

PHATIC LANGUAGE ELEMENTS USED BY TEACHERS TO MAINTAIN CONTACT IN THE DIALOGUES OF ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS AND IN-PERSON CLASSES

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Abstract

Studies analysing classroom discourse have been investigating the nature of effective teacher communication for decades; however, the linguistic tools teachers use to maintain mental connection and mutual attention remain an under-researched area to this day. This study explores the linguistic features of phatic teacher communication used to sustain interpersonal connection through an analysis of dialogue excerpts from 8 synchronous online and in-person lessons. The findings present the specific language elements through which teachers maintain connection with their students, illustrating the pragmatic functions of phatic communication with numerous examples. The results also address the relationship between teachers' phatic communication and student speech. Both the quantitative data and linguistic examples provided in the study may be useful for teacher education students, teacher trainees, and practicing teachers alike, as they can support professional communicative self-reflection regarding the maintenance of classroom connections. Additionally, the findings may serve as a basis for teachers to develop conscious discourse strategies that help engage students more effectively in classroom interaction.

Keywords: discourse analysis, classroom discourse, teacher communication, phatic communication, maintaining connection, online synchronous lesson

1. Introduction

The analysis of discourse in formal communicative settings, such as classroom communication, has been the subject of discourse analysis research for several decades (Iványi 2001; Walsh 2006). The literature on classroom discourse analysis is extensive, and research findings have shown that students' academic achievement is directly related to effective classroom communication (Antalné Szabó 2006; Asztalos 2020; Cazden 2001; Herbszt 2010; Skidmore 2006; Walsh 2006). Teacher communication plays a key role in the effectiveness of classroom discourse, as it is one of the most important tools for achieving and implementing lesson objectives (Antalné Szabó 2015; Herbszt 2010; Sharpe 2008). Although effective teacher communication has been examined from several perspectives (Antalné Szabó 2015; Asztalos 2020; Cazden 2001; Herbszt 2010; Schirm 2015; Skidmore 2006; Walsh 2006), the aspect of maintaining communicative contact in the classroom has so far received less attention (Asztalos 2022a). Without phatic communication, effective information transfer cannot take place, as the breakdown of mutual mental connection disrupts the process of communication (Fercsik–Raátz 2018). This was particularly evident on synchronous online classes held during the COVID-19 pandemic, where participants – despite the simultaneous digital communication – felt that they were unable to establish genuine interaction with one another (Nambiar 2020; Orhan–Beyhan 2020).

This study examines phatic language elements in teacher communication through dialogue scenes from 8 video-recorded synchronous online and face-to-face classes. The investigation combines the academic fields of discourse analysis, pragmatics, communication theory, and classroom

discourse studies. Using examples, it presents a system of language elements that provides a comprehensive picture of teachers' phatic language use. Furthermore, the analysis reflects on how phatic teacher communication influences student speech. The findings may support teacher trainees in enhancing their communicative self-reflection and developing conscious discourse strategies for maintaining contact in the classroom.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Phatic communication and its language elements

Beyond information exchange, one of the most important goals of communication is the establishment and maintenance of a relationship between participants, as supported by phatic communication (Bloammert–Varis 2015; Coupland et al. 1992; Jakobson 1960). Without the appropriate establishment and maintenance of connection, the communication process can break down at several points, preventing the effective exchange of information between the parties (Jakobson 1960; Domonkosi 2002; Erdélyi 2012; Fericsik–Raátz 2018). From a pragmatic perspective, phatic utterances can be interpreted as speech acts or linguistic actions whose informational content is largely negligible, but whose function is particularly significant in building interpersonal connection between speakers (Cruz 2007; Pléh 2012; Vanyan 2017).

The phatic function of communication is achieved by participants through both verbal and non-verbal phatic elements (Asztalos 2022a; Balázs 1993; Domonkosi 2002; Erdélyi 2012; Jakobson 1960). This study focuses on the verbal phatic elements. Due to their nature, phatic language elements primarily belong to dialogic discourse. They are present throughout discourses, and their frequency increases at certain key moments, such as during turn-taking (Asztalos 2022a; Vanyan 2017). Furthermore, phatic linguistic behaviour is governed by strict cultural and social norms, and consciously or unconsciously ignoring them can lead to negative judgments (Balázs 1993; Elhami 2020; Ivosavi–Vecsernyés 2022). Conversely, their appropriate use can facilitate the development of relationships between interlocutors, laying the groundwork for communicative cooperation (Coupland et al. 1992; Domonkosi 2002; 2017; Malinowski 1923; Jakobson 1960).

Research on phatic language elements overlaps with the analysis of contact-maintaining linguistic devices in various ways. Most studies focus primarily on phatic language elements that explicitly support the initiation, maintenance, and closure of communicative contact, such as greetings, forms of address, and small talk (Balázs 1993; Coupland et al. 1992; Domonkosi 2002, 2017; Erdélyi 2012; Ivosavi–Vecsernyés 2022). In the past decade, however, several analyses have pointed out that many language elements can also support the construction of communicative contact in implicit ways (Adnan 2022; Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025; Elhami 2020; Vanyan 2017). Although these elements fulfil various other pragmatic functions in communication beyond their phatic role, they always contribute to maintaining mental connection by supporting the construction of joint attention scenes (Adnan 2022; Asztalos 2022; Hollóy 2025; Elhami 2020; Simon–Tátrai 2017; Tátrai 2017; Vanyan 2017). During discourse, constructing a shared scene of attention is a constant task for participants, one that cannot be accomplished without continuous contact (Simon–Tátrai 2017; Tátrai 2017; Tomasello 2011). In this way, elements that support the creation of joint attention scenes inherently possess a phatic function, since maintaining and directing the attention of participants is by nature an interactive act (Simon–Tátrai 2017; Tátrai 2017; Tomasello 2011).

This study examines both language elements that support phatic communication explicitly (hereafter: purely phatic language elements) and those that do so implicitly (hereafter: supplementary phatic language elements). It adopts a classification system developed specifically for the study of classroom discourse (Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025), informed by the relevant literature and the analysed corpus. This system of phatic language elements is summarised in Table 1.

Purely phatic language elements	Supplementary phatic language elements
• Forms of greeting • Expressions substituting for greetings, well-wishes • Forms of address	• Verbs with supplementary phatic function • Possessive structures with supplementary phatic function • Discourse markers with supplementary phatic function • Fixed word combinations/reflective expressions with supplementary phatic function

Table 1. System of phatic language elements for analysis

The role of the phatic language elements of this classification system in classroom discourse is summarised in the Results section based on various examples.

2.2. Maintaining connection in in-person classroom discourse

Maintaining the connection is a shared interest between the teacher and the students throughout the lesson: achieving lesson objectives and establishing an effective teaching-learning process fundamentally depend on the mutual attention of the participants (Antalné Szabó 2015). Phatic communication plays a significant role in the teacher's speech in every segment of the lesson. At the beginning of the lesson, it contributes to establishing attention and shaping personal relationships (Hollóy 2024); during the lesson, it helps maintaining mutual attention and supports information transfer (Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025); and at the end of the lesson, it assists in closing the interaction, evaluating the lesson, and supporting personal relationships (Antalné Szabó 2006; Hollóy 2025). Furthermore, phatic language elements generally support the mechanisms of turn-taking, as teachers use these elements to give the floor to specific students or to reflect on student turns (Antalné Szabó 2006; Asztalos 2022a). They can also support the development of the personal teacher-student relationship, for example, through various small talk elements (Hollóy 2025).

In addition to phatic utterances, teachers can choose from various discourse strategies to maintain student attention. One such tool is questioning: with questions, teachers can continuously maintain students' interest in the subject matter and involve more and more students in classroom discourse (Antalné Szabó 2006, 2015; Király 2017; Faturrochman et al. 2020). Effective teacher explanations can also help maintain attention (Antalné Szabó 2006; Schirm 2013). A good explanation is concise, illustrative, logical, memorable, and captures students' attention. By using various rhetorical tools appropriately, teachers can maintain students' attention during explanations, even when they are passive recipients of information (Schirm 2013). Clear instructions are also crucial for maintaining the connection: based on task-defining statements, students can participate in solving tasks (Antalné Szabó 2006, 2015; Sáfrányiné Molnár 2016). Phatic language elements can be part of all teacher utterance types that facilitate interactions (Hollóy 2025).

2.3. Maintaining connection in online synchronous classroom discourse

Due to the rapid spread of Web 2.0 applications, one of the most important aspects of online communication, alongside information transfer, has become its connecting and social function (Gardinaru 2018; Prievara–Pikó 2015). For this reason, messages in digital communication are frequently fundamentally phatic in nature, as users often aim not to share actual information, but to emphasize their presence and establish connections (Gardinaru 2018). As a result of the physical distance between participants and the limited perceivability of non-verbal signs, online platforms provide multimodal signal types that are used exclusively in digital environments and support the phatic function of communication, such as reaction buttons or emojis (Radovanonic–Ragnedda 2012).

The significance of the phatic function of communication in the digital space was also demonstrated in the educational context during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although digital education during the pandemic was implemented in various ways in Hungary, one of the prominent methods was holding online synchronous lessons through video conferencing applications (Asztalos 2022b; Gonda 2022). Questionnaire-based and interview-based research focusing on this period has clearly highlighted that many communication problems arose during the education process (Asztalos 2022b; Gonda 2022; Nambiar 2020; Orhan–Beyhan 2020). Among the various communication difficulties (technical issues, limited perceivability of non-verbal signs, student passivity, etc.), one of the most prominent problems identified by participants in online synchronous lessons was the lack of real connection and interaction (Asztalos 2022b; Gonda 2022; Nambiar 2020; Orhan–Beyhan 2020). This further demonstrates that phatic communication is crucial for successful communication, as without it, participants do not feel that a real interaction has occurred.

3. The aims and hypotheses of the study

The aim of the study is to explore the phatic language elements of teachers' language use in online synchronous and in-person lessons. Phatic language elements are analysed in selected dialogue scenes. The study addresses four main questions: how teacher–student speech time is distributed in the analysed episodes; how frequently phatic language elements appear in teachers' turns; whether their frequency differs between online and in-person settings; and whether teachers' phatic language use affects student speech.

At the start of the study, I formulated the following hypotheses:

1. An asymmetry prevails in teacher-student communication in the dialogue scenes of both online synchronous and in-person lessons: teachers generally speak more, more often and for longer periods than students.
2. In the majority of teacher turns of the dialogue scenes in both online synchronous and in-person lessons, both purely phatic and supplementary phatic language elements can be observed.
 - 2a. In the majority of the dialogue scenes, supplementary phatic language elements appear more frequently in the teacher's speech than purely phatic elements in both types of lessons.
 - 2b. In teacher speech during online synchronous lessons, more phatic elements appear in the dialogue scenes than in in-person lessons.
3. If more phatic language elements are observed in the teacher's speech, the number and length of student speech turns increase.

4. Materials and methods

This study examines teachers' phatic communication in 8 video-recorded online synchronous and in-person high school Hungarian language and literature lessons. The characteristics of the 8 lessons are shown in Table 2.

Lesson number and setting	Teacher's gender	Teacher's experience	Type of lesson	School type	School location
1. online	female	beginner	literature	secondary school	Budapest
2. online	female	beginner	Hungarian language	secondary school	Budapest

3. online	male	beginner	literature	secondary school	Budapest
4. online	male	beginner	literature	secondary school	Budapest
5. in-person	female	beginner	Hungarian language	secondary school	Budapest
6. in-person	female	beginner	Hungarian language	secondary school	Budapest
7. in-person	male	beginner	Hungarian language	secondary school	Budapest
8. in-person	male	beginner	Hungarian language	secondary school	Budapest

Table 2. Characteristics of the lessons in the study corpus

It should be noted that each of the eight lessons was taught by a different Hungarian language and literature teacher, hence the corpus comprises analyses of individual teachers' language use across all lessons.

While research on classroom discourse typically considers the lesson as the basic unit of analysis (Antalné Szabó 2015), the aim of this study is to examine teachers' phatic communication in smaller classroom segments for a more detailed approach. Oral discourses can be divided into shorter segments based on thematic and structural units, and the micro-level analysis of smaller units may reveal interrelationships that could remain hidden in macro-level studies. To examine the teacher's language elements of connection maintenance in the most relevant classroom units, I selected dialogue scenes from the lessons using a unique criterion system, focusing on those that most reflect frontal, multi-participant, teacher-directed classroom dialogues (referred to as dialogue scenes hereafter). The selection of scenes was based on the following criteria:

Discourse characteristics:

- The interaction in the scene involves at least two students, aside from the teacher.
- The dialogue scene is at least 7 speech turns long.
- The speech turns are related to a single topic/exercise throughout the interaction.

Methodological characteristics:

- The dialogue scene is observed during the frontal part of the lesson.
- The teachers use the discussion method in the dialogue scenes.
- The dialogue scene is related to the lesson's content.

Communication characteristics:

- Student activity is primarily linguistic.
- The dialogue scene is clearly distinguishable from the other scenes in the lesson based on didactic aspects.
- The dialogue scene is clearly distinguishable from other scenes in the lesson based on pragmatic aspects. For example, teacher speech acts at the beginning and end of the scene clearly mark the start and closure of the discussion (e.g., discourse markers, verbs).

I transcribed the dialogues from the lessons, segmented and annotated the transcriptions, and coded them. The analyses were carried out based on the segmented, annotated, and coded notes using the ELAN 6.7 speech analysis software. In identifying and analysing phatic language elements, I always considered the context and recognised the role of phatic elements in maintaining

connection through close textual analysis. In addition to identifying and analysing phatic elements, I also studied characteristics of the dialogue scenes such as their length, the ratio of teacher to student speaking time, and the average length of speech turns, making it possible to compare teachers' phatic communication with the general communication characteristics of the dialogue scenes. The statistical analyses necessary for analysing the relationships were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software.

The full transcripts of the lessons' dialogue scenes (Appendix 1) can be found on the following website: [Transcripts of the online synchronous lessons' dialogue scenes. \(Appendix 1.\)](#)

5. Results

5.1. Discourse features of dialogue scenes in online synchronous and face-to-face lessons

The dialogue scenes appear in different numbers and durations on the lessons examined. The discourse features of the dialogue scenes in the lessons of the two learning-teaching settings are summarised in Table 3.

	Online synchronous lessons	Face-to-face lessons
Total length of dialogue scenes (s)	3486,18 s	4500,7 s
Total speech time in dialogue scenes (s)	3438,16 s	4649,4 s
Number of dialogue scenes in lessons (count)	14	24
Number of dialogue scenes (count) per lesson	1 st lesson: 4 scenes 2 nd lesson: 3 scenes 3 rd lesson: 3 scenes 4 th lesson: 4 scenes	1 st lesson: 6 scenes 2 nd lesson: 6 scenes 3 rd lesson: 7 scenes 4 th lesson: 5 scenes
Speech time (teacher, s / student, s)	2336,06 s / 837,46 s	3566,77 s / 1082,63 s
Number of speech turns (teacher, count / student, count)	184 / 165	395 / 369
Average length of speech turns (teacher, s / student, s)	14,65 s / 5,26 s	9,02 s / 2,93 s

Table 3. Discourse features of dialogue scenes

In the online synchronous lessons, 14 dialogue scenes were observed, with a total duration of about 3438 seconds. In the face-to-face lessons, 24 dialogue scenes appeared, totalling about 4649 seconds (Table 3). The duration of the scenes is not evenly distributed, and depends on the topic of the discussed dialogue scene, the task being discussed, the types of teacher questions, student activity, etc. (Appendix 1).

However, in general, it can be stated that communication asymmetry is a defining characteristic of the dialogue scenes in both learning-teaching settings, considering speech time, number of speech turns, and the average length of speech turns. The ratio of teacher and student speech time in the two settings is summarised in Figure 1.

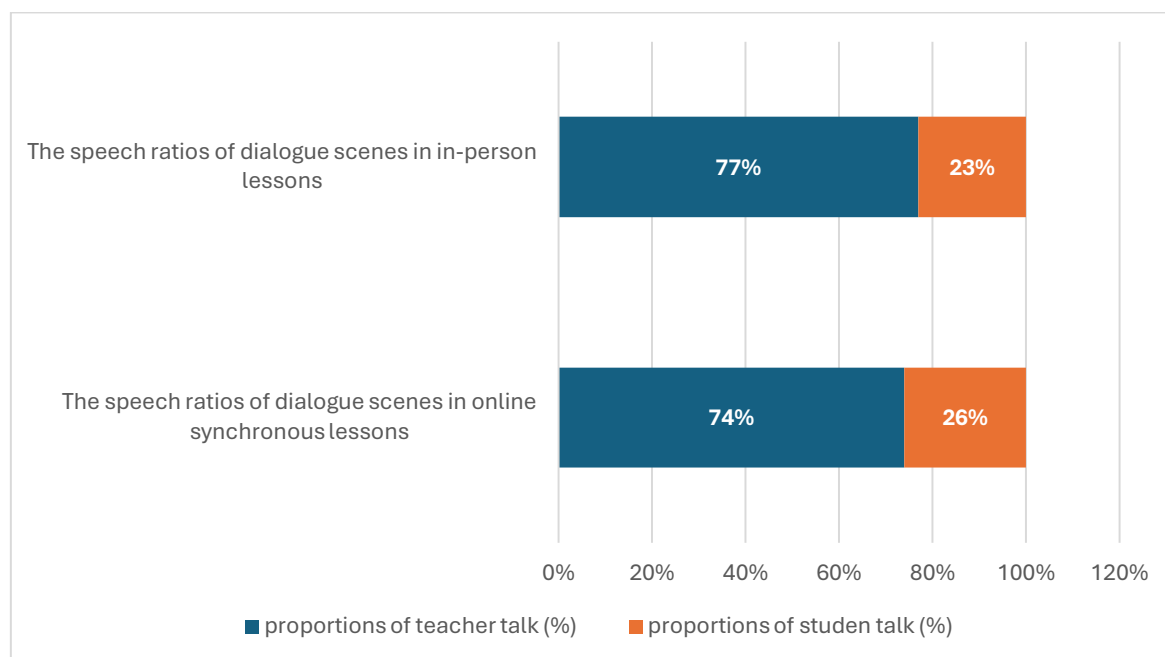


Figure 1. Speech time ratios in the dialogue scenes (n = 100% / learning context)

Teachers speak more than their students in the scenes: in the case of online synchronous lessons, the speech time distribution is 74-26%, while in face-to-face lessons, it is 77-23% (Figure 1). It is also important to highlight that while the teacher's speech time refers to one individual, the students' speech time is considered for the entire class. Therefore, speech time per student is always significantly lower (Antalné Szabó 2015; Asztalos 2020; Walsh 2006).

Although at different ratios, a similar trend can also be observed regarding the number of speech turns in the analysed dialogue scenes, as shown in Figure 2.

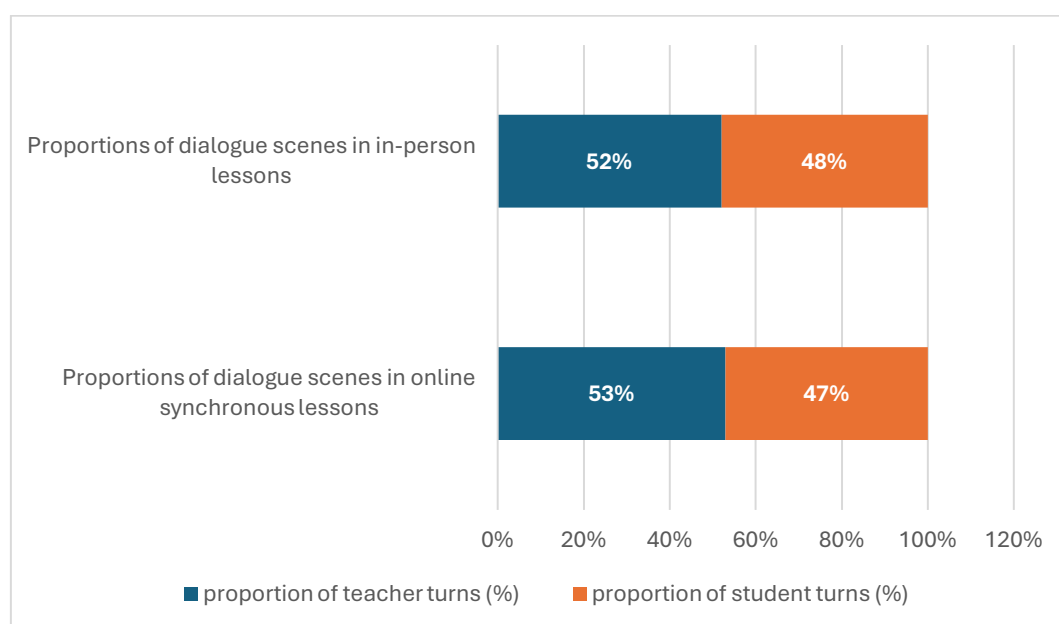


Figure 2. The ratios of speech turns in the dialogue scenes (n = 100% / learning context)

Although the distribution of speech turns appears more equal in terms of proportions compared to speech time distribution, the percentages should still be interpreted in such a way that the number of teacher speech turns refers to one individual, while the number of student speech turns is distributed among the entire class (Figure 2). In this way, the total number of student speech turns in both settings (165 and 369, respectively) represents very few speaking opportunities per student (Figure 2).

This asymmetry is also evidenced in the average length of speech turns in both learning-teaching contexts (Table 3). In the case of online synchronous lessons, teacher speech turns are, on average, 14.65 seconds long, while student speech turns are, on average, only 5.26 seconds long. This means that during a single speech turn, the teacher speaks about three times as long as a student. In the face-to-face lessons, the ratio is similar: the average length of teacher speech turns is 9.02 seconds, while student turns last only 2.93 seconds on average (Table 3).

5.2. Teachers' phatic language elements in online synchronous and face-to-face lessons

In the teachers' speech of the dialogue scenes analysed, it is generally the case that both purely phatic and supplementary phatic language elements can be observed. Figure 3 summarises the number of phatic language elements in the teachers' speech in both learning-teaching contexts (Figure 3).

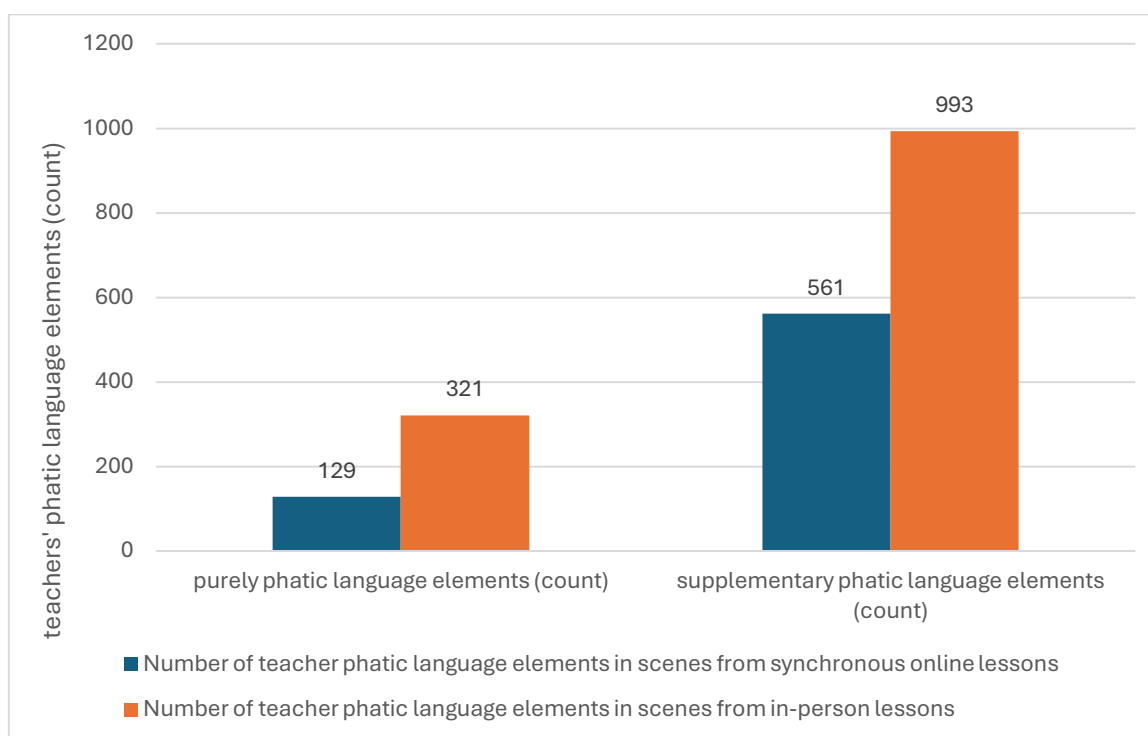


Figure 3. Number of teachers' phatic language elements in the dialogue scenes (n = 2004 items)

A total of 2004 phatic language elements can be found in the teachers' speech turns in the dialogue scenes of the two learning-teaching contexts. In the dialogue scenes of the online synchronous lessons, 450, while in the dialogue scenes of the face-to-face lessons, 1554 phatic language elements are found in the teachers' turns (Figure 3). However, these are not proportional data, and the phatic language element counts in the teachers' turns in the two learning-teaching contexts cannot be directly compared because the scenes have different lengths. It can, however, be stated that in both learning-teaching contexts, a higher proportion of supplementary phatic language elements can be observed than purely phatic language elements (Figure 3). This could be explained by the

basic characteristics of these two groups of phatic language elements: while purely phatic elements serve primarily to maintain the connection in communication, supplementary phatic language elements play pragmatic roles in the discourse alongside their phatic function. For example, verbs that also serve a phatic function might reflect teaching activities, task assignments, class organization, etc. in the classroom discourse (Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025).

The question arises whether, in the dialogue scenes of online synchronous settings, teachers use more phatic language elements to compensate for the shortcomings of the digital communication setting. After adjusting the counts of language elements for proportionality, I checked the ratios of their appearance in both settings using an independent samples t-test. The results of the t-test show that there is no significant difference in the number of phatic language elements appearing in the teachers' speech in the dialogue scenes of online synchronous versus face-to-face lessons ($t = -1.742$, $p = 0.132$). Therefore, the online setting does not lead to a significantly higher number of phatic language elements in the teacher's turns.

5.2.1. Teachers' purely phatic language elements in online synchronous and face-to-face lessons

Although purely phatic language elements appear in lower numbers than phatic elements with additional functions, they are an important part of teacher speech (Figure 3). The total number of purely phatic language elements in the dialogue scenes of the two learning-teaching contexts is shown in Table 4.

The number of purely phatic language elements in the teachers' speech turns in the dialogue scenes (n = 450 items)		
Greeting forms	Expressions substituting for greetings, well-wishes	Forms of address
0	0	450

Table 4. The number of purely phatic language elements in the teachers' speech turns in the dialogue scenes

Among the purely phatic language elements, only address forms can be observed in the teachers' turns in the dialogue scenes (Table 4). The reason of this could be that while greeting forms and expressions substituting for greetings are specifically used for initiating and closing communication (Balázs 1993; Hollóy 2024; Ivosavi–Vecsernyés 2022), address forms, in addition to initiating and closing communication, can also support maintaining the relationship in various ways in the classroom, such as during the turn-taking moments (Antalné Szabó 2015; Asztalos 2022a; Walsh 2006). Address forms used by the teachers can be categorised according to their parts of speech. The numbers for this categorization are shown in Figure 4.

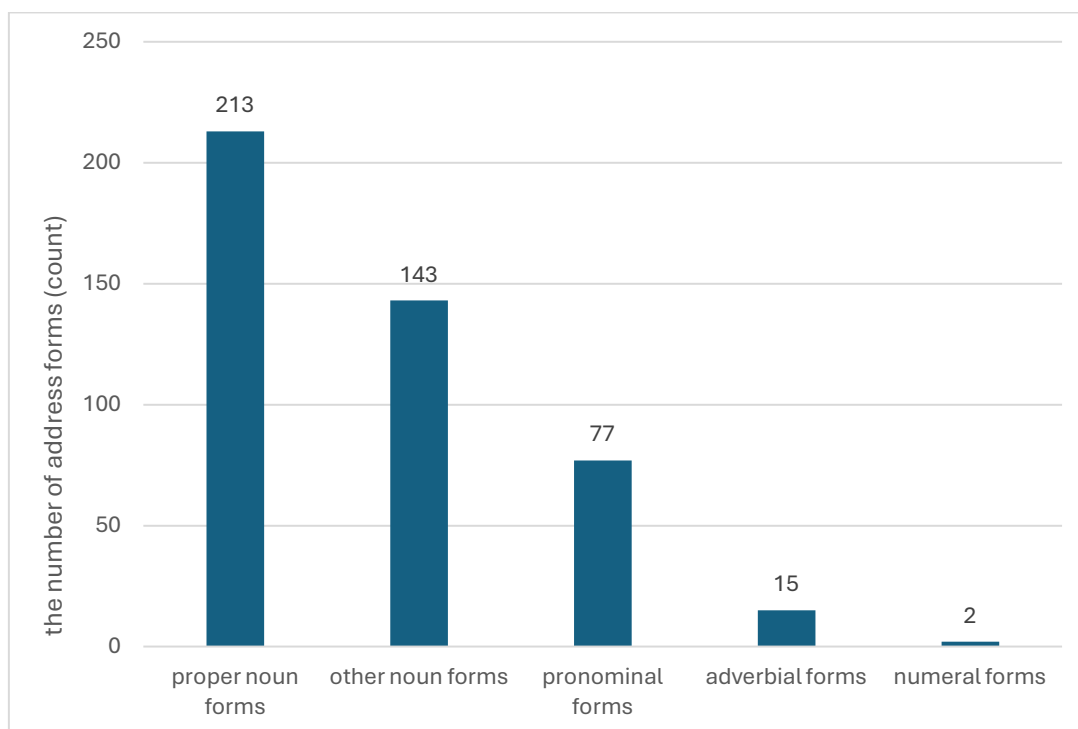


Figure 4. Types of address used by teachers in the dialogic scenes (n = 450 items)

Teachers most frequently prefer proper noun-based forms of address (213 instances, 47%), but a considerable number of common noun-based (143 instances, 31%) and pronominal addresses (77 instances, 17%) also appear. In addition, though less frequently, adverbial (16 instances, 4%) and numeral forms of address (2 instances) are also present in teacher utterances (Figure 4).

From a pragmatic perspective, forms of address fulfil two key functions within dialogues. Firstly, they facilitate turn-taking processes in dialogic exchanges: in most cases, teachers use various forms of address to designate the student(s) who should speak. All address types are suitable for turn allocation; teachers typically switch between them depending on whether they wish to engage one student or an entire group of students (Examples 1 and 2).

- (1) T: Azt szeretném kérdezni, hogy hogyan lehetne ez befejezett melléknévi igenév, *Dániel*?
D4: Ahm, az elfáradt gyermek már alig tudott dolgozni, annyira elfáradt volt.
T: Nagyon jó, az elfáradt gyermek alig tudott már dolgozni, annyira elfáradt volt, szuper, jó. [...] Okés, akkor még *Alexandrát* megkérdezem, hogy milyen szófajú szót írt...
- (1) T: I'd like to ask, how could this be a past participle, Daniel?
D4: Uh, the tired child could hardly work anymore, they were so exhausted.
T: Very good! The tired child could hardly work anymore, they were so exhausted – great, well done. [...] Okay, then I'll ask Alexandra what kind of word she wrote...
- (2) T: ... Érdekes ez is én azt gondolom, itt sok minden előfordulhat, az, amit már *ti* tapasztaltok a világból, ezt egyébként még írta *valaki* ezt az elfogadás dolgot, hogy kevésbé elfogadóak?
- (2) T: ...This is interesting too. I think a lot of things can happen here – what *you've* already experienced in the world. By the way, did *anyone* else write something about acceptance, like being less accepting?

In Example 1, the teacher uses proper noun forms of address in both instances of turn-taking to designate the student who is to speak. In contrast, in Example 2, the teacher first reflects on the previous student response using a first-person plural pronoun and then uses the indefinite pronoun *valaki* ('anybody') to signal that the next question is directed at the whole class, thereby broadening the focus of interactional engagement.

The second major function of forms of address in teachers' speech during the scenes is to maintain student attention during the monologic portions of the teachers' talk. During discussions in the scenes, numerous teacher explanations are observed: teachers often add short or extended explanations in response to student answers (Appendix 1). In these explanations, teachers frequently refer to individual students who previously responded, thereby guiding the class's attention to earlier segments of discourse, as shown by Example 3.

(3) T: Jó, Ákos, Attila, Ákos híven, ahogyan az előbb is elmondta, hogy nem nagyon tud majd megfogalmazni semmilyen rossz dolgot, de nagyjából így ketten maradtatok...

(3) T: Okay, Ákos, Attila, Ákos, just like you said earlier, that you probably won't be able to come up with anything negative, but roughly, it's just the two of you left...

Forms of address therefore serve two main purposes: on the one hand, they support turn-taking in classroom discourse, and on the other hand, they play a key role in directing shared attention, particularly during various teacher explanations.

5.2.2. Teachers' supplementary phatic language elements in online synchronous and face-to-face lessons

Supplementary phatic language elements appear in significant numbers in the teacher turns of the dialogue scenes from both learning-teaching contexts (see Figure 3). The total number of such elements in the dialogue scenes of the two settings is presented in Table 5.

Number of Supplementary Phatic Language Elements in Teacher Turns of the Dialogue Scenes (n = 1554 items)			
Verbs with supplementary phatic function	Discourse markers with supplementary phatic function	Possessive structures with supplementary phatic function	Fixed word combinations/reflective expressions with supplementary phatic function
717	555	61	221

Table 5. Number of supplementary phatic language elements in teacher turns in the dialogue scenes

Among supplementary phatic language elements, verbs (717 items, 46%) and discourse markers (555 items, 36%) occur most frequently in teacher utterances. To a lesser extent, fixed word combinations or reflective expressions (221 items, 14%) and possessive structures with supplementary phatic function (61 items, 4%) also appear (Table 5).

The high frequency of verbs with supplementary phatic function can be explained by the fact that verbs often support relationship maintenance in classroom discourse in addition to their other functions (Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025). Any verb whose personal suffix indicates who the teacher is referring to through the represented action can be considered to carry a phatic function. Thus, verbs in the 2nd person singular (E/2), 3rd person singular (E/3), 1st person plural (T/1), 2nd person plural (T/2), and 3rd person plural (T/3) all contribute to phatic communication in the dialogue scenes (Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025). Example 4 illustrates how such verbs function.

- (4) T: Ühüm, ugye itt azért az orvoslást *pontosítsuk*, mert hogy én gondolom itt a nem feltétlen az orvostudományra *gondolsz*, hanem inkább így az egészségügy helyzetére, nem? Vagy?
 D6: Hát igen-igen. [...]
 T: Aha, igen-igen, tehát ugye nagyjából így az infrastruktúra, kórházak állapota, ilyesmikre *gondolsz*, én feltételezem.
 D6: Igen.
 T: Jó, tehát akkor ez egy olyan oldal, ami lehet, hogy lehetne kicsit modernebb, vagy hát felkészültebb, az egészségügy. De gondolom, ezt *érezed*, ezt *látod*.
- (4) T: Uh-huh, okay, *let's clarify what you mean* by “medicine” here, because I guess *you're not necessarily thinking about* medical science, but more about the state of healthcare, right? Or?
 D6: Yeah, yes, that's right. [...]
 T: Ah, yes, yes, so *you mean* things like the infrastructure, the condition of hospitals, that kind of thing, I assume?
 D6: Yes.
 T: Okay, so this is an area that maybe could be a bit more modern, or better prepared, the healthcare system. But I guess that's what *you feel*, that's what *you see*.

In Example 4, the teacher begins a literature lesson by asking students about their attitudes to their homeland. The teacher adds follow-up questions and brief explanations to the students' thoughts. In the teacher's speech, the use of a first-person plural verb, *pontosítsuk* ('let's clarify') can be observed, which expresses an instruction: the teacher encourages the student to clarify or elaborate on their thought. Although the instruction is clearly directed at the student, the plural form emphasizes cooperation and shared reflection, thereby reinforcing the existing mental and interpersonal connection between teacher and student (Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025) (Example 4). The other verbs with supplementary phatic function used in the teacher's utterances are in the second-person singular. These serve to reflect or summarise the student's ideas, signal continued contact, and guide other students' attention toward the content expressed by the previous speakers (Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025) (Example 4).

Discourse markers are essential components of teacher talk. Numerous studies have shown the different functions these elements can fulfil in teacher discourse (Campbell-Larsen 2017; Schirm 2015). Based on the current analysis, it can be stated that discourse markers frequently take on a phatic function in the dialogue scenes from both online synchronous and in-person classes. The discourse markers with supplementary phatic function, along with their frequency, are summarised in Figure 5.

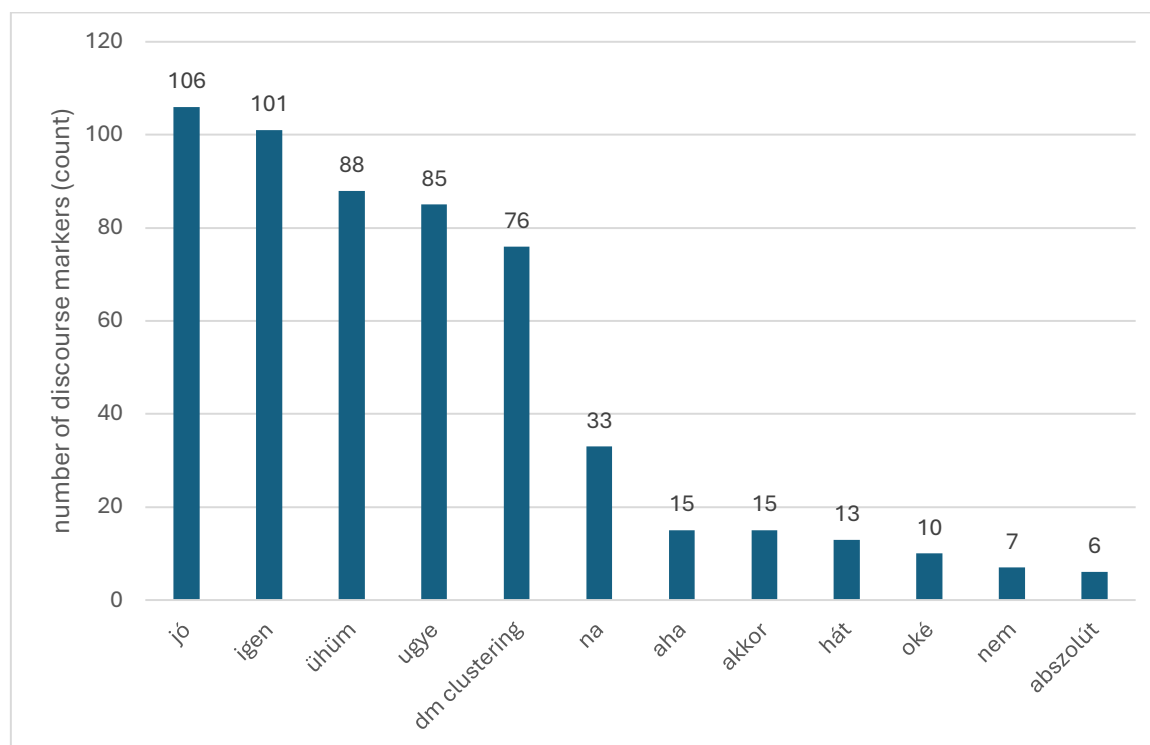


Figure 5. Discourse markers with supplementary phatic function in the dialogue scenes (n = 555 items)

Various discourse markers in teacher speech can support maintaining connection between teacher and student: the most frequently occurring ones in the teacher turns of the dialogue scenes are *jó* ('good', 106 instances, 19%), *igen* ('yes', 101 instances, 18%), and *ühüm* ('uh-huh', 88 instances, 16%). In addition, *ugye* ('right?') appears 85 times (15%), compound discourse marker forms 76 times (14%), and *na* ('well', 33 times, 6%) are also frequently observed (Figure 5). Discourse markers can support classroom phatic communication in many ways: they can help initiate a speech segment, draw student attention, manage turn-taking, support student speech in parallel as a backchannel cue, or allow teachers to reflect on what students have said (Asztalos 2022a; Hollóy 2025). Example 5 illustrates the role of discourse markers with supplementary phatic function in the mechanisms of turn-taking, while Example 6 shows their function in supporting student speech:

- (5) T: Agymenés, *ühüm*. Szkenner. Ki mit talált a szkennerre? *Na*, D5-ék mondják.
D5: Hm, hát igazából, hm, a nyomtatóra találtuk ki, hogy másina, és akkor a fordított másina az a szkennere.
T: *Ühüm*, fordított másina...
- (5) T: Brainstorming, *uh-huh*. Scanner. Who came up with something for the scanner? *Okay*, D5, you go.
D5: Well, actually, um, we thought of the printer first, and then the "opposite" of the printer is the scanner.
T: *Uh-huh*, the opposite of the printer...
- (6) D4: Igen, szóval azt kihagytam belőle, hogy az a megfelelő tojás számára, amit olyan tyúk tojt *T: *Ühüm.**, aki természetes magokon meg füveken, és nem tápot *T: *Igen.**, mert annak valahogy nagyobb lesz a mélytartalma, és kevésbé törik.

- (6) D4: Yes, so I left out that it's for the right kind of egg, the one laid by a hen *T: *Uh-huh.** that feeds naturally on grains and grass, and not on feed *T: Yes.*, because that way the eggs have a higher calcium content and are less likely to break.

In Example 5, the two *ühüm* ('uh-huh') markers reflect on the student's response, indicating that the teacher was listening, and the communicative connection was maintained. The *na* ('okay') helps facilitate turn-giving: it signals the teacher's attention and, along with the form of address, prompts students to begin speaking (Example 5). In Example 6, the two phatic discourse markers ('uh-huh, yes') appear simultaneously with the student's speech: here, the teacher does not take over the turn but signals ongoing mental engagement and expresses a positive attitude toward the student's answer. Possessive structures with supplementary phatic function involve nouns with possessive markers – typically first-person plural – which reinforce a sense of community with the class in the teachers' speech. This phenomenon is illustrated by the teacher's turn in Example 7.

- (7) T: Na, akkor a mai alkalommal a múlt órán lezárt egyszerű mondatról szóló *egységünk* után az összetett mondatról elmondandókra váltanánk át.
- (7) T: Okay, so for today's session, after finishing *our unit* on simple sentences last time, we'll move on to what we need to cover about complex sentences.

In Example 7, the word *egységünk* ('our unit') with a first-person plural possessive marker signals the teacher-student relationship and emphasizes joint work. The teacher refers to the material as a shared unit, thereby strengthening a sense of community and mental connection with the class (Example 7).

Fixed word combinations/reflective expressions with supplementary phatic function primarily appear in evaluative teacher utterances. These are established language elements that often appear repeatedly in teacher speech (Grund 2021). In such cases, although their evaluative and motivating value may decrease, their phatic function remains constant, as they signal the teacher's attention to the student (Antalné Szabó 2006; Hollóy 2025), which is demonstrated by Example 8.

- (8) T: Némajáték. Van-e valakinél ennek megfelelő idegen szó? Igen?
D5: Pantomim.
T: *Nagyon jó!* [...] Kinél van magyar szó? D7?
D7: Szókép.
T: Szókép. Idegen párja a...
D8: Metafora.
T: Metafora, *nagyon jó!* Gyere!...
- (8) T: Charade. Does anyone know a foreign word for this? Yes?
D5: Pantomime.
T: *Very good!* [...] Who has the Hungarian word? D7?
D7: Szókép.
T: Szókép. Its foreign equivalent is...
D8: Metaphor.
T: Metaphor, *very good!* Come on up!

In this example, *nagyon jó* ('very good') appears twice as a fixed evaluative phrase with a phatic function, both times signalling correctness. Despite being evaluative, its repetitive use reduces its motivational value, since it does not provide detailed feedback on the answers. However, the phatic function is still relevant, as such feedback shows students that the communicative connection is ongoing.

5.3. The relationship between teachers' phatic communication and student talk

This section examines the impact of teachers' phatic communication on student speech from two perspectives. First, it explores the correlation between the number of phatic language elements used by the teacher and the number of student turns. Second, it investigates the potential effect of teachers' phatic communication on student speaking time. Both relationships are analysed using Pearson correlation tests.

The results show a presumed correlation between the number of teacher phatic elements and the number of student speaking turns ($r^2 = 0.778$, $p = 0.023$). However, the Pearson test does not indicate a correlation between phatic communication and the average length of student turns ($r^2 = 0.239$, $p = 0.568$). Example 9 helps interpret these results.

- (9) T: ...Már jöhet is a következő magyar szó. D3, *nálad*?
 D3: Nálam nem magyar szó van.
 T: *Nálad* idegen szó van. *Kinél* van magyar szó? D4?
 D4: Szókép.
 T: Szókép. Idegen párja a...
 D5: Metafora.
 T: Metafora, *nagyon jó!* Gyere! Következő magyar *szavunk*?
 D5: Ide alá?
 T: *Igen*, oda, *légy szíves*. D6!
 D6: Szerelőhelyiség.
 T: Szerelőhelyiség.
 D7: Szerviz.
 T: Szerviz. Gyere te is!
- (9) T: ...Next Hungarian word, please. D3, *yours*?
 D3: I don't have a Hungarian word.
 T: *You* have a foreign word. *Who* has a Hungarian word? D4?
 D4: Szókép.
 T: Szókép. Its foreign equivalent is...
 D5: Metaphor.
 T: Metaphor, *very good!* *Come on up!* Next Hungarian word?
 D5: Under here?
 T: *Yes, right there, please*. D6!
 D6: Szerelőhelyiség.
 T: Szerelőhelyiség.
 D7: Szerviz.
 T: Szerviz. *You come up too!*

The example shows the various types of phatic language elements in teacher speech: the teacher uses forms of address, verbs, and possessive constructions with phatic functions to manage turn-taking and uses fixed expressions and reflective phrases to respond to student answers. These elements greatly support turn-giving and turn-taking, and thus likely aid in engaging more students in classroom dialogue (Example 9). However, it is also evident that student responses tend to be very brief, often limited to single words. In this classroom context, this does not imply student passivity or the lack of phatic communication by the teacher: many students actively participate in the task-checking process, and their answers are adequate, as the task often requires only one-word responses. Therefore, a direct correlation between phatic communication and the length of student speech is unlikely, as other factors (topic, question types, etc.) may have a stronger influence.

6. Conclusion

This study examined teachers' phatic communication in dialogue scenes from online synchronous and in-person lessons, focusing on the language elements of connection maintenance in teacher speech. It briefly presented the importance of the phatic function for effective communication and highlighted its role in classroom discourse. The study summarised the discourse features of the analysed scenes and the phatic language elements used by teachers, illustrating their pragmatic role through examples. It also investigated whether teachers used more phatic elements in the digital learning-teaching space to maintain more effective communication and whether there is a relationship between teachers' phatic communication and student speech.

The first hypothesis – that communicative asymmetry characterises dialogue scenes in both teaching-learning environments – was confirmed. In teacher-centred classroom segments, regardless of environment, teachers speak more frequently and at greater length than students. The second hypothesis was also confirmed: the majority of the teacher turns in dialogue scenes features a high number of phatic language elements. These elements permeate teacher discourse, guiding turn-taking, reflecting on student responses, and drawing student attention. Sub-hypothesis 2a was also validated: supplementary phatic language elements are more frequently observed in the majority of teacher turns than purely phatic language elements. However, sub-hypothesis 2b was not confirmed: in the analysed online synchronous lessons, there was no evidence of an increase in the number of phatic elements in teacher speech, suggesting that teachers did not attempt to counteract the digital communication gap caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in this way.

Finally, the third hypothesis was only partially confirmed: while teachers' phatic communication likely correlates with the number of student turns, it does not appear to have a direct effect on student speaking time. Phatic elements significantly support turn-taking and thus help engage students in interaction. However, student speaking time is influenced by many other variables, and a direct connection is therefore not assumed. The results of the study cannot be considered representative due to the small size of the corpus, but they do offer a highly nuanced picture of classroom discourse and teacher communication while also suggesting trends and potential future research directions that may justify further, more detailed analyses. The results may also be useful for teacher candidates and in-service teachers, as they can contribute to greater professional self-reflection and form the basis for conscious discourse strategies that support effective classroom interaction. The continuation of this research is being carried out within the framework of the umbrella project *Language Use at an Advanced Level* operating under the ELTE Centre for Digital Education Development and Competence, where I examine the phatic communication of teacher trainees within a larger video and written corpus specifically based on their microteaching sessions. This broader empirical study, grounded in microteaching, expands and refines the findings presented in the current paper and identifies both strengths and areas for improvement in the phatic communication of teacher trainees. The additional research results will serve as a foundation for the development work conducted within the project, including online workshops and the creation of digital learning materials. The findings of this study, along with the outcomes of further research, contribute to the communicative development of both teacher trainees and practicing teachers. Conscious use of phatic language elements can foster more interactive dialogue between teacher and students, leading to more effective collaboration and learning.

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related to oral communication within the teaching and learning contexts of higher education. Second, it seeks to develop an assessment tool suitable for examining oral communication in these settings, along with analysing communicative activities through the lens of discourse analysis. Finally, the project involves the creation of digital learning materials designed to enhance the oral communication skills of both instructors and students, with these materials being implemented through online workshops (Gonda–Hollóy 2025). A key priority of the project is the development of professional oral communication skills in teacher trainees, to which this study contributes both theoretically and empirically.

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