Missing response after teacher question in primary school English as a foreign language classes

Yuri Hosoda[*]

Kanagawa University, 3-27-1 Rokkakubashi, Kanagawa-ku, Yokohama 221-8686, Japan

A B S T R A C T

This study investigates question and answer sequences in primary school English language classes. Using the framework of conversation analysis, it explores instances in which student responses are noticeably absent after teacher questions and reveals teacher interpretation of the missing responses. This study draws on 22 h of video-recorded primary school English classes collected in Japan. The analysis revealed that overwhelmingly teachers treated students' insufficient linguistic knowledge as a source of missing responses and such interpretation was found to be specific to language classrooms. Moreover, in dealing with missing responses due to students' linguistic problems, teachers prioritized the preference for dealing with problems in understanding questions over the preference for dealing with problems in producing the answers. However, there were also occasions in which teachers attributed missing responses to their failure in producing questions appropriately. In such cases the trajectory of the interaction approximated to that of mundane conversation and other types of institutional interaction. This study suggests the significant consequences of on-line interactive decisions teachers make in classrooms.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In 2011, after approximately 10 years of an experimental period, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan set out to make fundamental adjustments in primary school curriculum that made English a compulsory subject for fifth and sixth graders. Although it is compulsory only for fifth and six graders, the majority of schools have opted to introduce English to younger students such as first and second graders since the beginning of the experimental period in the early 2000s.

According to MEXT, the main goals of English classes in primary schools are to expose students to communication in English, to develop their communication skills in the language and to develop their intercultural communication skills (MEXT, 2010). Therefore, explicit instruction in grammar, reading, or writing is to be avoided. Instead, activities that make students familiar with the sound of the English language and those that enable students to use simple but useful words and phrases are recommended. Another important feature of the English curriculum is that teachers are supposed to motivate students to learn English so that they can maintain their interest in English, which is a compulsory subject for their subsequent education in junior high school and high school. Accordingly, teachers tend to avoid explicit rejection of students' answers

* Tel.: +81 45 481 5661.
E-mail address: yhosoda@kanagawa-u.ac.jp

even when the students' answers are "incorrect" and to overtly praise students when they produce what they view as "correct" answers, which often occur in conjunction with applause (Hosoda & Aline, 2010a, 2010b).[1]

In order to develop communicative competence in a foreign language, peer discussion or tasks are generally recommended in the communicative teaching method. Compared to mundane interaction, classroom interaction is one type of interaction that is a relatively recent invention and has undergone a great deal of change (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). In language class-rooms, in reaction to Chomsky's linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1965) and with the influence of Hymes's "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1972), new teaching approaches and methods including "communicative language teaching" (e.g., Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983) that were designed to improve students' communicative skills through plenty of communica-tion practice were introduced in late 1970s and early 1980s. Nevertheless, that does not mean that everybody jumped on this communicative teaching band wagon. Depending on students and other teaching conditions, traditional teacher-fronted classroom style is still prevalent. At the very beginning stage of foreign language learning, as learners do not possess ample linguistic resources to freely communicate with peers, a traditional teacher-fronted classroom style is commonly observed. The interactional pattern of these traditional classrooms usually consists of three parts, called initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) by Mehan (1979), initiation-response-feedback (IRF) by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), and question–answer–comment (QAC) by McHoul (1978). Teachers in traditional language classrooms routinely initiate the three-part structure with "known-answer" questions, or what Searle (1969) calls "exam" questions, that are deployed to discover whether or not the students have mastered certain expressions or forms.[2]

This study focuses on the first two parts of the three-part interactional exchange, teacher initiation and student response. Specifically, it scrutinizes the cases in which student response to teacher initiation is relevantly missing and reveals teacher practices and orientation in pursuing the missing response.

Question–answer sequences

Question–answer sequences in mundane conversation

As the basic unit of conversational sequence is a two-unit sequence or an adjacency pair (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), when a speaker produces a first pair part, production of the second pair part by a recipient becomes conditionally relevant (Schegloff, 1968, 2007). Generally speaking, positive responses that agree with or conform to the action and design of the first pair part occur contiguously (Sacks, 1987). Through observation of massive mundane conversation data, Jefferson (1989) demonstrated that a "standard maximum tolerance" of silence is approximately one second. When the recipient's response does not occur in approximately one second, the speaker treats the missing response as indicative of some problems, such as a problem of hearing, a problem of understanding the initiation, or a problem in agreeing with or conforming to the initiation. The speaker then may deploy various practices to pursue recipient response (Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2007).

In question–answer sequences, when answers do not occur contiguously, questioners usually pursue recipient responses through repeated questions, and the design of repeated questions reveals the questioners' interpretation of the missing responses. In the extract below, Child pursues Mother's response twice after Mother fails to answer her question.

```
(1)  Heritage, 1984, p. 248
01  Ch: Have to cut the:se Mummy.
02       (1.3)
03  Ch: Won't we Mummy
04       (1.5)
05  Ch: Won't we
06   M: Yes.
```

In this instance, as the initial query is unanswered, Child produces two additional turns to pursue the answer (lines 3 and 5). Through the pursuit, Child is treating the missing response as problematic. Furthermore, by producing the questions in increasingly truncated forms, Child exhibits her interpretation that the recipient actually heard and understood the question but did not answer. Thus, in question–answer sequences, how a speaker interprets the missing response can be publicly demonstrated in the way the speaker designs the subsequent question.

---

[1] In Hosoda and Aline (2010a, 2010b), we demonstrated that instead of overtly rejecting the students' incorrect or unexpected utterance, the teachers in this context usually repeated the students' response or produced a token of surprise. However this practice of teachers is not exclusive to the context under investigation. Seedhouse (1997, 2004) showed that even in ESL classrooms outside Japan, teachers generally avoid producing "no" to evaluate students' linguistic performance.

[2] What I refer to as "known-answer questions" were first called "exam questions" by Searle (1969), then "known-information questions" by Mehan (1979), and have become known as "display questions" in the second language acquisition literature (i.e., questions to which the teacher knows the answer). In this paper, I employ the term "known-answer questions," which is commonly used in conversation analysis literature (e.g., Heritage, 2005, 2013a, 2013b; Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Heritage & Raymond, 2012; Lerner, 1995; Schegloff, 2007).