

Classroom Discourse Research & Classroom Ethnography



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Defining Ethnography

What is ethnography?

- ethnos (race, people, or cultural groups) + graphia (writing or representation).
- Research strategy?
- Method of data collection and analysis?
- Object of study?



Defining Ethnography

Ethnography is a process, a way of studying human life. Ethnographic processes are fluid and should not be rigidified as a research model. (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993)

Ethnography “plays a complex and shifting role in the dynamic tapestry that the social sciences have become in the twenty-first century” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 2).



Characterizing Ethnography

Characteristics of investigative strategies:

- Represents worldview of participants
- Empirical and naturalistic
- Data collection methodologies:
 - eclectic sources, mainly through participant observation and informal conversations
 - no pre-determined design or categories
- Data analysis
 - Largely qualitative
 - interpretation in context and holistic description
- Small data set



Ethnographic Approach to Classroom Discourse

Inspired by ethnography of communication (Hymes 1962, 1974)

- study of language in specific social and cultural settings, central to the study of culture and communities
- communities → schools : educational failures caused by cultural discontinuities between home and school of minority children
- classroom interaction as a site for studying cultural production and reproduction (Mehan, 1998)
- research focus: description and interpretation of detailed interactional processes



Ethnographic Approach to Classroom Discourse

- Researcher spending extended period of time in the classroom, as participant or non-participant observer
- Audio / video-record lessons + field notes
- Obtaining *emic* perspective on classroom data through
 - Interviews with participants
 - Teachers / learners' journals
 - Stimulated recalls of lessons

“... watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions through formal and informal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts ... in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (Hammersely & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3)



Ethnographic Approach to L2 Classroom Discourse Research

- Started in the late 1980s and began to attract attention in the 1990s
- Adopted in conjunction with discourse analysis methodologies
- Investigates how educational processes and practices are co-constructed by the teacher and the students
- How discourse processes and practices shape learning, what opportunities for learning are opened up, and what is being learnt



Major Themes in Ethnographic Studies of Classroom Discourse

Language Socialization of ESL Learners

- Socialization of ESL learners into different learning environments: difficulties and opportunities
- Harklau (1994): mainstream vs ESL classrooms, incomprehensible spoken discourse → students' avoiding spoken interaction, resorting to written text.
- Duff (1995): socialization of students in Hungary from transmission mode of teaching to open enquiry mode of learning; more democratic form of teaching → v different interactional patterns
- Morita (2000): socialization of research students into academic discourse



Major Themes in Ethnographic Studies of Classroom Discourse

(Co)-Construction of social relationships, identities and ideologies

- ESL learning as not only development of L2 competence but also social relationships & identities
- Willet (1995): not what interactional routines and strategies that led to successful language acquisition but the way the learners locally defined the meanings of the interactional routines and strategies that enabled them to construct positive relations and identities in the classroom.
- Duff (2002): teacher's inadvertent positioning of students in relation to their cultural backgrounds widened instead of narrowed the cultural gap.



Major Themes in Ethnographic Studies of Classroom Discourse

Social positioning, power and gender

- Implications of discourse practices for power, status, equality, race, class, gender
- Critical ethnography
- Menard-Warwick (2008): gender and social positioning in an ESL course for Latina immigrant women
 - How social positioning is manifested in classroom discourse
 - How social positioning affects L2 learning
 - Classrooms providing space for self-positioning and encouraging resistance against other-positioning



Major Themes in Ethnographic Studies of Classroom Discourse

Teacher and learner agency in co-construction of knowledge

- classroom discourse shaped by context → classroom discourse and context being mutually constitutive
- Opportunities for learning opened up by students' negotiation and reshaping learning tasks
- Opportunities for learning can be closed off or opened up by the teacher (e.g. Lin 1999: teacher's use of L1 to help students transition to learning through L2)



Issues to be Addressed

*“What counts as ethnography and what counts as good ethnographic methodology are both highly contested.”
(Walford, 2005, p.1)*

- **Theoretical motivation and research design**

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007)

- most ethnographic studies do not go beyond the stage of putting into question what has been taken for granted and providing plausible explanations for the identified puzzled phenomenon.
- called for explicit theorizing and hypothesis testing in order for ethnography to advance theory.



Issues to be Addressed

- **Theoretical motivation and research design (cont'd)**
 - Selection of cases are theoretically motivated - theoretical sampling
 - Theoretical assumptions guide the selection of cases, the kinds of questions asked, the things to look out for and the types of data to be collected and analyzed (e.g., class size and student learning)



Issues to be Addressed

- **Generalizability**

- Empirical vs theoretical generalization
- Generalizability vs uniqueness

“My view is that ethnographic sites should be chosen because they or the activities in them are intrinsically interesting or important in themselves, for themselves. Generalization, whether it be empirical or theoretical, need not be the goal at all. ... I would argue that it is better for ethnographers not to seek generalizability at all, but to study sites, groups and cultures for what they are.” (Walford, 2007, p. 165)



Issues to be Addressed

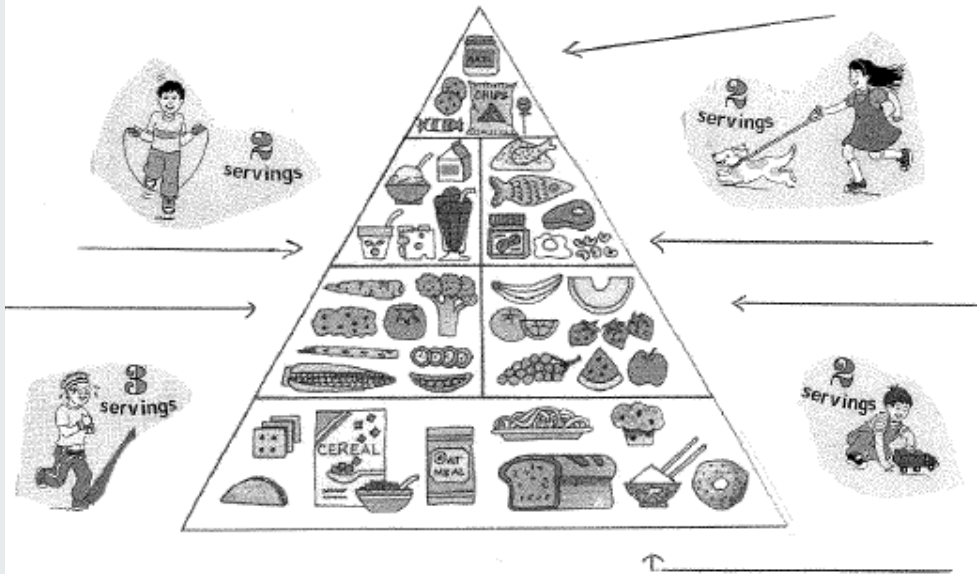
- **Quantitative and qualitative orientation**

- Case study vs ethnography

- Hammersley (1992; 1998) : ethnography – broader qualitative methodology; case – a selection strategy; an object of study (see also Silverman, 2005)
 - Brewer (2000): not all case studies are qualitative, all ethnographic research involves case study

3C FOOD PYRAMID

1) Label the food pyramid with food groups (do not use textbook)



1) Label the food pyramid with food groups (Do not use the textbook.)

2) Make a recipe for one meal during the day (breakfast, lunch or dinner). Use the food groups to help you and make the recipe healthy. (You can use the textbook)

Breakfast					
Snack					
Lunch					
Snack					
Dinner					

Figure 5.5 Classroom interaction modes (teacher-class)

No. of responses/times

Case Study I - Teacher-Class Mode

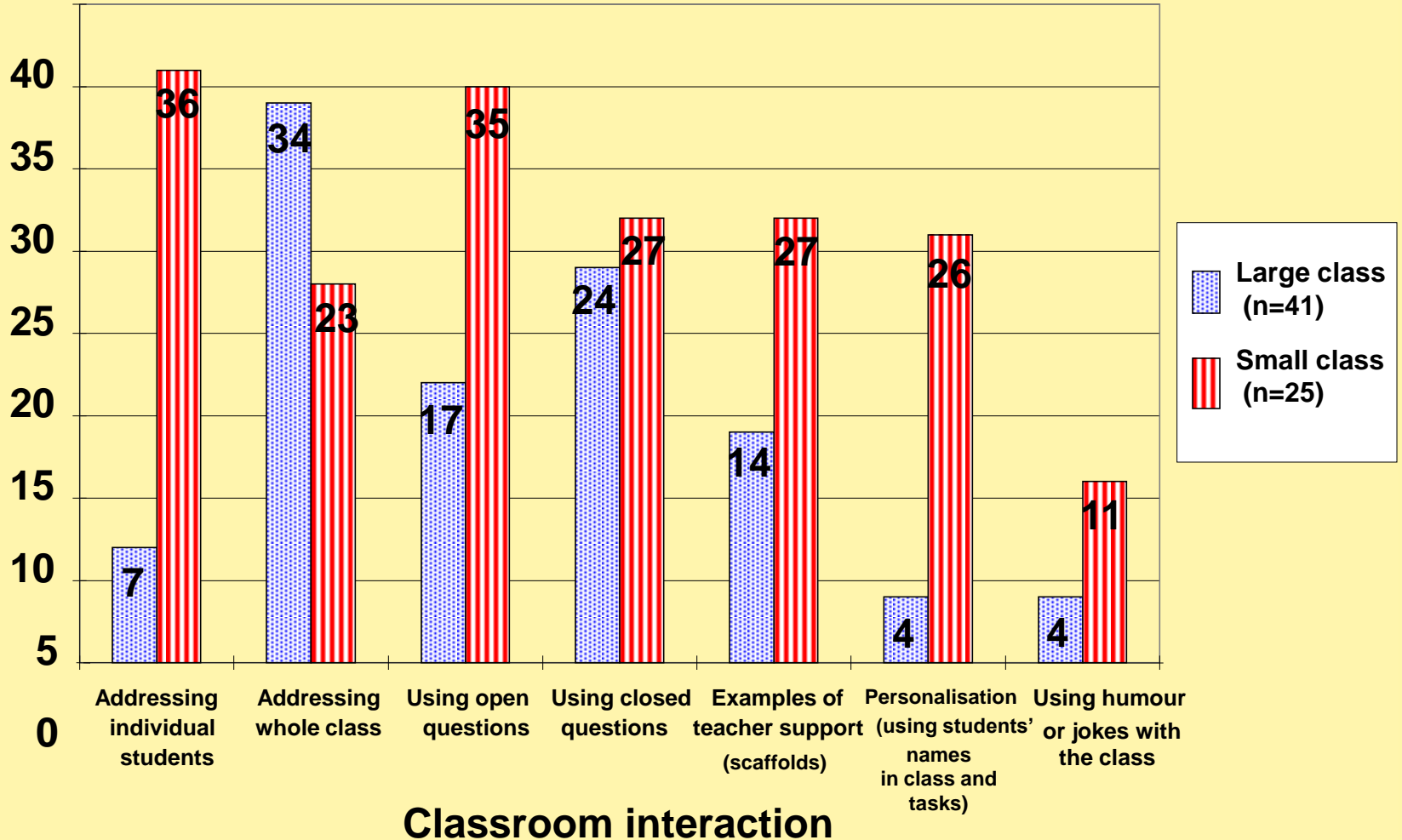


Figure 5.6 Classroom interaction modes (student-teacher)

No. of responses/times

Case Study I - Student-Teacher Mode

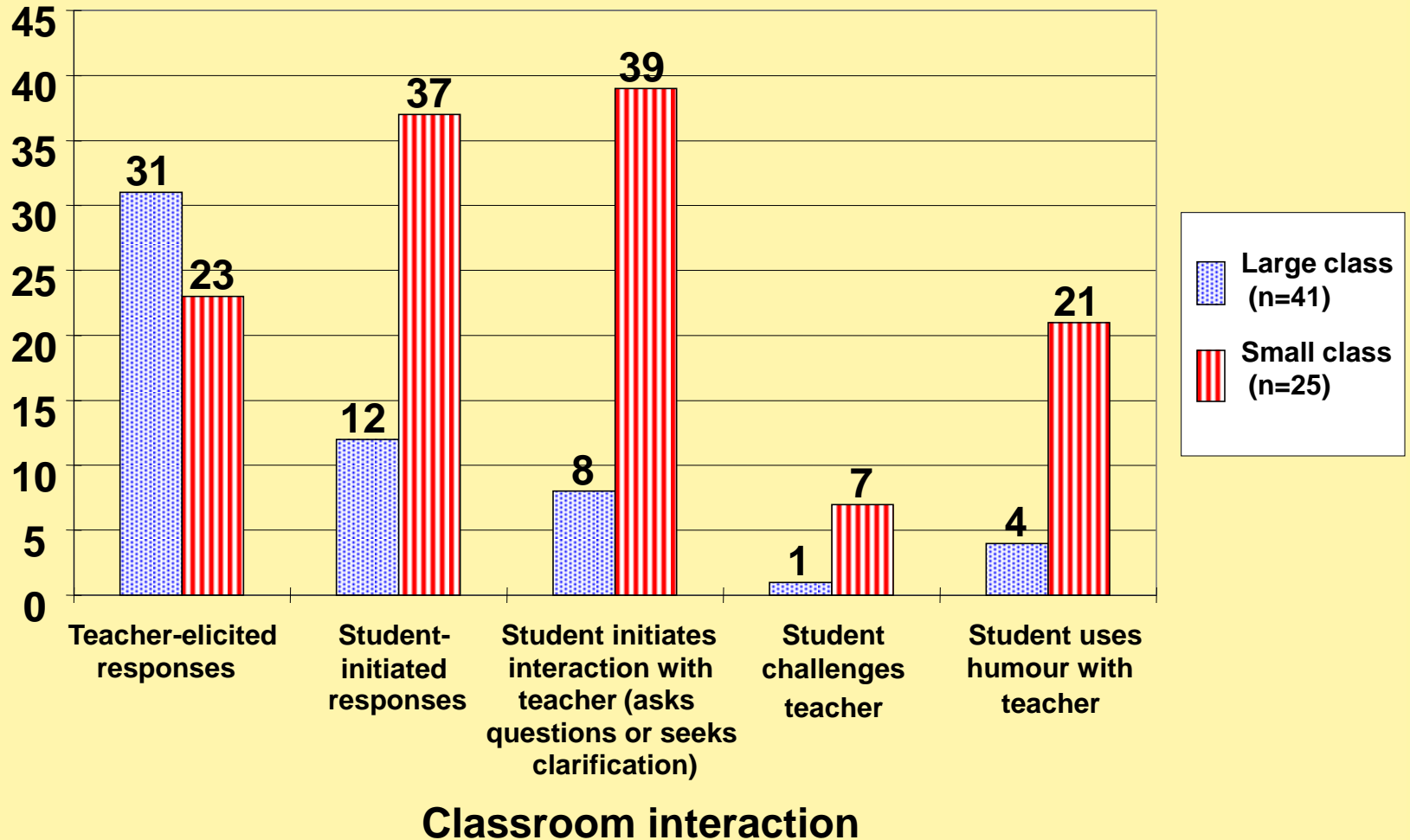


Figure 6.5 Classroom interaction modes (teacher-class)

No. of responses/times

Case Study II - Teacher-Class Mode

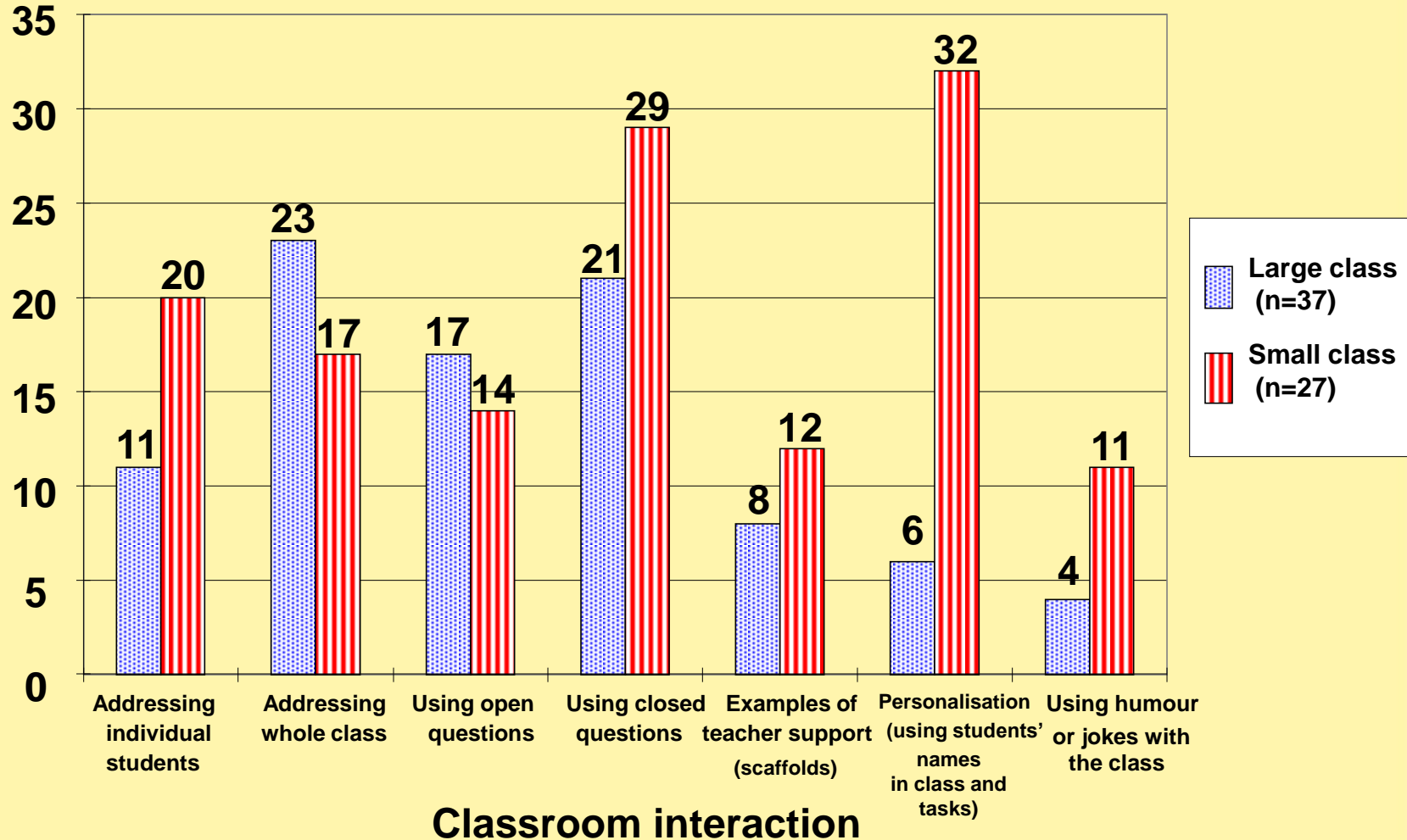
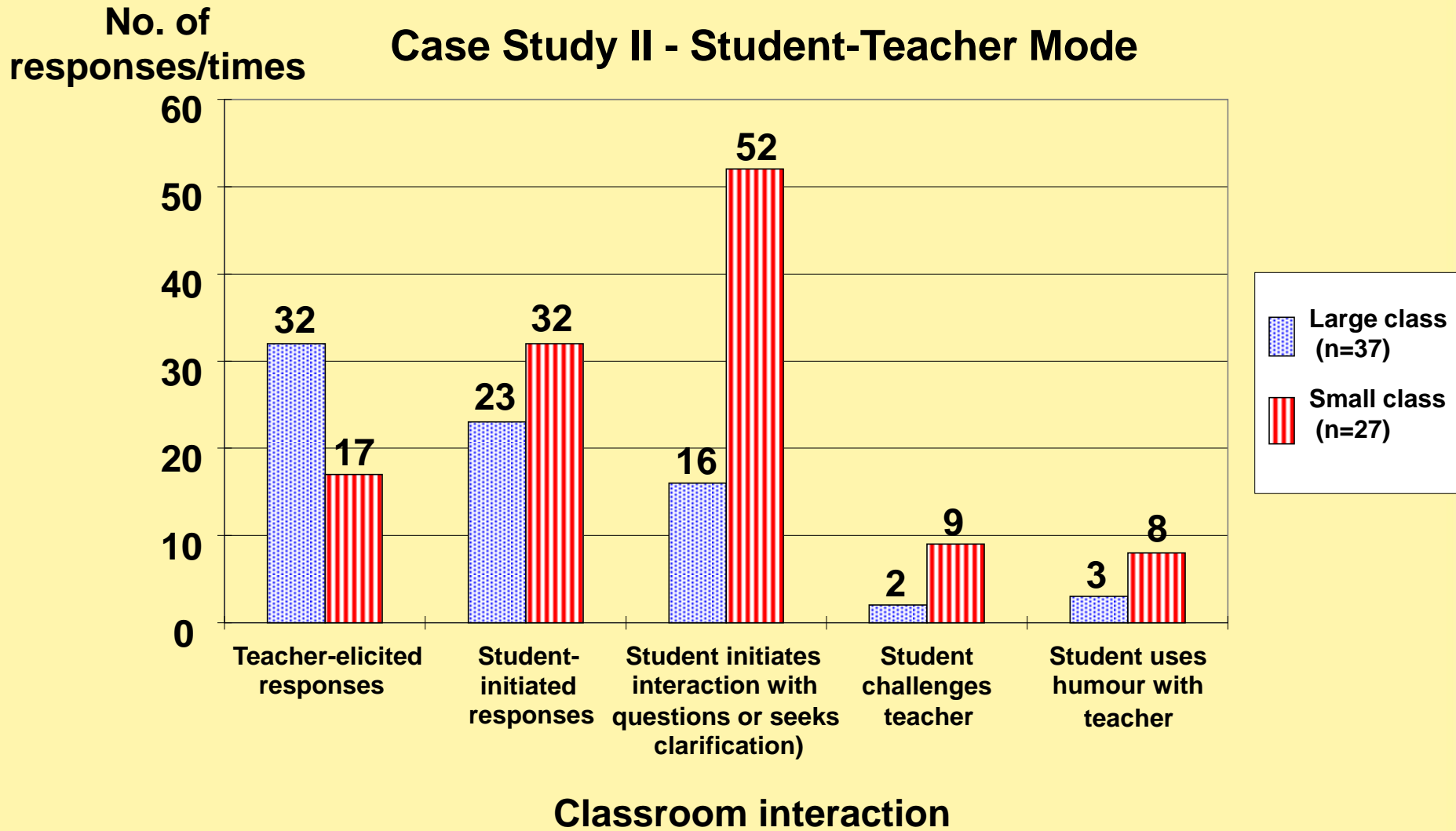


Figure 6.6 Classroom interaction modes (student-teacher)





Issues to be Addressed

- **Etic and emic perspectives**
 - Duff (2002)
 - Tsui (2011) & Harfitt (2010)
- **Macro- and micro-analysis**
 - micro-ethnographic study: classroom as a self-contained unit, without linking to broader context, and without access to the participants' interpretive frames
 - macro-ethnographic study without providing the actual analysis of classroom discourse data
 - Interweaving of macro and micro levels of analysis provides the basis for making grounded claims about the interpretation of data (Green and Dixon 2002)



Issues to be Addressed

- **Classroom as a bounded unit and a unit of inquiry**
 - Is it sufficient to take the classroom as the site of inquiry as effects of practices in other contexts are keenly felt at the local level?
 - Not only linking micro- and macro levels of research, but ability to perceive part-whole relationships

Concluding Remarks

Methodological issues pertaining to ethnographic approaches to classroom discourse studies are fundamental issues that need to be addressed if the field is to move forward



Thank you