Interactive Communication Strategies in Online Learning: A Case Study

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Abstract: This study aims to map and analyze positive interactional communication strategies between teachers and students in online learning, focusing on SD Islam Anak Saleh, Malang, during the first semester of the 2021/2022 academic year. The research highlights how teachers implement communication strategies to create a comfortable and conducive online learning environment. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through non-participant observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that teachers establish positive communication strategies through four key elements: care, clarity, credibility, and celebration. These strategies support a more effective and structured learning experience. Furthermore, the traditionally asymmetrical power relations between teachers and students have shifted toward a more flexible and participatory model, emphasizing dynamic multi-party collaboration between teachers, students, and parents. The study contributes theoretically by simplifying Gao's communication strategies into operational methods, and enriching the understanding of flexible and participatory power relations involving multi-party collaboration in online learning. Practically, these findings provide educators and policymakers with a framework for developing more inclusive, adaptive, and collaborative interactional communication strategies, suited for the digital education era.

Keyword: Communication Strategy, Interactional Strategy, Online Learning, Power Relation.

INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a pivotal medium for embedding cultural values into individuals, shaping them holistically in mind and spirit. The educational philosophy of Ki Hadjar Dewantara emphasizes the integration of intellectual development and moral values through the "Tri Center of Education" framework, which includes family, school, and community (Darmawan, 2016). Despite the rich theoretical foundation of Indonesian education, challenges remain in achieving substantial progress, as evidenced by consistently low literacy and numeracy scores reported by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Over 70% of Indonesian students aged 15 are below minimum competence in these areas, highlighting a longstanding crisis in education (Pusat Penilaian Pendidikan, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this crisis, forcing a sudden transition to online learning. This shift brought about unique challenges, such as limited infrastructure, teacher preparedness, and reduced student engagement (Jamila, 2021). Teachers and students faced difficulties in accessing adequate IT tools and stable internet connections, while the lack of face-to-face interaction hindered relationship building and motivation (Alawamleh, 2020). However, it also revealed opportunities to leverage digital tools for innovative communication strategies, enhancing flexibility in time and space for learning (Budiman, 2020).

The dynamics of online education necessitate new approaches to communication. Effective teacher-student interactions are critical for fostering meaningful learning experiences. Gao et al. (2021) proposed nine core elements for successful interactional communication: care, clarity, credibility, rapport, positive recognition, immediacy, confirmation, humor, and praise. These strategies provide a framework for building positive and adaptive relationships, particularly in the context of digital education. Additionally, relational theories, such as the Relational-Cultural Theory, emphasize the importance of maintaining emotional connections and inclusivity in online classrooms to mitigate feelings of isolation and disengagement (Purgason et al., 2022).

Despite these theoretical advancements, studies indicate significant gaps in applying interactional communication strategies in the Indonesian context. For instance, Rasmitadila et al. (2020) highlighted the challenges teachers face in creating relational connections with students during online learning, including limited interaction and reduced motivation. Similarly, Ding (2021) emphasized the role of teacher-student interpersonal strategies in boosting engagement and academic outcomes, particularly in environments with minimal physical interaction.

This research focuses on SD Islam Anak Saleh, a private Islamic elementary school in Malang, Indonesia, known for its innovative approaches to building relational communication foundations during online learning. The school implemented unique strategies during the first semester of the 2021/2022 academic year, incorporating principles of strategies interactional communication to foster a positive learning environment amidst the constraints of digital platforms.

How do teachers at SD Islam Anak Saleh implement positive interactional communication strategies in online learning, and what are the implications for teacher-student relationships in elementary education?

To map and analyze the application of interactional communication strategies used by teachers during online learning. To develop a theoretical and practical understanding of how these strategies contribute to fostering positive teacher-student relationships.

The researcher acknowledges several limitations in this study that may influence its findings. The study primarily relies on observations of online learning sessions conducted during the first semester of the 2021/2022 academic year, with data limited to recorded Google Meet sessions stored in email archives and discussion recordings from Google Classroom. This restriction on data sources may have affected the comprehensiveness of the observations. Additionally, the teachers and students involved in this study have undergone behavioral changes due to maturation effects, accumulated learning experiences, and increased variability over the time gap between data collection and analysis. These factors may have influenced their interactions and communication patterns, potentially introducing variations that are not fully accounted for in the analysis. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the implementation of interactional communication strategies in online learning contexts.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of interactional communication strategies in online learning during the

COVID-19 pandemic. The research was conducted at SD Islam Anak Saleh, Malang, focusing on online learning sessions held during the first semester of the 2021/2022 academic year.

The research subjects included Grade 3 teachers and students selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and richness of data. The study took place between July and September 2021, using data collected from recorded Google Meet sessions, Google Classroom discussions, and interviews with teachers.

Data were gathered using three primary methods: observation, interviews, and document analysis. Non-participant observations were conducted through recorded online learning sessions to examine interactional communication patterns. In-depth interviews with teachers provided detailed insights into their strategies and experiences, while lesson plans, communication logs, and student assignments were analyzed to complement the observational data.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach to identify and understand the use of interactional communication strategies. The process began with familiarizing the data by reviewing recorded sessions and interview transcripts, followed by coding specific elements such as care, clarity, rapport, etc. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that aligned with Gao et al.'s (2021) framework. Findings were validated through triangulation, document analysis, and member-checking to ensure reliability and accuracy.

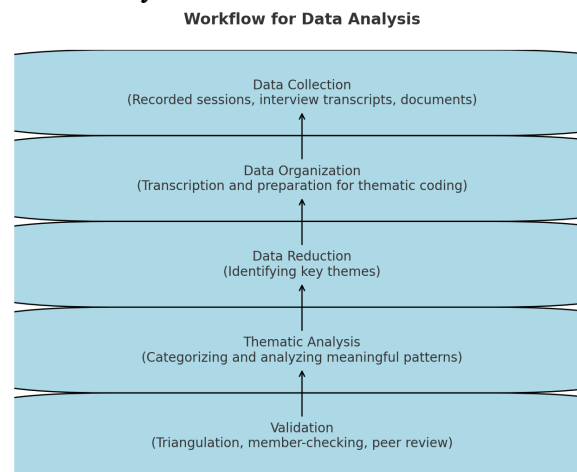The workflow for data analysis is summarized as follows:

Workflow for Data Analysis

Data Collection
(Recorded sessions, interview transcripts, documents)

Data Organization
(Transcription and preparation for thematic coding)

Data Reduction
(Identifying key themes)

Thematic Analysis
(Categorizing and analyzing meaningful patterns)

Validation
(Triangulation, member-checking, peer review)

Figure 1. The systematic workflow of data analysis

The visual representation illustrates the systematic workflow employed during data analysis. It begins with data collection, encompassing recorded sessions, interview transcripts, and supporting documents, which are then organized through transcription and preparation for thematic coding. Following this, data reduction is performed to extract and focus on key themes relevant to interactional communication strategies. These themes are subsequently analyzed and categorized to identify meaningful patterns that align with the research objectives. Finally, the findings are validated through rigorous methods such as triangulation, member-checking, and peer review, ensuring the integrity and reliability of the results. This sequential process provides a structured approach to understanding and interpreting the data comprehensively.

This methodological framework provided a comprehensive approach to understanding how interactional communication strategies were applied and their impact on teacher-student relationships in an online learning environment. The validity and reliability of data are crucial in ensuring the credibility of qualitative research findings. To achieve this, several measures were employed, as outlined by Sugiyono, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility, which assesses the internal validity of the data, was established through persistent observation and triangulation. Persistent observation involved engaging in in-depth discussions with respondents following the completion of questionnaires to enhance

and solidify the information gathered. Triangulation, on the other hand, was conducted both in technique and source. Technique triangulation involved gathering data from the same sources using multiple collection methods, while source triangulation utilized diverse sources to cross-validate the information collected. These steps ensured a robust evaluation of the authenticity and accuracy of the research data.

Transferability, or external validity, was addressed by presenting a detailed, systematic, and reliable description of the relational communication interactions observed. By articulating these components clearly, the study ensures its findings can be applied to similar contexts or settings. Dependability was established by auditing the entire research process, an activity often overseen by the research promoter to confirm consistency in methodology and execution. Finally, confirmability was achieved through a meticulous audit trail of raw data, including observations and interviews. This process involved verifying the origin and accuracy of the data to ensure the findings were derived objectively and free from bias. These rigorous validity checks not only strengthened the research's foundation but also enhanced its applicability and credibility.

The research emphasizes nine interactional communication strategies, including care, clarity, credibility, rapport, positive recognition, immediacy, confirmation, humor, and praise. Each of these strategies is assessed through specific indicators that measure the frequency, quality, and relevance of teacher behaviors in fostering positive interactions. For instance, care is observed through empathetic listening and emotional support, while clarity is evaluated based on the simplicity and structure of instructional delivery. Similarly, credibility involves demonstrating expertise and integrity, and rapport measures the harmonious and supportive atmosphere between teacher and student. These strategies collectively aim to create a communicative environment where students feel valued, motivated, and engaged, ultimately enhancing the quality of online learning experiences. Through the detailed conceptualization of these strategies, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and improving relational communication in educational contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SD Islam Anak Saleh, located in Malang, Indonesia, is a private Islamic elementary school known for its innovative educational practices and emphasis on holistic development. The school operates under the framework of Islamic values, integrating character education with academic excellence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SD Islam Anak Saleh adapted swiftly to online learning by utilizing platforms like Google Meet and Google Classroom. The school's pedagogical approach emphasizes relational communication as a core component of its teaching philosophy, fostering a sense of community among students, teachers, and parents. This context provides a rich foundation for exploring how interactional communication strategies were applied to address the unique challenges of virtual education. The school's commitment to collaborative and student-centered learning highlights its proactive approach in navigating the complexities of online education while maintaining strong relational bonds.

This study investigates how teachers at SD Islam Anak Saleh implemented positive interactional communication strategies in online learning and explores their implications for teacher-student relationships in elementary education. Through the lens of Gao's nine communication strategies, this study highlights the significance of **care**, **clarity**, **credibility**, and **celebration** as the four foundational elements shaping these interactions.

The implementation of **care** is evident in the way teachers foster trust and emotional support during online learning. Teachers often initiated lessons by inquiring about students' well-being and addressing their concerns, reflecting practices aligned with relational-cultural theory that emphasize fostering connection in virtual classrooms (Purgason et al., 2022).. This approach mitigates feelings of isolation commonly reported in online education, as highlighted

by Alawamleh et al. (2020), who found that virtual environments often challenge emotional engagement.

Clarity emerged as a pivotal strategy in ensuring effective communication. Teachers utilized structured and straightforward language to explain concepts and provide instructions, which resonates with Ding's (2021) emphasis on clear and concise communication in fostering engagement and understanding. By employing illustrative examples and confirming students' comprehension, teachers created a more accessible learning environment, addressing one of the key barriers in online settings.

The role of credibility in teacher-student relationships is substantiated by the ability of teachers to establish trust through their expertise and consistency. Gao (2021) underscores the importance of teacher confirmation and credibility in enhancing students' motivation and academic engagement. In this study, teachers demonstrated credibility by responding to students' queries with confidence and providing well-grounded explanations.

Celebration, encompassing recognition and praise, proved instrumental in sustaining student motivation. Teachers acknowledged individual achievements and provided specific feedback, fostering a positive learning climate. This aligns with findings by Salinding and Santoso (2020), who emphasized that positive teacher-student relationships significantly impact students' self-perception and motivation to learn.

The findings further indicate a shift from traditional hierarchical power dynamics to a collaborative model involving teachers, students, and parents. This aligns with Hasnidar and Nasir's (2022) study, which highlights the critical role of parent-teacher collaboration in addressing the challenges of online learning. By engaging parents in supporting students at home, teachers at SD Islam Anak Saleh reinforced relational dynamics that extended beyond the virtual classroom.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by operationalizing Gao's strategies within the 4C framework, providing a simplified yet robust model for understanding teacher-student interactions. Practically, it emphasizes the importance of integrating care, clarity, credibility, and celebration to enhance relational quality and overcome the inherent challenges of online education.

Implications of Interactional Communication Strategies in Online Learning in Elementary Schools.

The application of positive interactional communication strategies in online learning has significant implications for both teaching practices and educational policy. On a practical level, these strategies underscore the importance of fostering relational connections that prioritize student well-being and engagement. Teachers who adopt approaches rooted in care, clarity, credibility, and celebration can create inclusive and supportive learning environments, even in virtual settings. As highlighted by Ding (2021), such interpersonal strategies improve not only students' academic performance but also their emotional resilience and motivation in challenging learning contexts. This research demonstrates that these strategies are not only applicable but essential in bridging the emotional and relational gaps inherent in online education.

On a broader policy level, the findings call for systemic support to enable teachers to effectively implement these communication strategies. Educational institutions and policymakers must invest in teacher training programs that emphasize the development of relational and communication skills. As Purgason et al. (2022) argue, building relational capacity in educators can help address the emotional and psychological challenges faced by students during remote learning. Moreover, the integration of relational communication frameworks into curriculum design can ensure that students are supported holistically, combining academic rigor with emotional and social growth. The collaborative model involving parents, as seen in SD Islam Anak Saleh, further highlights the potential for policies

to encourage stronger partnerships between schools and families, fostering a community-centered approach to education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that interactional communication strategies play a crucial role in fostering positive teacher-student relationships in online learning environments, particularly in the context of elementary education. The research at SD Islam Anak Saleh highlights how the strategic application of care, clarity, credibility, and celebration not only facilitates effective knowledge transfer but also strengthens relational bonds between teachers and students. These strategies proved instrumental in addressing the unique challenges posed by the online learning context, enabling a participatory and collaborative educational model.

By reducing the traditionally asymmetrical power dynamics and promoting active engagement, these communication strategies provided a foundation for a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. The findings emphasize the importance of equipping teachers with relational communication skills to navigate the complexities of virtual education. This research contributes to the broader field of educational science by operationalizing relational communication frameworks and demonstrating their practical relevance in digital learning. The study underscores the need for systemic support in integrating these strategies into teaching practices, offering a model for improving the quality of elementary education in similar contexts.

Future research could investigate the longitudinal effects of interactional communication strategies on various student outcomes, such as academic achievement, emotional resilience, and social adaptability, across different educational levels and contexts. Understanding how these strategies are maintained or evolve over time in both online and hybrid learning environments would provide a broader perspective on their scalability and long-term impact. Additionally, studies focusing on diverse socio-cultural or economic settings could help assess the adaptability of these strategies in addressing specific contextual challenges.

A critical area for further exploration is the dynamics of power relations in teacher-student interactions, particularly in online learning environments. Building on the findings that demonstrate a shift from traditional hierarchical models to more participatory and collaborative frameworks, future research could examine how such transformations affect not only relational quality but also student agency and autonomy. Investigating the role of technology in mediating these power dynamics—whether through advanced tools like artificial intelligence, adaptive learning platforms, or virtual reality—could offer innovative insights into fostering equitable and inclusive educational practices.

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