

**ANALYZING CLASSROOM DISCOURSE AND
STUDENT RETENTION
IN *THE RON CLARK STORY* MOVIE**

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ANALYZING CLASSROOM DISCOURSE AND STUDENT RETENTION
IN *THE RON CLARK STORY* MOVIE
THESIS

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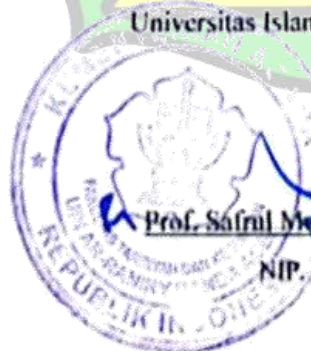

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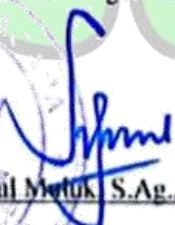

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Hereby declare that in writing this thesis, I:

ANALYZING CLASSROOM DISCOURSE AND STUDENT RETENTION IN *THE RON CLARK STORY* MOVIE

1. Did not use the ideas of others without being able to develop and be accountable for them;
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This statement is made truthfully and without coercion from any party.

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ABSTRACT

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Keywords : classroom discourse, Walsh's framework, student retention, *The Ron Clark Story*

This study examines classroom discourse modes and their influence on student retention as depicted in *The Ron Clark Story* movie, applying Steve Walsh's (2011) framework. Using a descriptive qualitative case study, data were taken from selected classroom scenes and analyzed through transcription. Classroom discourse modes were classified into four: managerial, materials, skills and systems, and classroom context. Managerial mode established order and routines; materials mode focused on content delivery; skills and systems mode improved linguistic accuracy; and classroom context mode fostered rapport and motivation. These modes were linked to indicators of student retention such as participation, responsiveness, and persistence. The findings suggest that varied, adaptive discourse use can support both cognitive and emotional aspects of retention in challenging settings. This study offers practical implications for teacher training, emphasizing dynamic and empathetic communication to enhance engagement and long-term learning.

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A R - R A N I R Y

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May this thesis bring benefit to those who read it, not only as an academic work but also as a source of insight and inspiration. I hope the ideas and findings within these pages can contribute, even in a small way, to further discussions and developments in this field of study. Just as the process of creating it has shaped my understanding, patience, and determination, I wish that it may also spark curiosity and encourage others to keep learning, questioning, and exploring.

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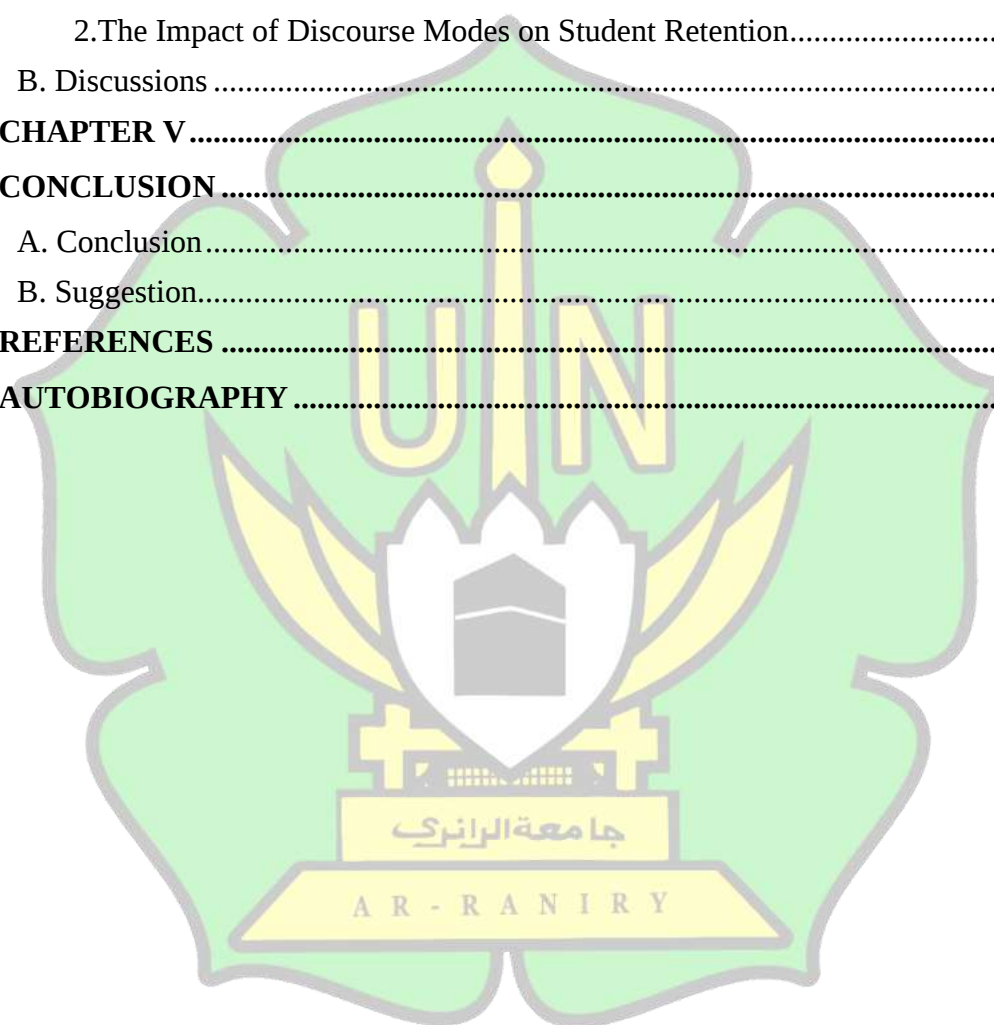
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Education plays a central role in building the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for individuals to succeed in modern society. Beyond teaching content, education helps shape how people think, work together, and solve problems in their daily lives. However, keeping students motivated and involved in their learning is not always easy, especially in schools facing social and economic challenges. One major issue is student retention, which refers to a student's ability to stay in school and continue learning over time. Retention also includes the ability to remember and apply what is learned. According to Hattie (2009), learning retention involves not just understanding a topic but being able to use that knowledge in different situations.

Unfortunately, many students struggle with this due to teaching methods that are too focused on lectures and lack student involvement. Freeman et al. (2014) found that when classrooms rely mostly on one-way communication from teachers, students are less likely to stay motivated or remember what they learn. This is also reflected in data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which shows that over 30% of students in disadvantaged schools report low motivation due to unengaging learning environments (OECD, 2023). These findings show the urgent need to find teaching approaches that support student retention, especially in classrooms where students face extra challenges.

These challenges highlight the importance of examining not only what teachers teach, but also how they communicate with their students. Discourse analysis offers a useful perspective here, as it focuses on language use in real contexts and its impact on learning. Gee (2014) emphasizes that discourse analysis goes beyond grammar and structure to show how language builds identities and relationships. Likewise, Paltridge (2012) defines it as the study of language beyond the sentence level, where meaning is shaped by social and cultural contexts. These

perspectives make discourse analysis particularly relevant to classroom settings, where teacher–student talk directly influences learning engagement.

One area that is gaining more attention in educational research is classroom discourse. This refers to the way teachers and students interact through language during lessons. Walsh (2011) defines classroom discourse as the talk that happens in classrooms, including instructions, questions, answers, and feedback. It also includes how these interactions are managed to help students learn.

Classroom discourse matters because it shapes how students understand lessons, engage with ideas, and take part in discussions. In classrooms where students may already feel excluded or struggle academically, the way a teacher communicates can either help them feel included or push them further away. Research by Mercer and Dawes (2014) explains that good communication in class creates space for students to share their thinking and learn from each other. Kahu and Nelson (2018) also argue that positive classroom interaction builds a sense of belonging, which is key to keeping students interested in school. Despite these benefits, many teachers still rely on traditional styles of talking in class, where the teacher talks most of the time and students just listen. (2020) highlights that these old patterns limit student voice and reduce the chance for deep understanding. This makes it important to study how classroom discourse works in different settings and how it can be used to improve student retention.

The Ron Clark Story (2006) is a film based on the true story of a teacher who chooses to work in a low-performing school in Harlem, New York City. The film follows Ron Clark’s journey in managing a class of students often labelled as disruptive, unmotivated, or beyond help. Rather than applying strict lectures or punishment, Clark uses enthusiasm, structure, and personal connection to inspire academic growth. He incorporates music, movement, storytelling, and praise to make lessons more engaging and memorable. These strategies are clearly shown in the classroom scenes, where teacher-student talk becomes more interactive and emotionally supportive. This makes the film a useful object of study for exploring how discourse patterns affect student behavior and engagement.

Fang (2022) acknowledges the film's portrayal of moral values and the impact of teacher commitment, while Abeti (2021) focuses on dominance and turn-taking using the IRF model. However, both studies do not investigate the discourse patterns through a structured discourse framework. The use of this film offers an opportunity to observe classroom discourse in a narrative format that reflects real-world teaching conditions. Because it is inspired by real events, the film also allows a more grounded reflection on how teacher talk can support retention and transformation in students from challenging backgrounds.

Although numerous studies have examined classroom discourse in real educational settings, there is still limited research exploring how such discourse is portrayed in educational films, particularly those based on true stories. Most film-related education studies tend to focus on character development, teacher attitudes, or general pedagogical themes rather than the actual linguistic structure of teacher-student interaction (Fang, 2022; Abeti, 2021). Furthermore, previous research often stops at describing methods or motivation but does not connect classroom discourse explicitly to measurable learning outcomes such as student retention. Walsh (2006) proposed a clear framework for analyzing classroom discourse based on four modes that reflect how language is used for teaching, organizing, and building interaction. Despite its relevance, this framework has rarely been applied to fictional or semi-fictional representations of teaching, especially in media. No study has been found that applies Walsh's discourse modes to analyze *The Ron Clark Story*, nor to link those modes to indicators of student motivation or long-term learning engagement.

This gap points to a central problem that underlies the present research. The problem highlighted in this study is that, although many researchers have discussed classroom discourse and student motivation separately, there is still little focus on how discourse strategies directly affect student retention, especially in challenging school contexts. In addition, previous studies on *The Ron Clark Story* mainly describe the teacher's character or general teaching strategies without connecting them to a structured framework of discourse analysis. This gap makes it necessary to examine how Ron Clark's way of communicating with students can be

systematically analyzed and how it contributes to maintaining their engagement and persistence in learning.

This is where the current study finds its novelty: by bridging the theoretical framework of classroom discourse with the concept of student retention through the analysis of a dramatized but realistic classroom portrayal. This approach also allows for new insights into how educational discourse works beyond the traditional classroom setting.

The themes presented in *The Ron Clark Story* also reflect the educational challenges faced in many Indonesian classrooms, particularly in areas with social and economic difficulties. According to a national report by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, more than 20% of students in marginalized schools in Indonesia experience a significant drop in motivation and classroom participation (Kemdikbudristek, 2021). This issue is not only tied to financial barriers but also to the lack of meaningful and responsive teacher-student communication.

While education reforms in Indonesia promote student-centered learning, actual implementation in many schools still relies heavily on teacher monologue, rigid instruction, and limited interaction. These conditions mirror the early scenes in *The Ron Clark Story*, where students feel disconnected and unmotivated. The urgency to improve classroom discourse is clear, particularly if the goal is to reduce dropout rates and enhance student retention. Studying the film through the lens of Walsh's discourse framework provides a chance to reflect on how changes in teacher talk when applied consistently and empathetically able to support long-term engagement.

The insights drawn from this research are expected to inform both teacher education programs and classroom practice in similar Indonesian contexts where retention remains a pressing issue. Previous studies that reference *The Ron Clark Story* often approach the film from a descriptive or thematic angle, focusing on its inspirational message, character development, or general moral values associated with teaching. For instance, Fang (2022) highlights the emotional appeal of the film and its potential to influence teacher beliefs, while Abeti (2021) provides a limited

structural analysis based on the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model. However, these studies do not examine how the teacher's discourse in the film aligns with specific interactional modes or how such discourse patterns impact long-term student engagement and learning retention.

This research fills that gap by applying Steve Walsh's (2011) classroom discourse framework to systematically analyze Mr. Clark's communication in the classroom. Rather than treating the film as entertainment or anecdotal evidence, the study treats it as structured data, breaking down key excerpts of classroom talk into discourse modes, such as managerial, materials, skills and systems, and classroom context, and linking them to indicators of student retention, including participation, responsiveness, and academic persistence. By doing so, this study introduces a new lens to view educational films: as empirical tools for analyzing pedagogical interaction and its impact.

Moreover, this research contextualizes the findings within retention issues faced in Indonesian education, particularly in under-resourced or urban schools. The approach not only builds on discourse theory but also makes it applicable to local classroom challenges. In this way, the study contributes both theoretically and practically: it advances research on teacher talk by integrating visual data from film and provides a reference for educators seeking innovative, discourse-based strategies to improve student retention in challenging environments.

B. Research question

1. What types of classroom discourse modes are used in *The Ron Clark Story* movie?
2. How classroom discourse modes affect students' retention in *The Ron Clark Story* Movie?

C. Research significance

1. For the Institution it is expected that this research could contribute to various parties, especially educational institutions, students, and researchers who are interested in the study of classroom discourse and teaching strategies. For educational institutions, the results of this study can provide insight into

the importance of classroom interaction as one of the factors influencing student retention.

In addition, this study can also be a reference for schools and educational institutions in designing more effective teacher training programs, especially in increasing student engagement through better communication strategies. Furthermore, the findings of this study can also provide input for policy makers in the field of education to develop curricula that support more productive teacher-student interactions.

2. For students: this study can help them understand how communication patterns in the classroom affect their learning experiences and motivation. By knowing effective teaching strategies, students are expected to be more aware of the importance of active involvement in the learning process. In addition, this study also highlights how positive interactions between teachers and students can create a more supportive and conducive learning environment to increase academic retention.
3. For researchers, this study can be an additional reference in the study of classroom discourse, especially in the context of representation in educational films. The findings of this study can provide empirical data on the relationship between teacher communication strategies and student retention, so that it can be used as a basis for further research. In addition, this study opens up opportunities for further research on how classroom discourse can affect student learning outcomes in different learning contexts.

D. Research Aims

1. To identify the types of classroom discourse modes employed in *The Ron Clark Story* movie using Walsh's classroom discourse framework.
2. To explore how the identified discourse modes influence students' retention as depicted in the film.

E. Research terminology

1. Classroom Discourse Modes

Classroom discourse refers to the patterns of spoken interaction and

communication that occur between teachers and students during instructional activities. According to Walsh (2011), classroom discourse is not only about what is said in the classroom, but how it is said and how it functions to support learning. It includes questioning strategies, feedback, instructional language, and opportunities for student talk. In this study, classroom discourse is analyzed using Walsh's (2006) four modes: managerial mode, materials mode, skills and systems mode, and classroom context mode.

2. Student Retention

Student retention in this research refers to the students' ability to stay engaged, remember, and apply what they have learned over time. Hattie (2009) defines retention as the process by which learning becomes embedded in long-term memory and can be transferred to new contexts. Retention is not only measured by staying in school but also by the depth and durability of learning. This research examines retention through student responses, participation, and demonstrated improvement in the film narrative.

3. The Ron Clark Story Movie

The Ron Clark Story is a 2006 biographical film based on the teaching journey of Ron Clark in Harlem, New York and has a duration of 1 hour and 36 minutes. In this study, the film serves as the primary data source, offering rich examples of classroom discourse, teacher-student interaction, and strategies that impact student retention. The analysis focuses on how Mr. Clark's use of language, feedback, and creative methods supports learning engagement and behavioral transformation, making it a suitable subject for discourse-based research (Fang, 2022).

F. Previous Studies

A study by Akbar et al. (2023) examined the use of discourse markers in classroom interactions depicted in the film *The Ron Clark Story*. The results of the analysis showed that the discourse marker "and" was the most frequently used,

appearing 76 times, while "I mean" was the least frequently used, appearing only 6 times. The use of these discourse markers plays a role in facilitating communication and increasing the clarity of classroom discussions, which in turn can increase student engagement and retention (Schiffrin, 1987).

Yusuf and Pattisahusiwa (2020) examined the teaching strategies implemented by Mr. Clark in the film *The Ron Clark Story* to create a conducive learning environment. This study identified five main strategies: physical classroom design, rules and routines, relationship building, engaging and motivating learning, and discipline. These strategies contribute to the creation of a positive classroom atmosphere, which encourages student engagement and increases retention. Clark's emphasis on relationship building and creating a supportive environment encourages active student engagement in learning (Hattie, 2009).

Several theories support the relationship between classroom discourse and student retention. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning, with discourse being a primary facilitator of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, Constructivist Learning Theory states that students construct knowledge through interactions with teachers and classmates, making effective discourse a critical element in student retention (Piaget, 1973). Research shows that strong teacher-student relationships play a significant role in increasing student retention. Hattie (2009) states that the quality of interactions between teachers and students is a major factor influencing student achievement and retention. Clark's approach to build relationships with students in *The Ron Clark Story* reflects this principle, as he actively engages with students and provides support tailored to each student's needs.

The classroom environment also plays a significant role in student engagement and retention. A positive and supportive classroom climate, as demonstrated in Clark's strategies, encourages students to actively participate in learning (Yusuf & Pattisahusiwa, 2020). Marzano (2003) supports this idea by stating that a safe and enjoyable classroom environment increases student motivation and engagement, which ultimately results in higher retention. The results of the study showed that the use of discourse markers and effective teaching

strategies contributed to increased student engagement and retention. Underlying theories, such as Vygotsky's Social Development Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory, emphasize the importance of discourse in the learning process. Future research should further explore the dynamics of classroom discourse and its impact on student retention in a broader educational context.

Another relevant study by Laily and Hidayat (2022) analyzed the language styles used in the film and found that Mr. Clark used a mix of formal and consultative styles, depending on the context. For instance, he used formal speech when addressing the class and a more relaxed tone during personal conversations. This adaptation of language helped him better connect with students, especially those who were previously disengaged. Their research suggests that this linguistic flexibility can be an important factor in building trust and increasing retention, especially among at-risk learners.

In line with this, Kartika et al. (2022) explored the interaction patterns in the film by applying Halliday's metafunctions. They observed that Mr. Clark's interpersonal and ideational language functions supported emotional bonding and meaningful content delivery. Their study shows that Clark's classroom discourse not only involved delivering lessons but also motivating students by embedding care and optimism in his words. This again aligns with the view that effective discourse strengthens the emotional and cognitive dimensions of retention.

Lastly, a study by Rahma and Yuliasri (2023) used a sociolinguistic lens to examine power and solidarity in teacher-student interactions in *The Ron Clark Story*. They argued that Ron Clark created solidarity by frequently using inclusive language like "we" and by listening actively. This approach helped reduce the perceived power gap between teacher and students, which is known to foster a more inclusive learning environment. As a result, students were more willing to stay engaged and participate in class discussions.

Collectively, these studies reinforce the idea that classroom discourse through markers, style, tone, emotional connection, and interaction patterns has a major impact on student engagement and retention. This current research builds upon those insights by focusing specifically on how discourse modes, categorized using

Walsh's (2006) framework, influence student retention in the narrative setting of *The Ron Clark Story*.

G. Research Gap and Novelty

Despite the growing interest in classroom discourse and student retention, most existing studies still treat these two areas separately. Research such as Freeman et al. (2014) has focused on teacher-student interactions in real classrooms, while Hattie (2009) and Kahu & Nelson (2018) have emphasized the importance of interaction and motivation in student retention. However, few studies have integrated both aspects using a single discourse analysis framework.

Additionally, previous research that has examined *The Ron Clark Story* (e.g., Fang, 2022; Abeti, 2021) has primarily focused on narrative elements, character analysis, or general pedagogical values. These studies have not utilized a structured discourse theory, such as Walsh's (2011) four mode framework to analyze classroom interaction patterns in the film. This study presents its novelty by explicitly bridging Walsh's (2011) discourse mode theory and Hattie's (2009) learning retention concept through a visual media lens. It not only explores how different discourse modes function in the film but also investigates their potential influence on students' participation and retention.

