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Searching for patterns in the education of young children's oral communicative competence

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BACKGROUND

PROBLEM DEFINITION

In today's schools, oral communicative competence (OCC) is important as a qualification supporting children's social participation and as a condition for school-based learning. To date, however, little attention has been devoted to the development of OCC in young children and ways in which teachers can purposefully and systematically stimulate this competence. In schools, the development of OCC is largely left to children's spontaneous development. Goal oriented and systematic support happens infrequently.

ORAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

We conceive of OCC as the ability of children to reach common understanding and coordinate their communicative actions by valid arguments, shared understanding and collaboration (Habermas, 1984).



PROMOTING CHILDREN'S ORAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Teachers play an essential role in orchestrating productive classroom conversations in which children's OCC can be promoted. In these productive conversations, teachers can use several talk moves. In research on classroom conversations, different families of productive conversational moves with different intentions were observed (for example Michaels & O'Connor, in press; see coding scheme). These productive talk moves have in common that they explicitly invite children to participate in the conversation, elaborate on their initial utterances and collaboratively search for common understanding. This is contrary to non-productive talk moves that focus on recitation and give little room for children to participate, elaborate or reason (cf. IRE sequences).

RESEARCH QUESTION

"What patterns of teaching can be distinguished in the promotion of children's (aged 4-6) oral communicative competence?"

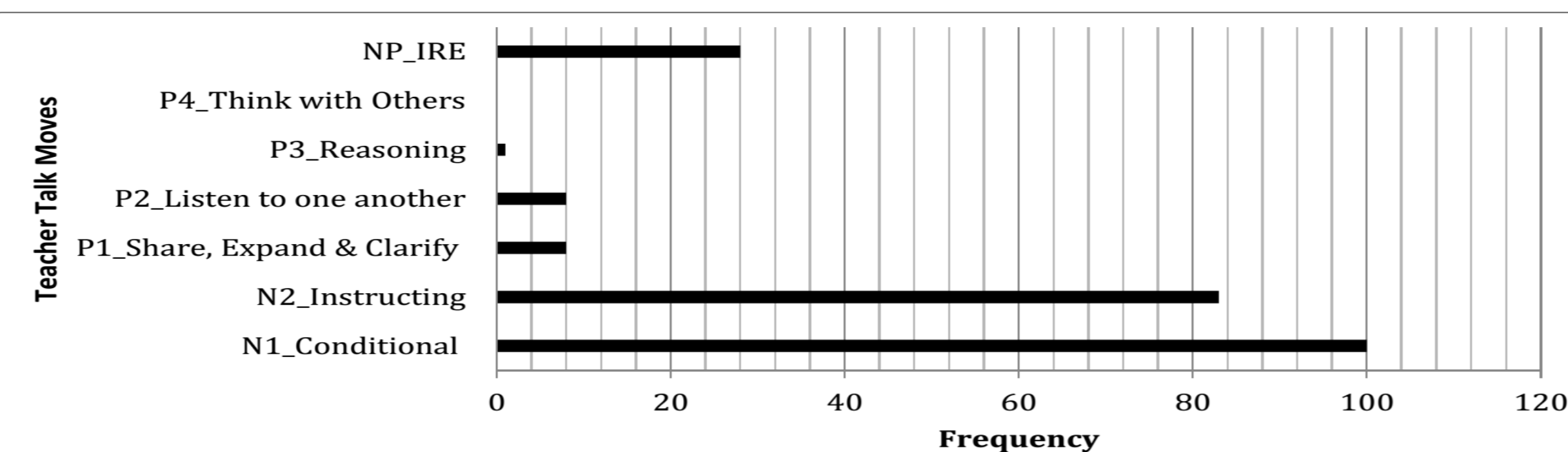


Figure 3. Frequency of teacher talk moves for one classroom conversation

CODING SCHEME

FAMILIES OF TEACHER TALK MOVES	PRODUCTIVE/NON-PRODUCTIVE/NEUTRAL	DESCRIPTION
1 Conditional	Neutral	All utterances that are conditional for the progress of the conversation, such as responding to disruptive behavior and notices that do not relate to the topic of conversation.
2 Instructing	Neutral	The teacher provides information (for example the meaning of a word) or explains something.
3 Share, Expand & Clarify	Productive	The teacher helps individual children to share, expand or clarify their own thoughts or initial utterances (can you say more, are you saying, what do you mean, etc.)
4 Listen to one another	Productive	The teacher helps children orient to and listen to one another (who can repeat or rephrase)
5 Reasoning	Productive	The teacher helps children to deepen their reasoning and presses them for evidence (why do you think that, does it always work like that)
6 Think with Others	Productive	The teacher helps children to think with others and engages them with others' reasoning (do you agree/disagree and why, what do you think about what S1 said; who can explain what S2 means to say)
7 Initiation, Response, Evaluation (IRE)	Non-productive	The teacher asks a closed question (I), the child gives a short reply (R), the teacher evaluates the response (E) (evaluations like good, not quite, etc.)

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Three innovative teachers from three schools were purposefully selected. All observed classes involved children aged 4-6 years. During three mornings, classroom conversations were observed and video recorded for each of the three teachers (see figure 1).

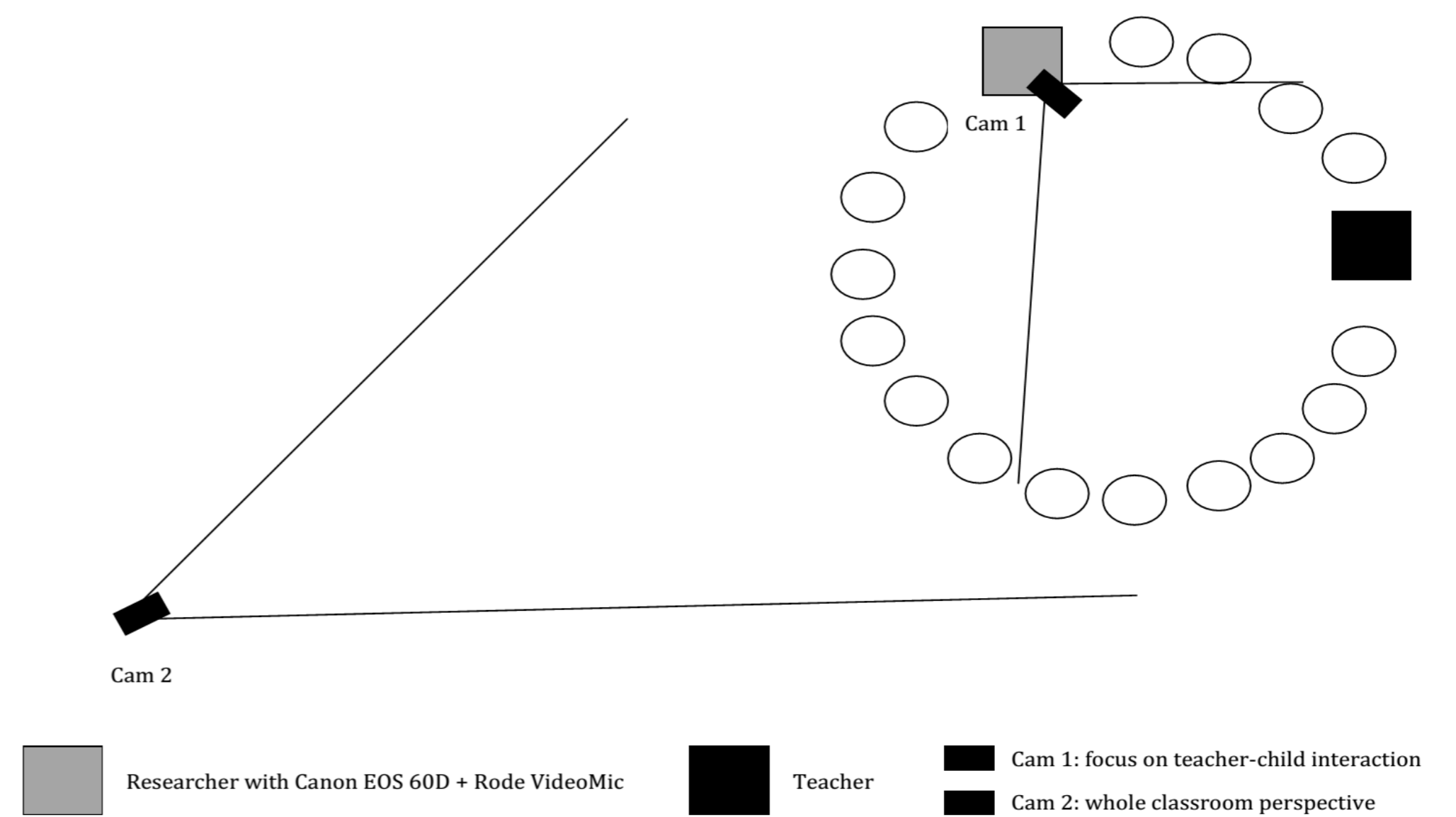


Figure 1. Video observations of classroom conversations: camera setup

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to distinguish teaching patterns in the education of young children's OCC, we focused our analysis on the level of utterance. In doing so, we could distinguish what type of talk moves teachers deployed in the context of classroom conversations. We were mainly interested in talk moves that opened up new slots for children to participate in the conversation (i.e. productive talk moves; see coding scheme).

RESULTS

Our coding scheme was tested and refined using data from one classroom conversation consisting of 225 teacher utterances (138 pupil utterances). In this conversation, the teacher only used 17 (8%) productive talk moves and 28 non-productive talk moves (12%). All other talk moves (80%) are neutral, meaning that they do not explicitly invite children to participate in the conversation (see figure 2 and 3).

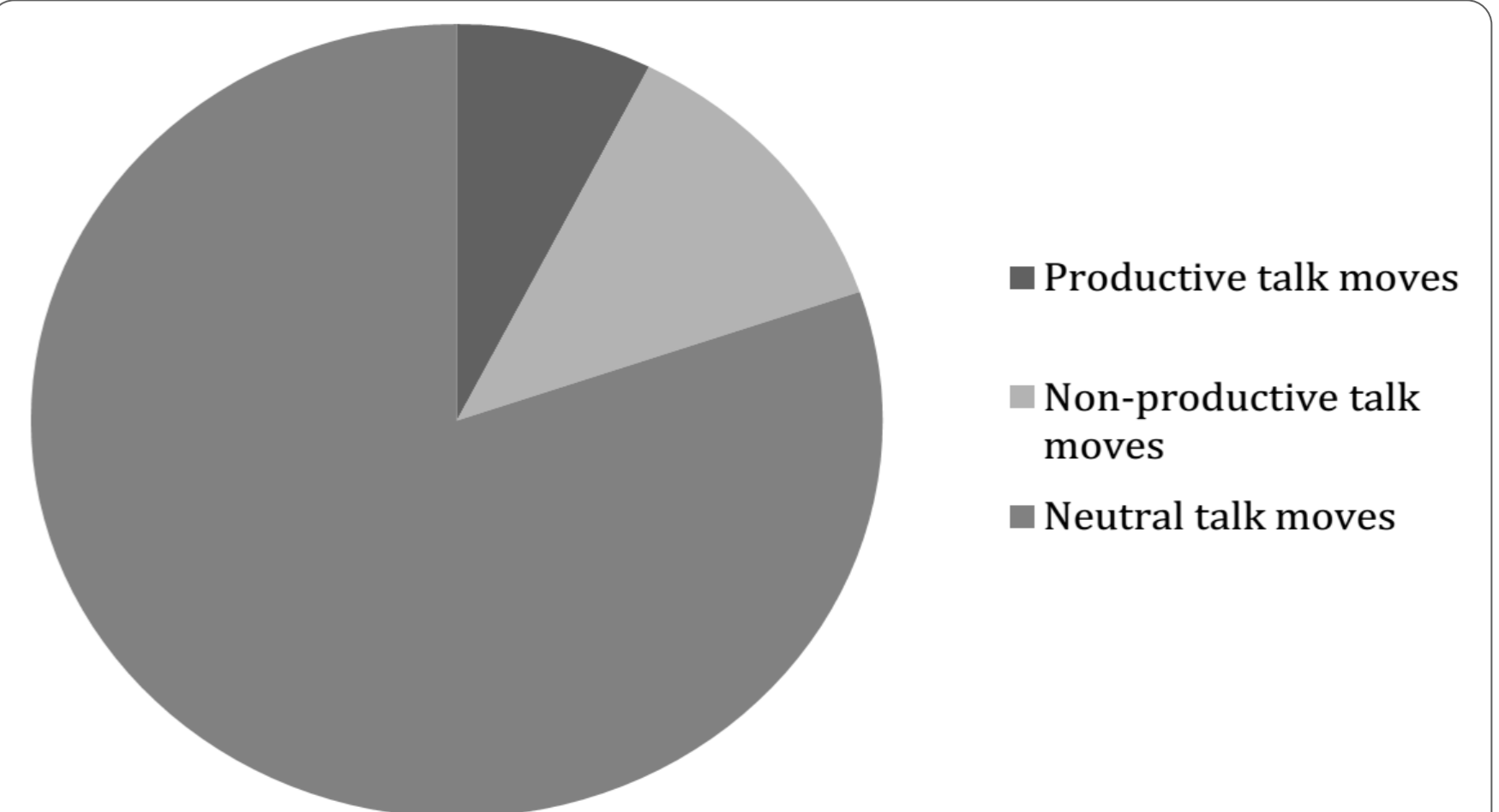


Figure 2. Productive, non-productive and neutral talk moves as proportion of total teacher utterances

CONCLUSION

In this study we searched for patterns in the education of young children's OCC. Teachers play an essential role in promoting children's OCC by orchestrating productive classroom conversations, in which children are invited to participate, reason, clarify their thoughts, etc.

We developed, tested and refined a coding scheme that we evaluated as a helpful tool to search for teacher talk moves that invite children explicitly to participate in classroom conversations. Preliminary results show that teachers only marginally use productive talk moves. As a result, children only receive little opportunities to actively participate in classroom conversations. In future research we will study how to promote the use of productive talk moves in classroom conversations.