrasing, she proposes that ‘sometimes’ the ‘twins are identical’. Following the statement, she initiates a new question, ‘Are twins always identical?’ (line 225). In response, Bertha, as well as others, says ‘no’ (line 226). The teacher also confirms the answer with a softly marked ‘no’ in the next turn (line 227) followed by Bertha’s brief turn. In feedback, the teacher suggests ‘some are identical’ (line 230) followed by the acknowledgement token ‘alright’. Interestingly, the token does not appear at the beginning of the turn. Instead, it appears at the end of the

teacher's feedback suggesting a closure of the sequence as well as a topic-shift. The talk continues and the teacher initiates questions to other students.

In this extract, passive reciprocity tokens are found in different parts of IRF sequence. Student responses have passive reciprocity tokens both as a response to teacher's initiation as well as classic continuers. Interestingly, the teacher also uses passive reciprocity tokens as feedback to student's response and the token acts in support of student talk. Also, the strong acknowledgement tokens, for example, 'alright', appears in the feedback section where the teacher terminates the IRF sequence responses from other students.

6.3. A Few More 'okay's

Extract 2.2⁷ is a continuation of the previous lesson. However, before starting the new IRF, the teacher was busy instructing the students. They were making some 'core squares'. Every student was assigned the responsibility of making their own models. Scattered around the floor, the pupils have built some model 'core squares'. These model-building sessions are used to assess their levels of understanding. In the extract below, the teacher again starts the discussion with the students. In Excerpt 2.2, the teacher asks Allen about the idea of 'symmetrical patterns'. In response, Allen exemplifies 'the 'dinosaurs' as 'patterns'. He suggests symmetrical means a kind of repeatable pattern.

Extract 2.2 The Patterns of Dinosaur

Participants: Teacher, Karen (K), Allen (A).

58 K(I) nobody should be touching their core square, right now. you should all
 59 have your eyes and ears on Allen. okay. tell us about the pattern you're
 60 thinking about Allen.
 61 A wel::1, I am thinking about (.) like (0.4) the pattern of di:nosau::r.
 62 (0.3)
 63 K ok.
 64 (1.0)
 65 A wel::1 like (1.1) (let's say) the first one was Tyrannosaurs ↑Rex.
 66 K uh mmm.
 67 (0.3)
 68 A the second one is a Dimetrodon.
 69 K uh mmm.
 70 (0.7)
 71 A the third one, Cantrosaurus.
 72 K uh mmm.
 73 (0.8)
 74 A hhhh. and then (0.8) so on and on and on.
 75 K(I)→ so, that would be the <part of his> pattern that would repeat (.) ↑could
 76 ↑you say that? for <one more time> so that they understand the pattern,
 77 for three things in order.
 78 (0.5)
 79 A °ok°.
 80 (1.2)
 81 A Tyrannosaur::s.
 82 K uh mmm.
 83 A Dimetrodon.
 84 (0.6)
 85 A an:d Cantrosaurus↓.
 86 K(I)→ ok. so those are the- those three dinosaurs repeating hhh. is the pattern
 87 Allen wants us to think about. ↑how ↑does the pattern help you explain
 88 what does the word, symmetrical, might mean?

The teacher attracts the attention of the students (line 58) by stating that they should keep their 'eyes and ears on Allen'. Teacher ends the imperative with an 'okay' (line

⁷TalkBank/Curtis/Class2/Dec05/folder (d)/from 1.90 min to 3.45 min.

59). She is not acknowledging any previous turn. It's more like a termination of her general address to the students. This 'okay' not only invites further talk to the turn but also acts like a bridge between two separate sections of her turn. It functions as an imperative as well as a cue for starting a new IRF sequence. The teacher finishes her turn with a new question to Allen.

In response, Allen (A) starts with a prolonged 'well', a pause and a stretched answer, 'dinosaur'. When providing feedback (line 63), the teacher receives Allen's proposition with an acknowledgement token, 'ok'. In the next turn, Allen proposes the first example as 'Tyrannosaurs Rex' (line 65). Allen's turn is followed by the teacher's passive reciprocity token 'uh mmm' (line 66), an aid to Allen's 'speakership'. In the following turn, Allen's second example, "Dimetrodon" (line 68), is also followed by the same token 'uh mmm' from the teacher (line 69). Again, the teacher's passive reciprocity token 'uh mmm' (line 72) follows Allen's third example, 'Cantrosauras' (line 71). In all these cases, the teacher's feedback is followed by short pauses (as in line 67, 70 and 73). Nevertheless, the teacher does not self-select for the next turns. Like the previous sequences in extract 1.1 and extract 2.1, the passive reciprocity tokens help to maintain teacher's listenership as well as a passive acknowledgement of Allen's proposition. Allen's listing goes on uninterrupted until he eventually finishes his turn in line 74. After he signals that these are his examples, the teacher self-selects for the next turn (line 75) without any inter-turn pause.

In the next sequence (line 75), the teacher asks Allen to put these examples more clearly. Noticeably, the teacher's emphasis on 'that' (line 75) brings in emphatic acceptance of Allen's examples. In the next turn (line 79), Allen's response is marked with a short utterance, 'ok'. In this case, this token is a 'free standing' token, instead of a strong acknowledgement token as used by the teacher on other occasions. Nonetheless, Allen's response follows the listing of examples (from line 81 to 85). In line 82, Allen's turn is again acknowledged with a passive reciprocity token 'uh mmm' (as used by the teacher in the previous sequences). Following all the examples, the teacher (K) again acknowledges Allen in line 86. This time, she uses the token 'ok' at the beginning of her feedback (line 86) is followed by further talk.

In this extract, the teacher, like in previous sequences, used 'ok' as a strong acknowledgement token when giving feedback to a student response as well as when terminating an IRF sequence. Students also used 'ok'. When Allen was asked to repeat his list, he responds with an 'ok'. This response acts as an answer to teacher's command rather an assessment of previous turn. We can compare it to the second turn of 'yes/no' questions. Here, Allen's 'ok' is free standing rather a strong acknowledgement token.

7. Discussion

Acknowledgement tokens, 'weak' and 'strong' (e.g. Jefferson, 1981; Schegloff, 2010), were distributed in a ubiquitous manner throughout the IRF sequences exclaimed above. As mentioned in the earlier discussion, acknowledgement tokens, e.g. 'yeah', 'okay' or 'alright', invite more talk (Guthrie, 1997; Jefferson, 1981) as well as acknowledging or accepting the contents of the turn. A 'passive reciprocity' token, such as 'uhmm', 'unhh' or 'mmhmm', (e.g. Jefferson, 1981; Schegloff, 2010) acknowledges the turns with minimal interference. These 'passive reciprocity tokens'

act like a passive acceptance of the previous turn contents and give the speaker an opportunity to continue the talk. The sequences mostly appear in Teacher (Initiation)–Student (Response)–Teacher (Feedback/Follow-up) sequences. It is important to clarify the way the sequences appear in these extracts and this will help to understand the later explanations regarding the positioning of the acknowledgement tokens in IRF sequences.

Now, the first research question aims at exploring the positioning of acknowledgement tokens in these IRF patterns. In this case, strong acknowledgement tokens, such as ‘okay’ or ‘alright’, are used by the teacher (for example: line 25, 35, 38, extract 1.1; line 230 in extract 2.1; line 63, 86 and 102 in extract 2.2) quite ubiquitously. A recent study by Walsh & O’Keeffe (2010) claims strong tokens like ‘okay’ is found more densely at the beginning of interactions with ‘clustering’ around certain phrases too. In this study, strong acknowledgement tokens such as ‘okay’ or ‘alright’ are found mostly in feedback sections. Mostly, these strong acknowledgement tokens are used in the beginning or middle of the feedback. These tokens either acts as an assessment to previous student response or gives a cue of a new teacher initiation. If the teacher addresses the whole class and wants to pull attention of the students, an ‘okay’ or ‘alright’ acts as a free standing token, an indication of closure of previous IRF sequence, and a new initiation in the IRF pattern. Often, these strong acknowledgement tokens raises the possibility of of ‘further talk’ (Jefferson, 1981; Schegloff, 2002) followed by a ‘revoicing’ (Wells, 1993), ‘repetition’, ‘re-formulation’ (Cazden, 2001) or ‘elaboration’ (Nystrand, 1997). Strong acknowledgement tokens, however, are very scarce in initiation sections unless the previous feedback ends with a token. In that case, the feedback, follow-up or evaluation ends and a new ‘initiation’ or ‘elicitation’ (Hellerman 2005) starts in the same turn where a strong acknowledgement token acts as a bridge between two IRF sequences.

Interestingly, students scarcely used strong acknowledgement tokens. In this study, only one exception is found. A strong acknowledgement token, in this case ‘ok’, is found in the ‘response’ section (line 79 in extract 2.2) where the student tries to give a reply to teacher’s command. In fact, the student tries to acknowledge teacher’s initiation and clarify his understanding. However, it will be quite misleading to generalize that the students do not use strong acknowledgement tokens but we found less references of strong acknowledgement tokens from the students.

Passive reciprocity tokens, on the contrary, are present throughout either as ‘weak acknowledgement tokens’ (Jefferson, 1981) or ‘continuers’ (Schegloff, 1982; Schegloff, 2010). These tokens are used both by the students as well as the teacher in ‘initiation’, ‘response’ as well as ‘feedback’ sections. The passive reciprocity tokens in feedback sections usually act as a ‘weak acknowledgement’, a source of maintaining the ‘listenership’ status (cf. with ‘interpersonal discourse markers’, Walsh & O’Keeffe, 2010), an affirmation of support, affiliation to student’s ongoing talk and temporary acceptance of the student’s turns (as in line 27 in extract 1.1; line 218 in extract 2.1; 66, 69, 72, 82 in extract 2.2). We also found that passive reciprocity, if appears in initiation, are often used as ‘continuers’ or ‘filler expressions’. A short ‘un hhh’ or ‘uhmm’ helps the teacher in formulating the preceding or following question. Contrarily, a short ‘hmm mmm’ (as in line 5, extract 1) may stand as a device to bring the students into the process of collective inquiry

and to set the direction of the classroom talk. Students, also, use passive reciprocity tokens (as in line 22 and 36 in Excerpt 1.1; line 206, 215, 219 in extract 2.1; line 92 and 109 of extract 2.2). In these cases, when students use these tokens freely without any reference to prior or preceding turns, these appear mostly as ‘filler expressions’ or ‘thinking expressions’.

The second research question aims at exploring the role of ‘okay’ in an IRF pattern. In these excerpts, teacher’s acknowledgement tokens, ‘okay’ and ‘alright’, are used in feedback sections either to acknowledge or to bring closure to an IRF sequence. As discussed before, ‘ok’ can stand alone as an acknowledgement of student response (as in line 35 in extract 1.1, line 63 in extract 2.2). In an IRF sequence, an ‘okay’ or ‘alright’ in feedback section is followed by ‘further talk’ or ‘topic shift’ (cf. Guthrie, 1997). An ‘ok’ or ‘okay’, whether normally uttered (as in line 25 and 38 in extract 1.1; 86 in extract 2.2) or marked by upward intonations (as in line 102 in extract 2.2), invites further talk to the turns, especially in the form of ‘elicitation’ in ‘feedback’ section of these IRF sequences. Jefferson’s studies (1981, 1983, 1993) suggest that ‘yeah’ invites further talk. Guthrie’s findings on ‘okay’ (1997) also points towards the relation between ‘ok’ and further talk in the turn. In this study, ‘okay’ functions both as a feedback resource to student response as well as a cue of imminent closure of the IRF sequence. Nonetheless, the students hardly use ‘ok’ as a token unless used as ‘yes/no’ answer to teacher’s question or an imminent affirmation following the teacher’s initiation (which is the case in line 69, extract 2.2).

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, passive reciprocity tokens are used by the students quite ubiquitously as they try to give answers to questions. In the teacher’s case, passive tokens are used as a device to maintain the listenership. Strong acknowledgement tokens act as a confirmation, an acknowledgement, an acceptance of previous response or a termination of the sequence followed by further talk in the turn. Also, students scarcely use strong acknowledgement tokens. It also suggests that we can expect more ‘uhm mm’ or ‘un hhs’ rather than prompt ‘okay’s from the students. If not asked to do something by the teacher, students hardly prefer to use ‘okay’. Contrarily, students often use ‘uh hmms’. Primarily, such passive reciprocity tokens are used as ‘continuers’, ‘thinking expressions’ or ‘fillers’ to buy the time during student responses. From a learner friendly, inclusive classroom perspective, it’s quite important that a teacher needs to be aware of the usage of tokens, how to wait for the right responses after a few ‘uh hmms’ from the students.

For further research, a study can look into the positioning of acknowledgement tokens in Student-Teacher IRF sequences. Some recent studies have explored the student-initiated IRF sequences (e.g. Jacknick, 2011; Waring, 2009). Further studies can take place to explore the positioning of tokens in initiation section of the IRF pattern. We can also explore this study in different institutional or non-institutional settings.

In conclusion, the study made an effort to understand the acknowledgement tokens, its positioning in the IRF patterns. Naturally, questions may come how a token can talk! As a phenomenon, these tokens invite a critical understanding. A small ‘okay’, a prolonged ‘yeaah’, or little ‘uhum’, are often a simple, negligible phenomenon in our everyday talk-in-interactions. However, these often ‘unclassified’, ‘homogenous’, ‘messy’ linguistic items may talk more than we can often expect, add more meanings

to its unnoticed meanings. The positions, the characteristic traces and the patterns of these tokens may often help us to produce the insight of the interactional details (cf. ‘rethinking the role of teacher’ and ‘shaping learner contribution’, Walsh, 2012). Even if these tokens are often so brief, small and minimal, they may serve the understanding of interactional dynamics of classroom settings in different pedagogical settings. A close understanding of these tokens may bring awareness to the teachers to facilitate student responses, to ensure a pro-pupil environment, to create a space of comfort for the students to articulate their understanding, to promote the threads of thoughts or to share more than what they do it today. Indeed, a token can talk!

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Transcription Notations

The transcription keys used in this transcription are as follows:

er:::	: prolongation of the utterance.
yeaah	: emphasis on particular intonation.
[: overlapping of the utterance of the participants.
]	: termination of the overlapping.
(.)	: a micro-pause.
(0.2)	: interval in seconds.
OK	: exclusively loud sounds than normal utterance.
x	: inaccessible words
(xx)	: observer's guess
° °	: quieter sounds than surrounding turns.
(())	: translator's note
><	: quicker pace
<>	: slower pace
?	: rising terminal intonation
.	: falling terminal intonation
=	: latching between utterances
he	: laughter
↑	: rising pitch
↓	: lower pitch
hhh	: speaker in-breath
hhh.	: speaker out-breath
▶(I)	: marking the initia