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Classroom Interaction and Teacher Scaffolding in Multi-Grade Arabic Instruction: Supporting SDG 4 Inclusive Quality Education at an Islamic Boarding School

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ABSTRACT

Objective: *Research on classroom interaction and scaffolding in foreign language learning has predominantly focused on age-homogenous settings, leaving a gap in understanding how interactional patterns unfold in cross-grade environments. This study aims to investigate classroom interaction dynamics, Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) patterns, and teacher scaffolding strategies within a competency-based, multi-grade intermediate Arabic class combining junior high (grades 7–9) and senior high (grades 10–12) students at Pondok Pesantren Al-Mumtaza.* ***Method:*** *Employing a descriptive qualitative design rooted in Classroom Discourse Analysis (CDA), oral interactions were audio-recorded during interactive instruction, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Sinclair and Coulthard's IRF framework alongside Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).* ***Results:*** *The findings reveal four key insights: the IRF cycle functioned as a predictable structural anchor for real-time speech production; intensive oral drilling and choral response enhanced phonological memory and speech automaticity; instructor scaffolding through mediational prompting and vocal encouragement overcame cognitive hesitation and lowered affective filters; and adaptive discourse management ensured inclusive participation regardless of age hierarchies.* ***Novelty:*** *The study is the first to document Classroom Discourse Analysis in a competency-based, cross-grade Arabic-as-a-foreign-language class within a Pesantren context, demonstrating that such grouping directly advances SDG 4 (Quality Education) by providing inclusive, equitable, and effective foreign language instruction when supported by active, contingent, and responsive teacher scaffolding.*

INTRODUCTION

Elementary education constitutes a critical phase in children's linguistic development, particularly in school settings where more than one language is taught simultaneously. In the context of foreign language instruction, active and responsive real-time oral interaction serves as a primary foundation for developing fluency and mastering Arabic grammatical structures as a Foreign Language (AFL) (Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Interaction is central to instructed second language acquisition (Loewen & Sato, 2018), and classroom talk creates opportunities for pushed output that drives more accurate and fluent production (Swain, 1985, 1995). Communicative approaches likewise place such interaction at the center of instruction (Nunan, 1987; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The communicative construction of students' grammatical understanding and vocabulary requires dynamic classroom interaction and the systematic implementation of scaffolding strategies (gradual support) by the instructor (Van de Pol et al., 2010; Van de Pol et al., 2019). However, the dynamics of this interaction become complex when applied in learning environments that implement competency-based grouping, where students from various educational levels and age groups are placed together in the same classroom.

Most of the literature on classroom interaction and scaffolding strategies in second and foreign language learning has thus far remained focused on homogeneous learning

groups. Previous studies have generally observed classrooms segmented by age boundaries or specific formal education levels, such as exclusively at the Junior High School or Senior High School levels. Recent studies of classroom dialogue show that the quality of teacher–student talk is related to student engagement and achievement (Howe et al., 2019; Muhonen et al., 2018; Sedova et al., 2019) and have produced analytic frameworks for coding such talk (Hennessy et al., 2016; Hennessy et al., 2020; Mercer et al., 2019; Vrikki et al., 2019); however, this evidence rests largely on age-homogeneous classrooms. Consequently, there remains a shortage of studies that deeply explore how oral interaction structures-particularly the adaptability of Initiation-Response-Feedback/Evaluation (IRF/IRE) patterns (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975)-unfold within cross-grade learning groups focusing on intermediate competency achievement.

To address these limitations, this study proposes an integrated approach combining responsive scaffolding strategies and oral drilling techniques tailored for multi-grade classrooms. The applied scaffolding framework refers to the three main characteristics outlined by Van de Pol et al. (2010): Contingency (support tailored to student needs), fading (gradual withdrawal of support), and transfer of responsibility (handing over learning responsibility to the student). Recent work on classroom dialogue and scaffolding shows how contingent teacher support is enacted in interaction (Muhonen et al., 2016; Van de Pol et al., 2019), while affective factors such as anxiety and positive emotion also shape learners' willingness to speak a foreign language (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele et al., 2019; Teimouri et al., 2019). Through a combination of prompting techniques, choral responses, and affective encouragement, instructors can adapt their pacing and instructions so that oral interaction can be engaged in inclusively without being constrained by age hierarchies.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus of investigation: Classroom Discourse Analysis within intermediate-level Arabic learning groups that combine students from grades 7-9 (Junior High) and grades 10-12 (Senior High) based on ability qualifications at Pondok Pesantren Al-Mumtaza. Beyond its pedagogical contribution, this competency-based cross-grade grouping directly speaks to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which calls for inclusive and equitable access to learning regardless of a learner's formal educational stage. Inclusive-education scholarship stresses that equity is realized through everyday classroom pedagogy and not by access to schooling alone (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Beaton, 2018), and that SDG 4 has to be examined at the micro (classroom), meso, and macro levels (Boeren, 2019; Unterhalter, 2019). Furthermore, this study specifically documents the integration of affective scaffolding and oral drilling in Islamic education to build phonological memory and student self-confidence.

This study is expected to provide significant theoretical contributions and pedagogical implications for the development of foreign language teaching methods. Building on the gap identified above, this study aims to describe how the IRF discourse pattern operates, how instructors deploy scaffolding strategies, and how competency-based cross-grade grouping shapes inclusive oral interaction in an intermediate Arabic-as-a-Foreign-Language.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a Classroom Discourse Analysis (CDA) design (Walsh, 2006) to dissect in depth the discourse structure of oral interactions between the instructor and students.

The research subjects consist of 20-25 students combining Junior High School (grades 7-9) and Senior High School (grades 10-12) levels at Pondok Pesantren Al-Mumtaza, who were grouped into a single intermediate class based on the results of an Arabic language competence qualification test. The object of research focuses on classroom interaction patterns, scaffolding strategies, and oral drilling dynamics occurring within this multi-grade classroom. This research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al-Mumtaza on January 25, 2025.

The primary instrument in this qualitative study is the researcher (human instrument), supported by an interaction analysis guide and discourse transcription guidelines. Data collection was carried out through direct audio-recording techniques during the interactive learning process. The recorded oral data was then thoroughly transcribed into written text (verbatim transcripts) to precisely record all initiation, response, and feedback utterances. Verbatim transcription supports the traceability and trustworthiness of qualitative analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

The data analysis technique in this study refers to a combination of the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback/Evaluation) Interaction Pattern theory by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and the Scaffolding/Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory by Vygotsky (1978) and Wood et al. (1976). The analysis process was conducted through three main stages: Data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, so as to arrive at conclusions regarding scaffolding patterns and the effectiveness of oral interaction in multi-grade learning groups. These stages follow standard procedures for qualitative data analysis (Lester et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Dominance of the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) pattern in oral practice

The classroom interaction was heavily structured around the traditional Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) discourse cycle (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). The instructor systematically used targeted interrogative structures to elicit real-time responses from students, followed by immediate evaluative feedback or corrective guidance, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of IRF pattern in sentence structure practice

Turn / Time Code	Move / Discourse Stage	Speaker & Utterance (Transcribed Text)	Discourse & Linguistic Analysis
[1:55-1:58]	Initiation (I)	Instructor: "*Mādhā fī al-faṣl?*" (What is in the classroom?)	The instructor initiates the turn by asking a targeted question to elicit a pre-positional structure (*Fī al-faṣl...*).
[1:59-2:01]	Response (R)	Students: "*Fī al-faṣli maktabun*" (In the classroom is a desk)	Students provide an immediate collective/individual oral response using the correct nominal sentence structure.

Turn / Time Code	Move / Discourse Stage	Speaker & Utterance (Transcribed Text)	Discourse & Linguistic Analysis
[2:02-2:06]	Feedback (F)	Instructor: "*Mādhā? Mādhā fī al-faṣl? Seperti itu...*"	The instructor reinforces correct sentence production and confirms phonetic clarity before moving to the next variation.

Implementation of choral response and phonological oral drilling

To strengthen phonological retention and articulation fluency, the instructor utilized intensive oral drilling and choral response techniques. This strategy ensured active participation from both junior high (SMP) and senior high (SMA) students simultaneously, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of choral response and phonological drilling

Turn / Time Code	Interaction Focus	Speaker & Utterance (Transcribed Text)	Pedagogical & Phonological Function
[0:22-0:30]	Collective Repetition	Instructor & Students: "*Oke bersama-sama... Lā shai'a... Lā shai'a*"	Choral response establishes collective confidence and normalizes accurate pronunciation of target expressions.
[1:08-1:37]	Sentence Expansion Drilling	Students: "*Lā shai'a fī al-faṣl... Lā shai'ati al-faṣli*"	Repetitive drilling embeds the contextual phrase structure (*Lā shai'a*) into working memory through auditory reinforcement.
[4:50-5:02]	High-Intensity Vocabulary Drill	Instructor & Students: "*Lā shai'a! Lā shai'a! Lā shai'a!...*" (repeated 9 times)	Intensive drilling builds automaticity in speech delivery and removes cognitive hesitation during output generation.

Instructor scaffolding through prompting and affective encouragement

When students experienced hesitation or repetitive word usage, the instructor provided dynamic scaffolding. This included mediational prompts (guiding students away from redundant words) and affective volume prompts (boosting vocal confidence), summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Analysis of instructor scaffolding strategies

Turn / Time Code	Scaffolding Type	Excerpt / Dialogue Context	Instructor's Interventions & Impact
[3:24-3:31]	Mediational Prompting / Vocabulary Expansion	Instructor: "*Jangan maktabum... Kata-katanya jangan maktabum lah, yang lain lah, kata-kata yang lain...*"	Intervention: Prompts students to abandon repetitive responses (*maktabun*) and retrieve alternative nouns. Impact: Forces cognitive search for expanded vocabulary.
[4:41-4:48]	Affective & Vocal Scaffolding	Instructor: "*Irfa' ṣautak! Lebih keras lagi!*"	Intervention: Commands increased vocal projection. Impact: dismantles hesitation and boosts performance confidence.

Multi-grade classroom adaptability and inclusivity

The cross-grade grouping (SMP grades 7–9 and SMA grades 10–12) required adaptive classroom management. The instructor maintained an inclusive pace using flexible code-switching and structured group turn-taking, ensuring that age differences did not impede learning, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Analysis of multi-grade responsiveness and adaptive instruction

Turn / Time Code	Adaptive Strategy	Observed Classroom Discourse	Inclusivity & Multi-Grade Outcome
[2:10-2:30]	Tiered Task Escalation	Instructor: "*Sekarang pertanyaan diubah: Apa yang ada di samping pohon? Antum... jadi bahasa Arabnya...*"	Shifts smoothly from simple room descriptions to spatial/prepositional concepts (*Jāniba al-shajarah*), accommodating varying learner capacities.
[4:26-4:37]	Group Role Allocation	Instructor: "*Antum yang pakai Lā shai'a... Antum yang akhir...*"	Assigns specific verbal roles to different student sub-groups, balancing participation across junior and senior learners seamlessly.

Discussion

The dynamic function of the IRF pattern in real-time oral production

The empirical discourse data indicate that oral practice in this cross-grade intermediate Arabic class is systematically structured around the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) discourse loop. As observed in the classroom transcripts, the instructor frequently initiated turns using interrogative prompts such as "*Mādhā fī al-faṣl?*", triggering immediate oral responses ("*Fī al-faṣli maktabun*") from the students. In traditional language instruction, the IRF pattern is often criticized for restricting student turns and creating teacher-centered environments (Hennessy et al., 2016; Walsh, 2006). However, in this intermediate AFL context, the pattern functioned as an essential interactional anchor that established predictability and encouraged immediate real-time output. This reading is consistent with evidence that informative feedback is among the more influential factors in learning (Wisniewski et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the feedback stage executed by the instructor went beyond passive evaluation. By asking clarifying follow-up questions ("*Mādhā? Mādhā fī al-faṣl? Seperti itu...*"), the instructor transformed the feedback move into an active mediational space. This structure aligns with the theoretical foundations of classroom discourse analysis by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), where teacher feedback reinforces target syntactic forms and verifies phonetic clarity before progressing to subsequent sentence variations. Rather than hindering interaction, the IRF structure provided the necessary framework for intermediate learners to continuously refine their grammatical accuracy during oral practice. Research on oral corrective feedback likewise documents the range of feedback moves available to second language teachers and their differing effects on learner uptake (Brown, 2016; Li & Vuono, 2019; Nassaji, 2016).

Phonological retention and speech automaticity via choral response and drilling

The second key finding highlights the intensive implementation of choral responses and oral drilling during instruction. Data showed that phrases such as "*Lā shai'a*" and "*Lā shai'ati al-faṣli*" were collectively repeated by the class, culminating in high-intensity drills

where target words were repeated up to nine times in rapid succession. This strategy served a distinct pedagogical function within the Islamic boarding school (Pesantren) context, where oral repetition is heavily emphasized to build phonological memory and speech automaticity. Because pronunciation accuracy contributes to how comprehensible learners' speech is (Saito et al., 2016), repeated and collective production of target forms can be understood as structured practice that supports fluency (Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

From a cognitive and interactional standpoint, collective chanting allows students to build vocal confidence without the anxiety of individual isolation, which matters because foreign language anxiety is negatively related to achievement (Botes et al., 2020; Teimouri et al., 2019). By embedding formulaic language ("*Lā shai'a*") into working memory through auditory and vocal repetition, the instructor systematically reduced cognitive hesitation during output generation. Consequently, oral drilling in this classroom functioned not as a mechanical exercise, but as a collective scaffolding strategy that enabled both junior high (SMP) and senior high (SMA) students to internalize complex Arabic articulation and sentence expansions fluidly.

Cognitive and affective scaffolding: Prompting and vocal empowerment

The interactional transcripts demonstrate that instructor scaffolding was dynamically deployed when students encountered hesitation or lexical stagnation. In terms of cognitive scaffolding, when students repeatedly relied on familiar vocabulary (such as "*maktabun*"), the instructor provided mediational prompting ("*Jangan maktabum... kata-kata yang lain lah...*") rather than supplying the direct answer. This intervention corresponds directly with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Wood et al.'s (1976) scaffolding theory. By withholding the target noun, the instructor disrupted repetitive speech patterns and compelled students to engage in active cognitive retrieval from their mental lexicon. Mediational prompting of this kind resembles the graduated, learner-sensitive mediation described in sociocultural approaches to second language development (Poehner & Infante, 2017) and the contingent support that characterizes effective scaffolding (Van de Pol et al., 2019).

In addition to cognitive guidance, the instructor provided explicit affective scaffolding through vocal encouragement ("*Irfa' ṣautak! Lebih keras lagi*!"). In foreign language learning, psychological barriers such as hesitation and low vocal projection can impede communicative output. By commanding students to raise their volume, the instructor actively dismantled self-doubt and boosted performance confidence. Such affective support corresponds to the notion of a lowered affective filter (Krashen, 1982, 1985) and to current evidence on positive emotions in foreign language learning (Dewaele et al., 2019). This dual-scaffolding approach shows that effective teacher support in AFL classrooms must combine cognitive nudging (prompting alternative vocabulary) with affective reinforcement (demanding vocal conviction).

Multi-grade adaptability and competency-based inclusivity

The final finding directly addresses the central research gap of this study: how classroom interaction and scaffolding operate in a competency-based, multi-grade environment. Existing AFL literature predominantly focuses on age-homogenous classrooms (e.g., exclusively grade 7 SMP or grade 10 SMA). However, the observed classroom discourse reveals that when learners are grouped strictly by linguistic capability, age differences and formal grade hierarchies become secondary to shared communicative tasks.

The instructor maintained an inclusive classroom dynamic by executing adaptive instructional management. Through tiered task escalation, the instructor smoothly shifted from simple room descriptions ("*Mādhā fī al-faṣl?*") to spatial prepositional concepts ("*Apa yang ada di samping pohon*?"), catering to varying learner capacities within the intermediate spectrum (Ellis, 2017; Pozas et al., 2020; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Furthermore, by strategically allocating verbal roles to specific sub-groups ("*Antum yang pakai Lā shai'a...*"), the instructor ensured balanced turn-taking, in line with research on structured cooperative learning (Gillies, 2016). This prevented older SMA students from dominating the floor and kept younger SMP students actively engaged. Ultimately, these results confirm that competency-based cross-grade grouping is highly effective when paired with responsive teacher scaffolding and flexible discourse management.

Contribution to SDG 4: Inclusive and equitable quality education

Beyond its pedagogical implications, the classroom model documented in this study offers a concrete, field-level illustration of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly Target 4.5, which calls for the elimination of disparities in education and equal access to all levels of learning for vulnerable groups, and Target 4.6, which calls for ensuring that all youth achieve literacy and numeracy, extendable here to functional literacy in a target foreign language. By deliberately grouping students across formal grade boundaries (junior high grades 7-9 and senior high grades 10-12) according to demonstrated language competency rather than chronological age, Pondok Pesantren Al-Mumtaza operationalizes an equity-oriented instructional model that reduces structural barriers to language learning access. Students who might otherwise be constrained by rigid, age-based tracking are instead granted access to instruction that matches their actual proficiency level, a practice directly aligned with SDG 4's emphasis on inclusive and equitable learning opportunities regardless of a learner's formal educational stage (Ainscow, 2020; Boeren, 2019; Florian & Beaton, 2018; Unterhalter, 2019).

The scaffolding strategies observed in this classroom further reinforce this SDG-oriented reading of the data. Contingent, need-based mediation (Van de Pol et al., 2010) ensured that neither younger nor older learners were left behind during oral practice: struggling students received targeted cognitive and affective support, while more capable students were not held back by a uniform pace. This differentiated yet unified instructional approach exemplifies how Quality Education, as envisioned in SDG 4, can be pursued not only through access to schooling in the aggregate, but through classroom-level pedagogical design that is responsive to individual learner readiness. In the context of a Pesantren serving a religiously and socioeconomically diverse student body, such an inclusive, competency-based model also resonates with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), insofar as it prevents age or grade level from becoming a proxy barrier to quality language instruction. Taken together, these findings suggest that competency-based, scaffolded multi-grade instruction is not merely a pragmatic response to limited institutional resources, but a pedagogically sound and SDG-aligned pathway toward more equitable foreign language education in faith-based and other resource-constrained educational settings.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study demonstrates that classroom interaction within an intermediate multi-grade Arabic language learning environment operates effectively through a highly adaptive, structured, and supportive pedagogical framework. The

empirical findings reveal that the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) discourse structure serves as an essential interactional scaffold, providing predictability and driving immediate oral output rather than restricting student communication. Furthermore, the integration of intensive oral drilling and choral response techniques plays a critical role in strengthening phonological memory, reducing speech hesitation, and fostering automaticity. Instructor scaffolding-executed through cognitive prompting to expand vocabulary and affective directives to boost vocal confidence-further transforms moments of learner hesitation into opportunities for linguistic precision and psychological readiness. **Implication:** The primary novelty of this research lies in its empirical focus on competency-based cross-grade grouping (combining Junior High grades 7-9 and Senior High grades 10-12) within an Islamic boarding school (Pesantren) context, a grouping practice that directly operationalizes SDG 4 (Quality Education) at the classroom level. While existing foreign language literature overwhelmingly focuses on age-homogenous classrooms, this study demonstrates that formal age hierarchies fade when learners are grouped strictly by proficiency level, provided the instructor employs adaptive discourse management, tiered task escalation, and balanced turn-taking strategies. Pedagogically, this research implies that competency-based grouping is a highly viable and inclusive alternative for foreign language instruction; educational institutions and language instructors are encouraged to adopt responsive scaffolding frameworks-integrating active prompting, high-density drilling, and affective encouragement-to bridge proficiency gaps across diverse age groups and advance more equitable language education. **Limitation:** This study is limited to a single intermediate Arabic class at one Pesantren observed during a short data-collection period, so the findings cannot be generalized to other institutions, proficiency levels, or languages without further verification. **Future Research:** It is recommended that future research expand the scope beyond qualitative discourse analysis by incorporating longitudinal designs to measure the long-term retention of grammatical structures and oral fluency in multi-grade settings. Additionally, further studies could explore the impact of peer-mediated scaffolding (Duran, 2017), examining how older senior-high and younger junior-high students directly scaffold each other during collaborative pair tasks within competency-based language classrooms, and could quantify the model's contribution to SDG 4 indicators more directly.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Iva Milatul Chanifah contributed to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, and writing-original draft; **Syamsul Sodiq** contributed to

supervision, validation, and writing-review and editing. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of this submission.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest, either financial or personal, that may have influenced the content or outcome of this study.

ETHICAL COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

This manuscript complies with research and publication ethics. The research was conducted with the permission of Pondok Pesantren Al-Mumtaza, classroom recordings were used solely for research purposes, and no personal identities of the participants are disclosed in this article. The authors affirm that the work is original, conducted with academic integrity, and free from any unethical practices, including plagiarism, fabrication, or falsification of data.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI OR DIGITAL TOOLS IN WRITING

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