ENCOURAGING MORE STUDENT OUTPUT: ALTERNATIVES TO QUESTIONS

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Abstract

Classroom interaction has traditionally been shaped by questions and students can become accustomed to little reflection being given before the next question is posed, hindering discussion and discouraging students from producing more language. Addressing this issue to the Japanese context, in order to avoid reinforcing the student's role as passive, teachers need to encourage effective communication and it has been claimed that using alternatives to questions promotes more student output (Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Wells, 1999; Dashwood, 2005). This article investigates the effect alternatives to questions had on the amount of student output in English oral communication classes in a Japanese high school. The results suggest that alternatives to questions should be employed more, in conjunction with more common questions, and regularly incorporated into classroom interaction to provide students the opportunity to produce more.

***Keywords*:** classroom interaction, student output, classroom language

Introduction

Classroom interaction has traditionally been shaped by questions, described in models such as Sinclair and Coulthard's (1992) IRF model, in which the teacher initiates the first move (I), a student responds (R) and the teacher evaluates and asks a question in the follow-up move (F). While this exchange sets cognitive challenges for students, guides the direction of learning and is effective for managing classroom behaviour, it has been claimed that there is potential for teachers to encourage more student output by using alternatives to a follow-up question in the third turn (Young, 1992; Dillon, 1994). Using a range of question types provides the opportunity to start discussion in the classroom, but it may not be the most effective way to encourage students to produce more output.

Previous studies found that although questions engaged students, they reduced 'the length of their answers to conform to [their perceived frame of] the teacher's preferred composition of the answer' (Dashwood, 2005:145), especially when the teacher occupied the role of 'primary knower' (Berry, 1981). As a result, students provided mainly short, accurate answers that

were often without clear development. However, following all of the alternatives to questions, the students were likely to continue and develop their ideas with more language being produced than after questions (Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Wells, 1999).

Table 1. *Move types and possible effects*

Move type	Process	Observed effects
Question	Asking a follow-up question to the previous response	Minimal responses were likely with hesitant or little follow up and the teacher proceeding to develop a long turn, hindering discussion by students.
Reflective statement	Restatement of the student comment	Clarification engaged the student, allowing them to expand their ideas and appeared to reduce confrontational effects of a question.
Statement of mind	Reflection of teacher's own views on the topic	The student responded to the teacher's state of mind allowing discussion to develop.
Declarative statement	A thought that occurs as a result of what the speaker was saying	The student speaker had the benefit of the teacher's thoughts on the matter.
Statement of interest	Expressing an interest in a person's views	A motivating effect on the student's engagement with discussion.
Speaker referral	Referring to a previous statement of a speaker	The potential for students to discuss a previous proposition was offered.
Back-channeling	Gestures, verbal signals and pauses	Created a feeling of obligation by students to offer more language input to discussions. The signals also indicated to students that they were on track and could keep the turn.

Despite more flexible approaches to the IRF model being identified by Cullen (2002), Dillon (ibid.) states that students can become accustomed to teachers taking back the third turn, often with little reflection on the student's previous response before posing the next question, hindering natural and progressive discussion. In view of this, teachers should consider alternative moves to questions in order to increase their students' language output in a way that promotes communication. Drawing on research by Hatch (1999) and Dashwood (2005:148), Table 1 illustrates types of moves that teachers could employ and their possible effects on classroom language.

Research into the teacher's role in managing classroom interaction has been conducted in different contexts (Morgan & Saxton, 1991; Brown & Wragg, 1993). In response to recent changes implemented by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (MEXT) stipulating that teachers are required to increase the amount of English used in the classroom, this article investigates the effects of using alternatives to questions in English oral communication classes in a Japanese High School.

Method

A topic within the current curriculum for the second year high school students (dilemmas and hypothetical situations) was selected and taught by the participating teachers to their normal classes (Class A, B, C, D, E and F). The classes are single sex and have an average of 12 students. The six classes used in this study were deemed representative of the students in the year group as they were 3 boys' and 3 girls' classes, one of each from the higher, mid and lower levels that the students are streamed into. After discussion with the participating teachers it was decided that open questions (those that cannot be answered with just 'yes' or 'no') were to be used in the opening move of the IRF sequence as they were expected to stimulate more student output than closed questions. It was also decided that the teachers should attempt to use the full range of alternatives when responding to students' answers. Although it was important for the teachers to use the full range of moves in their classroom interactions, this was not overemphasized as the analyzable data needed to be produced as naturally as possible.

As audio recordings of ten minute sections of the classes were made, each participant was asked to sign a consent form that outlined the aims of the research. The participant students

were not told when the recording would take place and the recording device was obscured in order to allow them to participate in class as usual during the sample time. Transcriptions were made of the recordings using the Jefferson system (2004), then the moves were identified and the responses made by the teachers were categorized into open questions, closed questions, reflective statements, statements of mind, declarative statements, statements of interest, speaker referral and back-channeling. The question move found in the previous studies identified in Table 1 was divided into open and closed categories in order to investigate the effect the two different question types have on student output during classroom interaction. The number of words uttered by students in response to a teacher's move were then tallied and used to rank the moves. Fillers, such as 'Hmm' and 'Uhh', were not included in the final results.

After analysis of the recordings, interviews with the three participating teachers were conducted to gain insights into their perceptions of the effect the different moves they employed had on student output. The interviews were recorded, but conducted informally and did not follow a set pattern of questions.

Results

From Table 2 (See Appendix) it can be seen that the type of moves made by the teacher had an influence on the length of the students' responses, with a difference of 6.1 words per move being demonstrated between the highest ranking move, reflective statement, and the lowest, back-channeling. Overall, reflective statements encouraged the greatest student output, followed by speaker referrals, statements of interest and open questions, declarative statements, closed questions, statements of mind and back-channeling. Although there is some variation in the ranking of the responses to the different moves, two distinct groups can be identified, with open questions, reflective statements, statements of interest and speaker referrals consistently encouraging students to produce the most language.

Effect of open questions

Sample 1:

T: Where did the boy go?

S: (2.6) The cinema.

T: (1.5) Why do people go (.) why do they go to the cinema?

S: (1.3) Yes. (2.4) They likes the feelings. (1.6) (Japanese) (2.7) Uh. It makes them happy, (1.4) but it is (.) expensive.

Often, following the teacher asking an open question, long answers with more output than was minimally required were produced. In Sample 1, two reasons and a piece of further information were produced where one reason would have sufficed.

Effect of closed questions

Sample 2:

T: How: often do you go: to the cinema?

S: (1.8) Sometimes I go.

T: (2.3) Do you like horror movies?

S: No, I didn't. (.) They are scary.

After closed questions, often short responses with little or no expansion were produced. In Sample 2, a follow up sentence was produced, but it was in the same form as a previously modeled example and no further expansion was given.

Effect of reflective statements

Sample 3:

T: Wha:t did her friends think?

S: (3.7) They were surprised ( ) she wasn't scared.

T: (2.0) So they thought she would be scared.

S: (4.2) Yes, (2.1) she is always scare, (3.2) but this times she wasn't. (2.5) They were shockered.

Rewording a student's statement and reflecting on the previous move engaged the students, giving them the opportunity to expand on their ideas. In Sample 3, the student gave further background information about the subject, reiterated the point previously made using a different, more complex structure, and added an extra confirmation and intensifying adjective.

Effect of statements of mind

Sample 4:

T: Where would you go on holiday, (1.7) Japan or America?

S: (3.2) I think Japan is [best.

T: [Really? I think most people ((cough)) most people would like to go abroad.

S: (5.2) (Oh). Yes.

After a statement of mind the students often produced minimal responses which rarely expanded on their first moves, as in Sample 4.

Effect of speaker referrals

Sample 5:

T: What would you: say [Misato]?

S: (2.6) (Japanese) (1.7) I would say 'no'.

T: (2.8) That's the sa:me a:s [Yukie].

S: (3.4) She doesn't like every insects. (2.2) I hate (Japanese) (2.0) cockroaches just. They are crazy and disgusting.

After speaker referral, students often produced long answers with more information given about their classmates and themselves. In Sample 5, the student comments on a previous remark, giving it background information, then offers information about her personal opinions, and then justified her opinions with a supporting sentence that included two adjectives.

Effect of declarative statements

Sample 6:

T: What do people think is (.) scary?

S: (1.4) (Japanese) (1.9) They think (.) walking at night is scarer.

T: (2.5) Hmm. So:me people find it e:ven scarier when they are walking at night by themselves.

S: (1.7) Yes. (1.6) I don't like when it's (.) (Japanese) (2.6) just me.

Unlike statements of mind, after a declarative statement the students were able to respond to the teacher's move, allowing the classroom interaction to develop. In Sample 6, the student

agrees with the teacher's response and then supports their first comment with personal information.

Effect of statements of interest

Sample 7:

T: Would you: go to watch the horror mo:vie?

S: (1.9) No, (.) I wouldn't.

T: (2.6) Tell me mo:re.

S: (1.8) I don't like (.) horror. (.) They make me scary. (2.4) I like action or romance (love) (2.6) or drama.

After statements of interest the students produced more output than was minimally sufficient and expanded on their previous ideas. In Sample 7, the student supported their initial answer with three sentences, including five pieces of extra information.

Effect of back-channel signals

Sample 8:

T: When (.) would mo:st peo:ple (1.1) watch (.) a horror movie?

S: (1.2) (Japanese) (1.7) In Summer (.) people watch horror.

T: (2.9) Mmm.

S: (3.2) It makes them (.) colds.

After back-channeling, students often produced short answers of only one sentence and did not tend to expand, as in Sample 8.

Table 2 also shows that the number of times the move types were made varied considerably, with open questions being asked a total of 37 times but speaker referrals only being used 15 times. There are also comparisons that can be made between the four most and least used moves and the four moves that encouraged the most and least student output, with six of the eight moves being in the top or bottom groups for both. The exceptions were closed questions being the second most used move but only encouraging the sixth most student output and speaker referrals being employed the least, but encouraging the second highest amount of student output.

Discussion

The alternatives to questions used in this study provided students the opportunity to produce output following prompts that they would not usually encounter as much in the classroom. The results suggest that alternatives to questions should be employed more, in conjunction with more common questions, and regularly incorporated into classroom interaction to provide students the opportunity to produce more. The identification of the groups of four moves that consistently encouraged more student output indicates that students responded better to reflective statements, speaker referrals, statements of interest and open questions in this context.

Reflective statements showed students that their comments were valued and being listened to, and the high level of student output may be attributed to students becoming more confident in offering their own opinions in discussions because of this. Previous studies found that the use of reflective statements reduced the confrontational effects of a question, and the participating teachers in this study reported that the students appeared to feel relaxed and willing to produce more, for example Teacher 1 commenting '[the students] visibly perked up and wanted to open up. They were engaged in the dialogue.' Also, it was noted that a wider variety of comments were produced that deviated from commonly found responses and structures, illustrated by Teacher 2 stating 'some really interesting things came up, not just usual 'test-like' answers.'

Speaker referral offered the potential for students to discuss a previous comment and in many cases this allowed them to produce longer turns than after other moves. The students often commented on and developed classmates' contributions, supporting the findings of Wells (1999: 209) that this type of move helps to develop 'the collective understanding of the topic under discussion.' Teacher 1 commented that 'it brought students' ideas together and they generally linked together well and this helped the flow of the class.'

Unlike previous research conducted in the field of classroom interaction, the results indicate that, along with statements of interest, open questions prompted the third longest responses on average. This could be attributed to younger students taking longer to adapt to new methods and moves being introduced in classroom interactions, especially in a second

language. Therefore, familiarity with open questions being employed in the third move of the IRF model could have led to more output being produced than other unfamiliar moves not commonly encountered. This effect may not be so noticeable in older or more experienced students. Teacher 3 stated 'asking open questions seemed more natural to me and, I guess, the students,' and Teacher 1 commented 'open questions worked better with some students than the alternatives.' These results and comments show that while the implementation of alternative moves to questions are useful in developing student output, questions should not be excluded or replaced completely.

Similar to reflective statements, the teacher employing a statement of interest in the student's previous move showed recognition of their comments and opinions, and allowed the student to expand on their previous comment. Teacher 2 commented that 'statements of interest appeared to engage the students the most. They were happy to be asked for more.'

When the teacher used a declarative statement, some students interpreted the move as an evaluation of their comment and if the declarative statement differed from the opinions the students had put forward in their move, they often corrected their previous statements in order to comply with the teacher. Two of the teachers commented that students contributed less to classroom interaction in general, not just in that one isolated interaction, after the teacher employed a declarative statement. This may be a finding that is emphasized by traditional teacher-student power roles and may also be less pronounced in more experienced, older students who are more confident in their own ideas and opinions.

Closed questions allowed students the opportunity to produce language and offer an opinion or personal information, but often the structure of the response was similar to a previously modeled answer and fitted a pattern that they felt the teacher wanted, similar to the findings of Edwards and Westgate (op. cit.) and Dashwood (op. cit.).

After statements of mind students interpreted the teachers' own views as an evaluation of their previous moves, and this hindered language production. This possibly reflects Japanese students' uncertainty avoidance (Porcaro, 2001) and view that the teacher should not be questioned. All of the participating teachers stated that they noticed a change in student attitude after they employed a statement of mind, for example Teacher 2 commenting 'he just

accepted my comment to be correct and that was the end of it.'

Back-channeling produced the shortest responses of all moves. It was noted by the participating teachers that often the students did not realize what the teacher was attempting to do and did not produce any further output and this may have been caused by the unfamiliarity of the move. Teacher 3 stated 'I was trying to back-channel, but they were just watching me and not speaking!'

The misunderstanding or misinterpretation of certain moves, especially statements of mind and back-channeling, highlights an area of interaction that could be developed and improved. The large difference in the number of times the various moves were employed indicates that the participating teachers felt more comfortable using certain items, particularly open and closed questions, which are the more traditional moves used by teachers in formal contexts. However, by using some of the lesser-used moves in classroom interaction, student output can be promoted, as seen in the high amount of language produced following speaker referral.

Conclusion

Traditionally, in the Japanese education system there is an expectation among students that the teacher and textbook are the sole sources of information (Dashwood, op. cit.), and this view has been used as a way of 'imposing order' (Arum & Ford, 2012: 58) in the classroom. However, rather than reinforcing the student's role as passive, silent listener in Japanese education, teachers in English oral communication classes need to encourage students to speak and communicate effectively. This study has shown that this can be achieved by teachers using alternatives to questions in conjunction with more common question moves.

Overall, the participating teachers reported that using the alternatives to questions together with open and closed questions gave students the opportunity to produce more output and enhanced classroom language production more than using only questions. However, the teachers also claimed that in some cases, such as when using back-channeling, statements of mind and declarative statements, the students misinterpreted or misunderstood the teachers' intentions. This situation could be improved over time as the students become more comfortable with, and able to recognize the intention of, the moves made the teacher. Also,

giving teachers further training in how to effectively incorporate different moves into their classroom language would greatly benefit the fluidity and authenticity of their interactions. After all, natural conversations are not just a series of questions being asked by one person and answered by another.

Biodata

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Appendix

Table 2

Average words per move, output rank and no. of items by class.

Move	Average words per move (by class)																				
	A			B			C			D			E			F			All		
	Words	Rank	No. of items	Words	Rank	No. of items	Words	Rank	No. of items	Words	Rank	No. of items	Words	Rank	No. of items	Words	Rank	No. of items	Words	Rank	No. of items
Open question	8.3	3	5	8.7	4	7	6.3	4	6	7.7	2	8	6.6	3	7	7.3	1	4	7.5	3	37
Closed question	3.2	8	3	4.3	6	4	5.5	5	6	2.7	8	4	4.5	5	5	3.7	6	6	4.0	6	28
Reflective statement	10.7	1	5	9.7	2	3	8.7	1	4	9.3	1	5	8.1	1	2	7.3	1	3	9.0	1	22
Statement of mind	4.1	6	2	4.3	6	1	2.3	7	4	3.3	6	5	4.5	5	3	2.3	7	2	3.5	7	17
Declarative statement	6.7	5	3	8.7	4	2	5.5	5	2	6.7	4	3	3.7	7	6	5.0	5	3	6.1	5	19
Statement of interest	8.3	3	6	9.7	2	4	8.3	3	3	6.7	4	1	5.3	4	3	6.5	3	5	7.5	3	22
Speaker referral	10.5	2	1	11.3	1	2	8.7	1	3	7.3	3	1	6.7	2	6	6.3	4	2	8.5	2	15
Back-channeling	3.7	7	2	3.7	8	3	2.3	7	2	3.3	6	2	2.3	8	4	2.3	7	3	2.9	8	16
Total average words	6.9			7.6			6.0			5.9			5.2			5.1			6.1		