

Students' Questioning in Classroom Discourse: A Preliminary Microanalysis

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Abstract

Since it is important to encourage students to ask questions in class, it is essential to inform students about when and how this action is done. This paper describes students' questioning behaviors through the use of conversational analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) and the notions of face in politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Specifically, it aims to answer the questions of when and how students ask questions in classroom discourse. Using actual classroom recordings, I examine the sequential contexts leading up to the students' questions and the organization of the students' questions. This paper can assist students who are interested in participating in class but still need to learn how to perform this task. It can also offer useful information to language teachers.

Introduction

Students' questioning in class is essential for a successful class since it reflects the extent to which students understand the content and fosters class discussion (West & Pearson, 1994). There are plenty of studies that provide suggestions concerning what teachers can do to encourage students to ask questioning in class. For instance, according to Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long (2003), in order to elicit students' questions, a teacher should (1) ask authentic questions, which are those for which the teacher does not already have an answer, in order to show the students that the teacher is truly interested in their answers; (2) employ uptake, which means the teachers ask follow-up questions that incorporate the students' previous response to show interest in the students' response; (3) provide a positive response to the students' comments or questions to encourage more questions from other students; and, (4) ask *why* questions to elicit students' perspectives (pp. 145-147). However, few efforts have been made to study *students'* questioning behaviors (Skilton & Thomas, 1993, p. 81). Further, most studies on student participation in class only try to document what types of questions students ask (Skilton & Meyer, 1993, p. 87-90), what variables influence the students' questioning in class (Nystrand et al., 2003, p. 188), and how students may form their questions (Skilton & Meyer, 1993, p. 83). To my knowledge, there have been few studies that

try to explain the various sequential environments in which students' questions emerge as well as the turn-by-turn organization of students' questions. And yet, this information is crucial for students who are willing to participate in the class but are unsure of the ways to perform this task. In this paper, I aim to explore the issue of exactly at what point of the classroom discourse students ask questions and how they perform the task.

Students' Questioning

Questioning functions as a way to gain information, clarify ideas, and seek answers to social and individual problems. Learning depends largely on questioning since it requires critical thinking skills as well as reasoning (Hyman, 1980, p. 38). Skilton and Thomas (1993) mentioned that since students' questions can lead to interaction and negotiation for meaning, student questioning can be a very important element for second language acquisition (p. 81). For these reasons, it is of great interest for teachers to learn about when students ask questions.

Asking questions in class can be face-threatening. For example, asking questions in class can threaten the students' positive face (which is the desire to be appreciated) because it shows their confusion and ignorance in front of other people. In addition, asking questions can also threaten the teacher's negative face (which is the desire to be left alone) because the student is asking the



teacher to do something for them. Following Brown and Levinson (1987), students may use politeness strategies to avoid or reduce the degree of the face-threatening acts when asking questions in class.

According to several researchers, students' questions are most frequently preceded by teachers' questions (West & Pearson, 1994, p. 307; Ayaduray & Jacobs, 1997, p. 562). That is to say, the teacher's questions will elicit student's participation in class since teacher questioning allows time for the students to think about the content and offers opportunities for students to ask questions (West & Pearson, 1993, pp. 307-308). As the teacher asks a question to the students, it is also a cue for students to take the next turn to ask a question. In addition, Nystrand et al. (2003) observed that when a teacher offers a positive response or asks a follow-up question to a student's question, it is most likely that the student will feel encouraged and become more willing to participate in class discussion (pp. 146-147). Along the same lines, West and Pearson (1994) noted that when a teacher compliments a student's inquiry of content, the student would feel that his/her involvement in class is valued and meaningful. A teacher's positive response would thus become a catalyst to active student participation in class (p. 309).

Research Questions

In this paper, I aim to find out the answers to the following questions:

1. At what points in classroom discourse do students ask questions?
2. How do students ask questions?

Methodology

The data are from a discourse analysis class in a graduate program in Hawaii. The class meets once a week for three hours and the data includes three video-tapings from three class

meetings. There were 17 students in this class from Vietnam, Taiwan, Canada, Japan, the US, and China. The teacher, a non-native speaker of English, is an experienced teacher in discourse analysis who also encouraged questions from the students. The class atmosphere was friendly and respectful. During the time of videotaping, the classes usually consisted of teacher-fronted lectures for the first half of the class, followed by group work in the second half. The class topics during the recorded interaction were about interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and discourse grammar. There were a total of four episodes involving students' questioning in this data set.

In this paper, I employed conversation analysis, which looks at spoken discourse to analyze the organization of social interaction from the participants' perspectives. I examined why students asked questions at certain points of the classroom discourse, and how they did it. I also drew on the notion of face, which Brown and Levinson (1987) defined as the self-image that everyone possesses in social interaction. I used the notion of face to attempt to explain the way students formed their questions in order to handle the face-threatening acts in the classroom discourse.

Analysis

In this analysis, I will present the four excerpts from my data, and for each excerpt, I will examine when the student asked the question and how s/he did it.

Excerpt 1: Any Questions?

In the following excerpt, the teacher (T) was explaining an assignment from the previous class. A student asked a question after an invitation for questions from the teacher and a short pause, as can be seen below. (See Appendix A for transcript notations.)

- 1 T: ↓so that would be my take on this. ↑any questions?
- 2 (.)
- 3 → X: ((X looks at T and raises his hand then drops it)) (0.3)

4 ((T *nods at X*) <in the question number four> you said denying°(0.3)
 5 so how c(hh)an hh. we know ↑exactly=

In line 1, T invites students to ask questions. After her turn ends, no one takes a next turn right away, which results in the brief pause in line 2. Student X, in line 3, then initiates a turn and responds to the teacher's invitation with a question. Thus, as has been found in previous research (West & Pearson, 1994; Ayaduray & Jacobs, 1997) one of the contexts for the students' questions is the teacher's invitation for questions, followed by a short pause.

Regarding the manner of the student's question, Student X requests the floor before asking his question. In line 3, he looks at T and raises his hand, the classroom convention for students to request a turn to talk (Paltridge, 2006, p. 115). He does not speak until T nods her acknowledgement and approval. X's permission-seeking action seems to orient to the fact that although there is an invitation for questions at the moment, any student can potentially respond, and thus X needs to self-select before actually initiating a turn.

It is noteworthy that before X asks his question, he issues a preliminary (Schegloff, 2007) in line 4 by referring back to what the teacher said earlier, "in question number four, you said denying." The student's use of reported speech ("you said") makes his

reference to the teacher's previous turn explicit. The question is also prefaced by "so," marking it as an upshot of what the teacher has said (Schiffrin, 1987). In other words, the preliminary grounds the upcoming question in the context of a specific detail from the ongoing discourse of the class.

To summarize, this example shows that a student can ask a question after the teacher's invitation for questions and a short pause. The student may then seek permission to ask his question, use a preliminary and then asks his question as an upshot of what the teacher has previously said.

Excerpt 2: Gerunds

In the following excerpt, the class was looking at a transcript of a grammar class in which the teacher in the data was talking about gerunds and infinitives (the transcript that the class was looking at can be found in Appendix B). The teacher (in the discourse analysis class) had been talking about the analysis of the transcript for a certain amount of time and finally one student asked what a gerund was. This excerpt contains two instances of students' questioning and they will be analyzed one by one.

1 T: ...any questions?
 2 (0.1)
 3 → Y: excuse me
 4 T: yes
 5 Y: can you explain that line sixteen, is that just just a sentence
 6 that student can use gerund.
 7 [is there any idiom
 8 T: [↑LINE sixteen? is there a gerund in it. there's no gerund in it.
 9 uh...present uh... progressive tense, that's not a gerund. but earlier
 10 he did, he said we have gerunds and infinitives waiting for us,
 11 that's a gerund. they don't want TO WAIT anymore and he's using the
 12 structure in class, which is the content. in this move, which is a
 13 management move. and people who have studied classroom discourse have
 14 divided two types of talks, content talk and management talk,
 15 sometimes we talk about the content here's infinitive here's gerund
 16 and here are the examples BUT what he's doing right now, calling to
 17 attention, that's management and those, usually there are two types

18 of talks, but here he's bringing it both together and some of you
19 mentioned it's a metaphor, but it's not this is just the MERGING
20 of those two and again that is part of the contextualization cue,
21 that's more fine: more sophisticated but yeah what he's doing here.
22 he's using one type of classroom talk embedded in another. he's
23 using the ↑content talk in uh management and again by the French
24 talk, it's unusual, people don't usually do that, that's why
25 it's funny. he's using the emphasis WAITING and TO WAIT to indicate
26 that I'm borrowing the content. this is not just by accident that
27 I'm using it, I'm emphasizing it. so that's a contextualization cue
28 to tell the students yes, I'm mixing codes I'm using the content in
29 °management talk°. and they're tired of waiting, all of these are
30 content talk but he's using it to °manage.°
31 (0.1)
32 → Y: [°so°
33 → D: [what's a ↑gerund.
34 T: OH good question YES ↑can somebody explain?
35 J: °(xxx) verb plus ai en gee ((ing°
36 D: what is it? ((S leans to J))
37 T: yes(.) vee plus [ai en gee
38 D: [↑oh: that's a gerund
39 T: =but ↑not all the time though [(0.1) like uh:: line five (.) flight
40 D: [oh↓
41 one fifteen will now be leaving (.) that part is vee plus ing
42 (.) that's the progressive tense, but
43 V: °I've never learned about gerund in my whole life°
44 T: yeah(.) HUH! ↑that's why you take SYNTAX ((T smiles))
45 L: °haha° so we [should take syntax°
46 T: [↑what's a gerund(.) so in line uh: line five (0.1)
47 we have a gerund in WAITING for us (.) that WAITING is a gerund (.)
48 he's ↑teaching about ↑gerund and he's using a ↑gerund in his class.
49 [and he's emphasizing it. to say that YES I am using it
50 D: [uh...waiting is a gerund ohhh ((S nods))
51 V: I also have the question, too, but I'm embarrassed and then
52 earlier I looked it up on Google and I said I should know what
53 this means

This excerpt confirms the finding from previous research and Excerpt 1 that students tend to ask questions after the teacher's invitation for questions (line 1) and a brief pause (line 2). Student Y, in line 3, responds with a turn that seeks permission to speak and simultaneously self-selects Y as a next speaker, quite similar to X's raising hand in Excerpt 1. Only after T's acknowledgement and approval (line 4) does Y proceed with the question (line 5), which is also quite similar to Excerpt 1. Unlike X, however, Y does not use a prelimi-

nary to ground her question. Instead, she starts with a request ("can you explain that line sixteen") then asks her question "is that just a sentence that student can use gerund"). An interesting feature of Y's turn is that it contains an extended question ("is there any idiom") immediately following the first question. The extended question in this case seems to function as a clarification of the first question. According to Kasper (2007), extended questions can serve as repeated questions, i.e., same or similar questions, that

elicit more relevant responses to the first questions.

As it turns out, the teacher responds by questioning the premise of the student's question ("is there a gerund in it," line 8). After making it clear about this premise (line 9), she expands her answer to the analysis of another part of the data not mentioned in the student's question but relevant in an understanding about the use of gerunds in the transcript being analyzed by the class (lines 9-30). When T's turn comes to a completion with softer speech and a pause (line 31), Y attempts to uptake T's turn with a soft "so" (line 32). Students' uptake after the teacher's answer to students' question may display their active listening to the teacher.

However, in this case, it turns out that Y's uptake is abandoned as she yields the floor to D, who is initiating a question (line 33). The term "gerund" has been mentioned several times from line 6 to 11. Most of T's lecture from line 8 to 11 concerns the term "gerund" as well. It seems that when it is clear that T is finishing her turn in line 30 (by lowering her volume at the end of a TCU, turn construction unit, Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974)), after a short pause, D asks her question, "what's a gerund?"

There are several interesting points about this interaction, but I will focus only on the shape of D's question in line 33. Here, we do not see any turn-claiming and permission-seeking device, preliminaries, or request; only a bare question. This question format could be due to the fact that "gerund" has been mentioned many times in this context and thus it is not necessary to contextualize the question, as in Excerpt 1. Second, D's bare question could be related to the fact that her question is not about the subject matter of the class—discourse analysis. Asking a question about "gerund," thus showing ignorance about syntax, may seem to be less face-threatening (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987). Finally, another possibility for D to ask a bare question at this moment could be that earlier

in line 5-6, student Y has already shown her confusion about the term "gerund." D's positive face is probably less threatened to ask the question because she is not alone in her lack of knowledge about gerunds. Indeed, as the interaction unfolds, another student, V, acknowledges her prior lack of understanding about what a gerund is (lines 43, 51-53).¹

As it turns out, the teacher gives a positive response to D's question by complimenting it and turns the question to the class (line 34). When another student (J, line 35) provides the answer, which is confirmed and repeated by the teacher (line 37), D displays her new understanding via the token "oh" in line 38 (Heritage, 1984) as an uptake of the classmate's and teacher's answer. As noted above about Y's question, up-taking the teacher's answer to one's question seems to be part of the students' action of asking questions in class.²

In short, Excerpt 2 shows two instances of students' questioning behavior. In both cases, the questions occur after the teacher's turn completion and a pause, thus confirming the pattern found in Excerpt 1. Regarding the format of the questions, in one case, the question (by student Y) is preceded by a turn-claiming/ permission-seeking device and a pre-question, as in Excerpt 1. In the other case, the question (by student D) is in bare form, possibly due to the fact that the question is not about the subject matter of the class, that the student needs to clarify a specific term after it was mentioned several times in the teacher's turn, and that another student has displayed a similar lack of knowledge.

Excerpt 3: Line Sixteen

In excerpt 3, the teacher was still answering the previous student's question of what a gerund is. H did not wait until there was a complete TCU and a short pause but started asking another question (line 3).

- 1 T: ask people who learn grammar rules before they can communicate
 2 [°first°
 3 → H: [excuse me ((Y raises her hand)) uh (0.1)
 4 can you explain why they start laughing after line sixteen=
 5 T: =YEAH what do you think why students start laughing after line
 6 sixteen but yeah let me finish on gerund. There's another gerund
 7 in line ten. Now back to line sixteen, why do they laugh, I have uh
 8 video data, but I just couldn't load it up. It's just too heavy...

The fact that H enters into T's turn space may be explained by the general pattern that the next speaker would join the conversation when s/he thinks the current speaker's turn is close to ending (Sacks, Shcogloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Instead of waiting until the current speaker completely finishes the turn, the next speaker may initiate a new turn, resulting in overlapped speech. If the next speaker mis-projects the completion of the current speaker's turn, then the new turn does not count as violating the turn-space of the current speaker, but as an unintended mistake. In excerpt 3, it is more likely that student Y mis-projects T's turn completion than trying to compete with T for the floor. However, the timing of Y's question seems problematic. Y's bad timing can be evidenced by what T says in line 6, "but yeah let me finish on gerund." From this excerpt, it may be inferred that it may be risky to ask questions without a clear cue for turn completion, such as a complete TCU and a short pause (as in Excerpts 1 and 2).

Regarding the format of the question, H first asks for permission to take the next turn by saying "excuse me" and raising her hand (line 3). Then, she utters a hesitation marker ("uh"), pauses, then makes a request ("can

you explain") before her question ("why they start laughing after line sixteen") (line 4). Thus, H is using several pre-question elements. Her use of these elements might indicate her orientation to the fact that her question is on a different trajectory from the teacher's current turn (which is on gerund still). Indeed, the teacher explicitly marks H's question as being on a different trajectory as well when she announces her shift back to her previous topic ("but yeah let me finish on gerund," line 6).

In short, this excerpt shows another example of how students' questions may occur after several pre-question elements. It also shows that when a student asks a question without clear signals for turn completion by the teacher (such as actual turn completion and a pause), the question's timing may be problematic.

Excerpt 4: Can We Use the Questions

In excerpt 4, the class was working on an exercise to transform a written text into spoken form by making changes to the text. The teacher was commenting on one of the groups' answers when student L asks a question.

((L's hand is raised at this point in the interaction))

- 1 T: ...and I like the use of ↑you (0.1) in the text cause you're
 2 ↑involving the audience and that °makes it
 3 [more (0.3) approachable° ((T smiles and approaches L))
 4 → L: [so (0.5) ((L looks at T and puts down his hand)) can we use the questions at the
 5 beginning of the lecture, for example, [(0.5) what can people do to make papers?
 6 T: [↑yeah you could

It is interesting to see that at the end of line 2 when T lowers her voice, student L seems to project T's turn completion and initiates a turn, resulting in overlapped speech with T's ongoing turn (line 4). L seems to orient to this overlap, as he pauses for 0.5 seconds before he continues with the question.

As for the format of the student's question, it is important to note that in line 3, student L starts his question by saying *so*. According to Schiffrin (1987), *so* can be used as a turn-initial device to show an upshot from the previous talk (pp. 141-150). Thus, L may be couching his question as an upshot of the teacher's talk so far, similarly to Excerpt 1 above.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis above examines at exactly what point of the classroom discourse the students asked questions and how they performed the task of asking questions. From the data, it can be observed that the students asked questions after the teacher had invited questions and there had been a short pause. Also, students asked questions when the question is about content immediately in the preceding turn by the teacher; in which case, the students' questions did not follow an invitation for questions or a pause. A student's question may be hearable as bad timing if the question occurs before the teacher's ongoing turn comes to a completion. With respect to the format of the questions, the students asked questions either by issuing pre-question elements (which includes asking for permission, requesting for the floor, issuing a statement related to what T just said and issuing a request), prefacing their questions with the use of *so* to show an upshot from T's talk, or using bare questions. Bare questions seemed to occur when the question was about content immediately available in the teacher's preceding turn, other students had shown their confusion in the previous talk, or when the question was not about the subject matter of the class.

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1986) can be brought in to shed further light on the data. As mentioned above, in one case

examined, the bare question may be related to the fact that the question was less face-threatening to the student who asked the question, since it was perhaps more acceptable to show ignorance about something that was not the subject matter of the class and when it was already known that some other people in the group were confused about the same question as well. In short, face could be a factor that shaped the students' questions. Second, the use of preliminaries were probably to avoid threatening T's negative face, and the use of *so* as a pre-question element was to show that the students' questions were the upshot of what T said in the previous turn, which could make the question less threatening to the students' positive face (the student was showing the teacher that they were paying attention to the class, despite some confusion).

It is noteworthy that the students' questions in the data were all about the content of the class (rather than, say, about classroom management issues). In West and Pearson's (1994) study, 27% of the student questions in class were about the content of the lesson (p. 303). Additionally, the teacher's responsiveness to and positive acknowledgement of the students' questions seen in the excerpts above may have encouraged the students to ask questions in class. Previous researchers have noted that if a teacher gives high-level evaluation to a student's question or comments, it is most likely that the student who asks the question or other students will be encouraged to ask questions in class (Nystrand et al, 2003; West & Pearson, 1994).

By looking at the minute details of the sequential organization and turn construction involved in students' question episodes, this study hopes to be useful for students who are willing to participate in class discussion but do not have the knowledge of when and how they should do it. At the same time, this paper also offers implications for teachers in the classroom. My data thus support the recommendation that teachers can encourage students' questioning in class by inviting questions, allowing time for students to respond, and giving positive comments on students' questions.

A limitation of this study is its small scale. As a preliminary study, I only observed one teacher in a small number of classes. Thus, the answers to the research questions here may need to be verified by further research. For example, it may not be the case that whenever the teacher issues an invitation to questions followed by a short pause, a student will ask questions. Further context before students' questions needs to be examined to uncover other possible factors that may also lead to students' questions, such as the projectable completion of the teacher's current action. Moreover, students' questioning may vary from different cultures or customs. As

Cameron (2001) mentioned, we need to be careful when analyzing discourse and not make claims or overgeneralizations easily (p. 94). Therefore, my findings may be true in this classroom which happened to be in the United States, but they might not apply to all classrooms. Finally, also due to the limited amount of data, I was not able to explore an important question regarding what students do after they receive the response, which is also a part of the questioning action. It is my hope that the preliminary findings of this study can pave the way for these future research questions.

Notes

¹ These explicit displays of shared ignorance among the students (Y, D, V) may work to build their solidarity as fellow classmates and the class atmosphere as friendly and comfortable enough for students to reveal their weaknesses openly.

² Regarding the students' actions after receiving the teacher's response, it can be said that there are mainly two types of behaviors. Firstly, students may repeat or

summarize the main idea from other people's response on their questions, as seen when T specifically pointed out that "WAITING is a gerund" in line 44, D responded by repeating "Waiting is a gerund ohhh" in line 47. Second, students may also display a new understanding by using the change-of-state token *oh* (Heritage, 1984). According to Heritage, when *oh* is used as a response, it represents the producer has change the state of his knowledge or information of some kind.

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Appendix A Transcript notation

.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
,	slightly rising intonation
↑	rising pitch in the next phrase
↓	falling pitch in the next phrase
↑↓	pitch rises and falls within the next word
:	lengthened speech
=	latching speech
-	cut off word
<u>underlined</u>	stressed syllable
CAPITALIZED	higher volume
superscript zero	beginning and end of softer speech
in <i>italics</i>	non-verbal actions accompanying speech
(())	vocal effect accompanying speech
[beginning of overlap of speech, or speech and non-verbal action
><	sped up speech
<>	slowed down speech
(number)	duration of silence in seconds
hh	edible out-breaths, often hearable as laughter or laughing voice

Appendix B

This transcript is used in the recorded class as the exercise material and is reproduced from Nguyen's (2007).

- 1 T: OK EVERYBODY,
2 (1.0) *T claps twice*
3 T: CAN WE (.) COME TOGETHER AS A ↑↓GROUP AND GO OVER ↑↓THIS,
4 (2.5)
5 T: WE HAVE GERUNDS AND INFINITIVES (1.0)
↑↓ <WAITING> FOR US.
6 A: *smiles*
7 (2.0)
8 T: They don't want <to wait >(.) anymore.
9 (1.0)
10 T: They're tired of (.) <waiting>.
11 (4.5)
12 T: ATTENTION?
13 (.)
14 T: ((with French accent)) ATTENTION?
15 (4.0) *Several students stop working and look up*
16 T: FLIGHT ONE THIRTEEN WILL ↓NOW BE LEAVING.
17 s: °heh heh heh°
18 T: ri -hhh- t.
19 T: IN THE FIRST PARAGRAPH (.) DO