



A FEW CONSTRAINTS ON STUDENT QUESTIONING

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In education, it is believed that much of the learning that takes place in the classroom is the result of the questions asked by the teachers, and that the better the teacher's questions, the better the teacher's teaching and the class learning. Aristotle, in *Posterior Analytics*, 89b (quoted by Dillon, 1988: 7) says 'These, then, are the kinds of questions we ask, and it is in the answers to these questions that our knowledge consists'. In other words, student questions precede teacher questions in the learning process, and when students ask questions, learning follows in answer. According to Aristotle, questions arise in ignorance and perplexity, and the student's understanding is shaped by the relation s/he builds between question and answer as questions and answers conjoin to form knowledge and understanding. Questions invite both a search for answers and other questions which follow from these answers. The student's knowledge consists in the proposition that s/he forms of question and answer.

Even if asking questions is believed to stimulate thoughtfulness and to encourage expression, education is in many ways, an activity similar to other fields where questioning is an exercise of power and control. James Dillon (1988) showed that in fields that encourage both talking and thinking, such as counselling and personal interviewing, practitioners avoid questions. In other fields, such as courtroom advocacy and public opinions surveying, where the goal is to limit thoughtfulness and to control the utterances of the people being questioned, the practitioners are highly skilled in asking questions. In other words, social superiors ask questions and subordinates answer them. This pattern where the questions of the social subordinates are rare or miss altogether is normal practice: physicians seldom answer questions from patients, lawyers are never questioned by witnesses, adults do not always answer questions from children. In the classroom, the student has years of experience with only the teachers asking questions and answers being given by self and classmates. Although student questions are often mentioned in theory, there is small room for them in classroom practice.

Since Aristotle and before him, questioning by the students has been widely regarded by pedagogues as the starting point for effective education. In reality, questioning by teachers seems to actually be an exercise of power and control, as it is in other fields, where questions limit authentic discussion. In theory, student questioning and questions, together with the answers given to them, are encouraged and supported in the classroom, and no teachers would admit that they do not design lessons which encourage students' questions and answers. However, although as Aristotle showed, learning follows in answer to a question, few student questions are asked aloud in the classroom.

In normal classroom practice, classes in which no question is asked by students are not the exception but the rule. This is explained by the fact that students have few opportunities or reasons to ask questions, as they are busy giving answers to teacher questions. Classroom activities are organised in ways that do not motivate students to formulate questions, while

the classroom setting gives students reasons not to ask many questions.

We have never walked into a classroom, irrespective of the level of English of the students, where the students asked *a lot of* questions [1]. In fact, the older the students get, the fewer questions they ask, although their level of proficiency in a foreign language gets higher. Apparently, children ask a lot of questions, but not in the classroom. In 26 classroom recordings [2], with approximately 600 pupils participating, only one genuine student information question could be heard ("*What's the English for roabă?*"), while the questions from the teachers account for over 60% of the teacher's talking time. Such features are not uncommon for foreign language classroom practice or for classroom practice in general. Even if one could argue that most of class recordings mentioned were done in primary and lower secondary schools (18), and that most of these classes were taught in countryside schools (14), still we have to admit that this is the rule and not the exception. In fact, the teacher's asking a lot of questions does not by any means guarantee the stimulation of the students' interaction by the latter asking questions. Actually, certain types of teacher questions may discourage interactive learning (Kinsella 1991, quoted by Brown, D.H., 2001): display questions, obvious questions that may insult the students' intelligence, vague or abstract ones, questions that are too wordy or too complex, rhetorical and random questions (i.e. questions that do not fall into a well-planned sequence).

Although not represented in the corpus mentioned, besides information, knowledge and comprehension questions, students use other interrogative strategies, such as application, inference, analysis and synthesis, evaluation and procedural questions and devices (Dillon, 1988). Procedural questions (e.g.: *Is this going to be on the test?*) are the most strategic, as they are used effectively by students to solve their problems, to execute routines and to negotiate over obligations. Conversational questions can also be heard formulated in Romanian (e.g. *What? I didn't hear, Poftim?*). Self-answered and rhetorical questions are not uncommon during student project presentations, used to express some feeling or to make some point. They have the role of statements, and a common response to them is a remark such as 'Good point' or 'Yeah, but...' These other interrogative strategies are completely absent in the corpus mentioned.

One can argue that in the classroom, many of the questions that the students formulate and keep in their minds, remaining unasked, are answered by something said by the teacher or another student later on, as the discussion proceeds. In the same way, an unasked question that comes to a student's mind may be asked in the next part of the lesson. However, in classroom interaction, in the talk between teacher and students, it is sensible that students ask questions: the non-asking denies the very purpose of interacting. To refrain from asking is not to join in the discussion. Questions are due to arise and be shared, and it is a failing for a participant in the interaction not to speak his/her mind on the current issue, by withholding the questions instead of contributing them. On the other hand, it is true that some people learn just by listening and following along, but in a discussion, this defines non-participation, and is just an alibi. Some unspoken questions may be answered, others are not; in either case the answering is accidental. This thwarts the essence of the pedagogical activity, whose aim is to teach and to make the student learn that which is taught. The non-asking impairs the activity of teaching, turning it into something else.

Paradoxically, classroom teaching involves planned behaviour, adjusted in the process of enacting it. When planning a lesson, the teacher needs to anticipate the questions in the students' minds. If s/he is unable to do so, the teacher can neither plan nor act in accordance. In this process the teacher cannot know whose questions will be answered and whose will not, or which ones. However, when students do not ask questions, both teaching and learning suffer, and classroom interaction is affected.

However, it is normal and understandable for the students not to ask questions in class. A student's question may be an exceptional event as there are many powerful factors

accounting for the rarity of student questions. Although all these factors operate in the classroom, they do not necessarily originate in the classroom; nor are they located in either the student or the teacher. They operate systematically, and have to do with the structures and conditions of society and schooling, with rules of socialisation in schools and with situational authority rules. They include the whole complex of ways that other classrooms use with the same students, the curriculum itself, the nature of the subject-matter and the character of materials and textbooks.

Of all these factors, we will examine only the constraints of classroom discourse on student questions, showing that student questions are almost excluded by the cycles of interaction, rules, and norms of classroom discourse.

1. The IRF cycle

Typical classroom interaction leaves little room students to ask questions as they find it hard to fit a question into the ongoing IRF cycle. When a student bids for a question, the teacher has to think how to stop everything in order to let the student start in. However, most of the time the teacher has no reason to stop the ongoing cycle, since no one seems to have a question when they are all engaged in the ongoing interaction. The teacher and students are talking back and forth, and the cycle of talk is closed to everything but students' *answers*. The cycle typically begins with (a) a teacher's question, then turns to (b) a student's answer, and then to (c) the teacher's evaluation of answer plus (a) next question. Students can do nothing but answer in this cycle, and there is no turn at talk for them.

However, when a student asks a question, the cycle turns quite differently. The cycle does not begin with a student question, as in his subordinate position, the student must first gain permission to ask a question. To do that, the student must first gain the floor. Therefore, before the student can formulate a question, two exchanges are required:

1. Student's bid for the floor
Teacher's nomination of student
2. Student's request to ask a question
Teacher's permission to student

These preliminary exchanges are not easy to get going from the position of the student. This is because when a student bids for the floor, the teacher's assumption is that s/he wants to give an answer. On the other hand, when the student does get the floor, s/he is in the awkward position of having to substitute an answer with a question at that juncture, and therefore switch things around. However, the preliminary exchanges are usually smoothly executed:

1. Student's bid
Teacher's nomination: *Yes, Anda.*
2. Student's question: *What is the English for 'roabă'?*

The student may be waving a hand for bidding and the teacher may nod or say the student's name. Permission to ask might be asked for and granted parenthetically instead of in actual words. Even so, everyone knows that permission is involved. In our example, the question was preceded by a non-verbal bid from the student. Although we haven't found any example in our limited corpus, such exchanges may also involve the student specifically asking for permission to ask a question, using formulas like *Can I ask (you) a question?, I want to ask a question*, or even Romanian formulas to the same effect. The teacher's accord can also be verbal or non-verbal: *OK, Yes, Go ahead, What is it?* or a simple nod.

While after a teacher question, the next move is always a student's answer, after a student's question, the next move always belongs to the teacher. This move is more

unpredictable: it can be either a reply or a non-reply to the question. In the reply, the teacher may answer the question, but other replies may involve a counter-question, a redirection, a reformulation, or even a disparaging of the question or of the student who asked the question. This shows why asking a question may sometimes be a demotivating move for the student.

After a student's answer, the next move is teacher's feedback. This is most often, the evaluation of the student's answer, which is then followed by the next question. After a teacher's answer to a student's question, the next move always belongs to the teacher. Optionally, the teacher may allocate this turn to the student who asked the question, but if the student takes it, s/he can only acknowledge the answer and never evaluates it. More typically, the teacher keeps the floor and continues with the next move, which is another teacher's question, and the cycle repeats itself: teacher initiates/asks – student answers – teacher provides feedback/evaluation. By contrast, the cycle for a student question turns uncertainly at every turn:

1. Student's bid
T's nomination
2. (Student's request to ask question)
T's permission)
3. Student's question
4. Teacher's move
 - a. reply
 - b. non-reply
- 5a. Student's acknowledgement (optional)
- 5b. Teacher's move (question)

2. IRF and politeness rules

General rules of politeness, learnt both at home and in the years of schooling, also govern talk in the classroom. These rules do not encourage student questions, either. The cycle involving a student question takes remarkable tact and delicacy to find a suitable moment to begin, although no teacher would ever institute a rule against the student's questions. A general politeness rule says 'one speaker at a time', meaning that a student may not interrupt a speaker, whether the teacher or another student, with a question. On the other hand, a superordinate school rule holds that the teacher can talk at any time and that the teacher can interrupt the student, typically with a question. In other words, the teacher always has the floor, and the next turn at talk, and a student cannot take it to ask a question. Indeed, the next turn at talk always belongs to the teacher, even when a student is speaking, as it is the teacher who allocates the turn to a student, and can take it back at any time. Unlike other interactions where speakers negotiate turns and topics, in the classroom interaction, the turns are allocated by the teacher, who designates both the next speaker and the topic. A consequence of this is that a student cannot, as a rule, interrupt with a question when the turn is already taken, and the speaker and topic are designated. As the cycle follows its course, it is a real feat for a student to break it and ask a question. The corollary to these rules is that a student does not have a right to speak unless s/he is designated to do so by the teacher, and then s/he has the obligation to address the teacher and the topic specified. In other words, the student is supposed to answer the teacher's question and then stop and wait for the teacher's evaluation of the answer followed by the next question.

To conclude, in order for the student to ask a question, s/he must locate an appropriate juncture, make a bid to talk, gain the floor, obtain permission to ask the question, and, very often, change the topic. This kind of move, determines a change in classroom dynamics,

which reverses the usual one: from passivity, reactivity, expectancy and dependence to initiative, independence, proactive attitude, energetic action, and even aggression. All these are contrary to habit and violate the norms of classroom behaviour.

3. Student behaviour norms

Although not written, the norms of class behaviour are also very powerful. These norms do not support the student in the act of asking either, as displaying ignorance in school is against the norms. Even when the student has followed all the rules of talk and entered the cycle of interaction in the right way, s/he must ask the right question at the right time. If the student asks a question too soon or too late, the teacher's reaction will be *We'll get to that later* or *We have already dealt with that*. Moreover, the question should be about something that nearly everyone does not know. Otherwise, the student who asks the question will lose face when sighs or comments of *What a dumb question!* will be heard. One strategy to avoid this, used by some more advanced students is to deprecate self in the asking, prefacing the question by *I was just wondering* or *This may be kind of dumb, but...* Moreover, the student must take care not to ask one question too many or two questions in a row.

A student's question is expected to meet with negative reactions on the part of both classmates and teacher. A negative reaction may consist in a non-reply or a reprimand from the teacher and/or depreciation from classmates. Perplexity, incomprehension and the need for asking are disapproved, especially when the topic at hand seems so simple to everyone else and only the questioner still does not understand. Moreover, in many classes, it is against the group rules to display interest in the subject-matter or the teacher.

To conclude, powerful social forces inside and outside the classroom make difficult the asking of questions by the students. These forces involve peers, teacher, status, language proficiency, the IRF cycle and norms of discourse, class dynamics and years of school experience. Students have every reason but one not to ask the questions that occur to them in class. This one reason is desire of knowledge and understanding.

End Notes

- 1) We do not refer here to the practice of foreign language interrogative structures.
- 2) The recordings were done in the lessons taught in February and March 2008 by the participants in the MA in ELT Programme at the English Department, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași.

References

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Abstract

This paper presents the constraints which complicate and restrict the questions the learners formulate during the foreign language class. These concern the other participants in the interaction, the status of the one who risks asking one question, the structure of the cycle initiation – response – feedback, the dynamics of the class as well as the general norms of politeness and those of school conduct.

Résumé

L'article présente les contraintes qui font difficile et limitent la formulation des questions par les élèves pendant une leçon. Celles-ci se réfèrent aux autres participants à l'interaction, au statut de celui qui risque une question, à la structure du cycle Initiation – Réponse – Feedback, à la dynamique de la classe mais aussi aux normes générales de politesse et à celles de la conduite scolaire

Rezumat

Lucrarea prezintă constrângerile care îngreunează și limitează formularea întrebărilor de către elevi în timpul unei lecții. Acestea se referă la ceilalți participanți la interacțiune, la statutul celui participant care riscă și formulează o întrebare, la structura ciclului Inițiere – Răspuns – Feedback, la dinamica orei lecției precum și la normele generale de politețe și cele de conduită școlară.