A Study of Questioning Strategies in Conversation Classes

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1. Introduction

As the prominence of conversation classes increases in university language curriculums, it becomes increasingly important for language teachers to understand and monitor their use of language as a "pedagogic tool" (Mercer, 2001, p. 255). Teacher talk is often characterized by aspects including wait time, initiated interaction, feedback and question strategies (Thornbury, 1996). Analysis of features like these provides occasions for adjustment, refinement and variety of choices teachers make when speaking to students. Research on teacher talk can potentially lead to more natural output and more pedagogically useful interactive opportunities between teachers and students.

One aspect of teacher talk that is crucial in any classroom involves a teacher's questioning strategies. Richards (1990) states: "Questioning is one of the most commonly employed techniques in the teacher's repertoire" (p. 5). This is particularly applicable to conversation classes, which are meant to include models of natural interaction. Thorough understanding and appropriate use of questioning strategies are vital because much of teaching consists of teachers asking and students answering. This study investigates my deployment of questions in English IIB, a conversation class at Shimane University. Deployed questions will be analyzed according to three categories as well as two distinct questioning situations.

After outlining the methodology of this study, the question classifications used in this paper will be defined. Next, data resulting from the study will be presented and discussed. Suggestions will be made as to which questioning techniques offer maximum benefits to teachers and students. Finally, this paper offers a tentative conclusion that teachers should be alert to potentially predictable "bad habits" (Thornbury, 1996, p. 282) and "ritualized behaviors" (Maingay 1988 in Thornbury, 1996, p. 282) when questioning and should vary questioning strategies in order to both manage classes and engage learners.

2. The study

The purpose of this study was to examine one teacher's questioning strategies in order to determine whether existing patterns of behavior could be identified and whether those patterns permitted or limited natural teacher-student interaction and whether adjustments can be made to improve such interaction.

2.1 Data collection

Using a digital audio recorder and microphone, six English IIB English Conversation classes were recorded, equaling 10 hours of class time. Two different classes were recorded three times each. The microphone was attached to the teacher's pocket, and students were informed of its presence. After each class, the teacher's questions were transcribed and analyzed.

3. Question classifications

This section details some question classification systems in the literature and specifies the categories used in this study.

3.1 Display and Referential Questions

Questions can be separated into various categories. Richards & Lockhart (1996), citing Long & Sato (1983), state that

> 'display questions' [are] (questions that teachers know the answer to and which are designed to elicit or display particular structures) and 'referential questions' [are] (questions that teachers do not know the answers to) (p. 187)

Brock (1986) echoes this distinction and points out that display questions are used more frequently in L2 classrooms, while referential questions are used more often in native speaker-native speaker interaction (p. 48).

Thornbury (1996) worries that display questions can become "bad habits" if used too often (p. 282). He promotes referential questions as "genuine" (Thornbury, 1996, p. 281) and seems to suggest that they are better suited to L2 teaching and communication, as they "touch parts beyond the reach of other types of questions" (Thornbury, 1996,

p. 282). However, Swan (1985) defends the use of display questions (p. 82-83). Thus, it would seem exclusive use of either type of question mentioned above is inadvisable as well as impractical. While one style may be used more than the other, a combination is probably more effective than exclusive use.

3.2 Procedural, Convergent, and Divergent Questions

Richards & Lockhart (1996) propose other categories of questions: procedural, convergent, and divergent. Procedural questions (PQ) are used for classroom management and are unrelated to lesson content (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Convergent questions require only short answers, so they are similar to display questions. The two are related because "…[convergent questions] do not usually require students to engage in higher-level thinking…but often focus on the recall of previously presented information (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 186). However, some discrepancies between the two exist. Richards & Lockhart (1996) list examples of convergent questions; for example, "How many of your have a computer at home?" and "Do you use it everyday?" (p. 186). These questions require only brief answers, but the teacher may be asking because she does not know the answer, a possibility that hints of the referential variety. Still, display and convergent questions share most characteristics and will merged into a category of display-convergent questions, referred to from this point as DCQ.

Meanwhile, divergent questions closely resemble referential questions and will also be combined into a single category of for the purposes of this examination, referred to from this point as RDQ. Using these three question classifications (PQ, DCQ, and RDQ), the teacher's questioning strategies will be analyzed.

3.3 Questions to groups and individuals

This study also differentiates between "teacher-fronted" and "teacher-mobile" questions. The term "teacher-fronted" means the teacher stands at the front of the class, usually behind a podium, table or desk, and asks a question directed at the entire group of students. "Teacher-mobile" questions are those the teacher asks during periods of student-student pair work. During such periods, students stood up and frequently rotated partners. The teacher often joined in these practice sessions, rotating conversation

partners as well. Ur (1984) supports the idea of teachers involving themselves:

> "[The teacher] is only one individual and cannot interact with many of her class at the same time, but she can nevertheless supply some minimal native (or near-native) speaker participation. Where a class is well organized and a teacher can afford to abandon at least in part her role as supervisor and instructor, there is a strong case for having her actually participate in discussion activities on equal terms with her students" (p. 167).

It was hypothesized that those questions asked in a teacher-fronted position are often PQ or DCQ while those asked in the teacher-mobile capacity are more often of the RDQ variety.

4. Results

The transcribed questions were first separated into two groups by teacher position: teacher-fronted and teacher-mobile. Within these two groups, questions were further divided into the three more specific categories (PQ, DCQ, or RDQ).

4.1 Numerical breakdown

In the 10 hours transcribed, a total of 425 questions were recorded and analyzed. In the teacher-fronted position, a total of 283 questions were asked. PQ were most frequent (180), followed by DCQ (74) and RDQ (19). Teacher-mobile questions totaled 132. In this group, PQ were least common (5), followed by DCQ (17), and RDQ (110). Tables 1 and 2 summarize this data.

Table 1: Teacher-fronted questions

Procedural	DCQ	RDQ	Total	%Proc	%DCQ	%RDQ
180	74	19	283	64%	26%	7%

Table 2: Teacher-mobile questions

Procedural	DCQ	RDQ	Total	%Proc	%DCQ	%RDQ
5	17	110	132	4%	13%	83%

5. Discussion

As is evident in Section 4, the hypothesis that PQ and DCQ comprised a majority of teacher-fronted questions is supported. Likewise, the data show that teacher-mobile questions were more often RDQ.

5.1 Usefulness of these questioning strategies

This study shows a mixture of all three types of questions. However, the strategies used differ by teaching position.

5.1.1 Procedural questions

As may be expected, each lesson contains PQ. In this study, all PQ are understood by students and seem part of the questioning pattern to which students are probably accustomed. Used consistently, questioning patterns become easy for students to perceive. Nunan (1999) states: "routines can be crucial in facilitating comprehension" (p. 229). Procedural questions are used to help classroom and time management as well as to check understanding before students commence pair work.

5.1.2 Display-Convergent questions

Display-convergent questions proved useful in some situations in this study. They often serve a purpose similar to that of "boundary marker" (Pica, Young & Doughty, 1987, p. 738). The use of DCQ as follow up moves after periods of student pair work clearly signals the conclusion of that particular activity or stage. Utilized in this way, DCQ are similar to the aforementioned PQ, helping the teacher to manage timing and interaction. Some of the DCQ employed in this study allowed students to report on what they had discussed with their partner; hence, DCQ provide more speaking opportunities than pair work alone. Also, speaking to the teaching may be more motivating for some students than speaking to other students.

Another practical application of DCQ is related to their diagnostic function. As Swan (1985) points out: "[Display] questions have the communicative value…of eliciting feedback—of asking students to display knowledge of a piece of information" (p. 83). The are useful for evaluating student ability, which plays a large role in determining the manner in which that particular class will proceed. By accumulating evaluative

information, the teacher can also better plan for future lessons and more easily identify student strengths and weaknesses, especially those related to specific target functions.

It seems DCQ have practical applications in the following teaching situations: giving instructions, checking comprehension, following up after pair work, marking the conclusion of an activity, and diagnosing student ability. Most DCQ observed in this study occurred in the teacher-fronted position.

However, exclusive use of DCQ would be inadvisable and they should be used in conjunction with RDQ. While Swan (1985) comments favorably on display-type questions, he also observes that sole reliance on a limited range of activities, including presumably, questioning strategies, may be less than ideal. Pica, Young, and Doughty (1987) support this notion in their study of comprehension. They state that while DCQ are useful in some regards, DCQ alone are not sufficient, and that teachers should engage students with deeper, more meaningful and probing questions as well.

5.1.3 Referential-Divergent questions

The teacher's questioning strategies do in fact include a substantial number of RDQ, a vast majority of which occurred in the teacher-mobile position. These questions allow students chances to offer opinions and personal information the teacher does not know. While DCQ generally necessitate shorter, more controlled answers, RDQ prompt students to engage in communication that more closely resembles native speaker-native speaker interaction. This is due to an information gap between the teacher and the student, a gap that seldom exists with DCQ.

One benefit of RDQ is their ability to personalize activities for learners. Responses to topical RDQ provide the teacher with valuable information pertaining to the specific students in class. While listening to student responses, the teacher notes potentially useful replies that can be later incorporated in order to personalize the lesson material for students and/or used to exemplify language use for others. This collection of distinct learner responses allows the teacher to personalize practice stages and other activities to, including feedback, to suit particular student preferences and experiences. Similar to DCQ, RDQ can be used as diagnostic tools.

As stated previously, the teacher uses DCQ to signal a conclusion to student pair work. Referential / Divergent questions are employed in the same fashion, but are extended to allow students to make judgments, analyze, prioritize, and offer opinions. This type of query lets learners interpret the language produced and make judgments based upon their own perspectives. An example from this study is: "So, who had a more interesting weekend, you or your partner?"

It is clear that RDQ are easier to ask in the teacher-mobile position. This position allows teachers to become involved as well as to involve students at a more communicative level than DCQ alone can provide.

5.2 Effect of teacher positioning

As mentioned in Section 3, part of this study differentiated between teacher-fronted and teacher-mobile question positioning. The types of questions used in these two positions varied dramatically, and it is important to note how teacher whereabouts affect questioning practices. When teachers position themselves at the front of a class, it seems their questioning options are often PQ or DCQ but rarely RDQ. Procedural questions and DCQ certainly have value in classes (see Section 5.1.2), but they do not allow for the genuine communication that occurs with RDQ. Indeed, if teachers limit themselves to a teacher-fronted position, they confine themselves largely to PQ and DCQ choices. Exclusive use of these strategies may lead to behaviors that are overly predictable and ritualized. Such behaviors, in turn, contribute to unnatural, non-spontaneous, contrived exchanges.

In order to promote more authentic communication and stimulate more natural interaction, teachers may best be served by limiting their time questioning in a teacher-fronted position. This is not to say the teacher-fronted position does not have pedagogic merit (see Section 5.1.2). However, as stated in Section 4, teacher-mobile positioning creates much greater opportunities for RDQ. It is an RDQ-style of questioning that more closely reflects natural conversation in which speakers participate in conversation in order to exchange real, personal information previously unknown to their partner. This is presumably a goal of many conversation classes.

In a teacher-mobile position, teachers have the right set of circumstances to remove the barriers and "asymmetrical relationships" (Van Lier, 2001, p.103) created by PQ and DCQ. Teachers can interact with students at the more friendly and communicative level of RDQ. By asking RDQ, teachers are able to get to know students on a more personal level. Some advantages of asking RDQ from a teacher-mobile position are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Benefits of Teacher-mobile position

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Social benefits: students may enjoy talking to teachers as "equals"
Motivational benefits: students often relish the opportunity to speak directly to the teacher and have her undivided attention; however, some students may find this situation stressful
Affective benefits: when the teacher participates in a teacher-mobile position, he is treating students as equals, thereby creating a more relaxed, comfortable classroom atmosphere
Subsequent teaching benefits: teachers can collect evaluative data that can be used in feedback sessions
Diagnostic benefits: teachers can identify strengths and weaknesses of individual students

It must be pointed out that teacher-mobile questioning strategies require more effort on the teacher's part, not only in terms of physical movement, but also in terms of mental processing. More effort is needed to actual (as opposed to contrived) communication where information gaps exist. Thornbury (1996), in fact, challenges educators to "Try conducting a lesson in which every question is referential!" (p. 282). Additionally, some teachers may hesitate to engage students in more symmetrical relationships, especially in cultures where teachers are meant to be revered by students. Still, the benefits listed in Table 3 are valid reasons for teachers to at least periodically operate in the teacher-mobile position.

5.3 Modifications during the study

The data for this study were collected over the course of three weeks, and it is worth noting any changes or lack thereof in the teacher's questioning strategies. Any changes were likely due to the process of listening to class recordings, transcribing questions,

and feeling dissatisfaction with any current behaviors. Use of DCQ and RDQ remained relatively consistent. However, modifications in Procedural questions were evident.

5.3.1 Modifications in Procedural questions

As stated in Section 4, 180 procedural questions were asked in the teacher-fronted position. The realizations of these questions changed noticeably from the first to the third week of the study.

During the first week, the PQ "OK?" was overused to check student comprehension of instructions. This practice restricted opportunities for learner exposure to alternative realizations. In an effort to vary my PQ, I began to introduce a range of PQ that are basically synonymous. By the third week, a mix of PQ other than "OK?" was evident. Examples are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Procedural questions in Week 3

Week 3 Procedural Questions
*OK?
*Are you with me?
*Got it?
*Everybody got it?
*Does everybody understand?

Once students became used to the variety (as opposed to the ritualized "OK?"), they were able to respond with little difficulty.

The examples in Table 4 show some aspects of authentic language; for example, the question front words are sometimes dropped (i.e. the "Does" is omitted from "Does everybody got it?"). This modification in questioning practice should be seen as positive, as within the procedural framework of the class, students are exposed to and communicate using more varied, realistic language models. This improvement is a product of the teacher investigating use of language as a "pedagogic tool" (Mercer, 2001, p. 255).

5.4 Potential development

The strategies discussed so far seem suitable for questioning in this classroom context. However, additional techniques could be added to avoid stagnant and sluggish questioning practices (Hussin, 2006). Hussin is concerned that teachers are unable to incorporate multiple questioning strategies and therefore may limit student progress. In order to evade this type of restricting situation, it would be advisable for the teacher to expand the range of questions asked by gradually increasing question difficulty.

One suggested improvement is an adjustment from DCQ to RDQ when possible; for example, transforming "What's 'overseas'?" to "Have you ever been overseas?" simultaneously checks vocabulary (a DCQ function) and allows for expansion (a RDQ function). Additionally, use of tag and rhetorical questions, largely absent in these classes, would offer exposure to questioning styles sometimes used in native speaker-native speaker interaction. The inclusion of these and other questioning strategies may aid the teacher in better correlating question choice to student ability.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined one teacher's questioning strategies in university conversation classes. Three types of questioning strategies (PQ, DCQ, and RDQ) and two teacher positions (teacher-fronted and teacher-mobile) have been discussed. It is clear that a variety of questioning strategies is necessary for teachers to conduct the business of the classroom. One implication of this study is that variety in questioning practices is preferable to singularity. Another implication relates to teacher position and the effect it can have on a teacher's questioning options. Teachers are encouraged to limit their time in a teacher-fronted position and embrace and utilize the advantages of a teacher-mobile position.

By examining their use of language as a "pedagogic tool" (Mercer, 2001, p. 255), teachers can ensure their output steers clear of monotonous, unrealistic language and towards varied, authentic usage. This study examined questioning strategies, which comprise only part of teacher talk. Further investigation into other facets of teacher talk will positively inform and affect teacher output.

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