
"What Time Is It, Denise?": Asking Known Information Questions in Classroom Discourse

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There is a significant difference between some of the questions that teachers ask students in classrooms, and the questions that are asked outside classrooms. This difference can be made clear by contrasting the following two question-answer sequences:

- 1:1 Speaker A: What time is it, Denise?
2 Speaker B: 2:30
3 Speaker A: Thank you, Denise
- 2:1 Speaker A: What time is it, Denise?
2 Speaker B: 2:30
3 Speaker A: Very good, Denise¹

The first sequence is typical of ones that we would expect to encounter in our everyday lives. The first speaker has asked another person for information that the second person presumably has. The second person provides this information, and the first person thanks the second for her trouble.

The second sequence is quite different than the first. And, the difference is found in the first speaker's response to the information provided in response to the question asked. The third component of the second example doesn't seem to do the same conversational "work" as the third component in the first example. While the "thank you, Denise" seems to "acknowledge" the content of the previous reply, the "very good, Denise" does much more than this. It seems to be more of an "evaluation" of the previous reply than an "acknowledgement" of it.

We would be taken aback if, after telling another person the time while waiting for a bus or standing in line, that person said "very good." Nevertheless, that kind of a response to a previous reply occurs with great regularity in elementary school classrooms. In fact, the presence of an "evaluation," which comments on a reply to a question, seems to be one of the features that distinguishes conversations that take place in classrooms and other educational settings from those that occur in everyday situations.

The difference between question-answer sequences that are followed by "evaluations" rather than "acknowledgments" has been explained as the difference between "known information" questions and "information seeking" questions. (Searle, 1969; Labov & Fanschel, 1978; Shuy & Griffin 1978 and Levin, 1978) When a known information question is being asked, the questioner already has the answer,

or at least has established the parameters in which a reply can properly fall. The questioner is testing the knowledge of the respondent. The respondent to a "known information question" is placed in the position of trying to match the questioner's predetermined knowledge, or at least fall within the previously established parameters. When, in contrast, information seeking questions are being asked, the questioner does not have the information, assumes that the respondent has the information, and has an immediate need for the information.

The presence of known information questions (also called elicitations in this paper) in the classroom and other educational settings can be accounted for in terms of the social distribution of knowledge associated with the teacher role. Teachers know things that students don't know, and vice versa. But, because teachers in U.S. schools are both educators and evaluators, they are placed in the conversational position of asking students questions to which they already know the answer.

The balance of this paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will describe the organization of a variety of interactional sequences that occur between teachers and students when the teacher already has the answer. In the second part, I will draw some of the consequences of asking known information questions.

The Sequential Organization of Known Information Questions

Basic Elicitation Sequences

The following excerpt is from a first grade lesson about numbers. The teacher has placed a row of large, cardboard dice on the wall with corresponding ordinal and cardinal numbers. Students were asked to identify various words as the teacher pointed to them:²

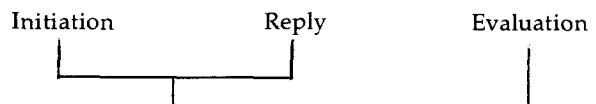
This set of exchanges is a classic example of the three part pattern that has been described repeatedly by observers of classroom conversations (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Mishler, 1975a, 1975b, Mehan, 1978, 1979; Shuy and Griffin, 1978). The first part of this sequence has been called an "initiation", the second part a "reply", and the third part either an "evaluation" (Mehan, 1978, 1979; Shuy and Griffin, 1978) or "feedback" (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). In the example above, each time the teacher asks a question,

Initiation	Reply	Evaluation
3:1 T: . . . what does this word say? Beth	Beth: One	T: Very good
3:2 T: What does this word say? Jenny	Jenny: One	T: Okay
3:3 T: Now look up here. What does this word say? Ramona	Ramona: Umm	
3:4 T: Kim	Kim: First	T: Okay
3:5 T: Let's say it together	All: First	T: All right
3:6 T: Say it together again.	All: First	T: Okay
3:7 T: Lillian, what does this word say?	Lillian: First	
3:8 T: Richard, what does this word say?	Richard: First	T: Oh, you said it so nice and loud

the students produced a reply. And, in all but two instances in this example (3:3 and 3:7), the reply, in turn, received an overt verbal evaluation.

This basic three-part sequential structure of this type of instructional discourse³ is depicted in Figure 1:

Figure 1. The Sequential Organization of a Typical Three Part Structure

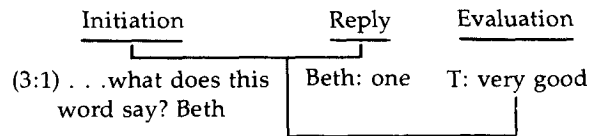


This structure is composed of what has been defined as adjacency pairs (Sacks *et al.*, 1974). Adjacency pairs are "conditionally relevant." That is, one item in a pair is conditionally relevant upon the other if, given one item in the pair, the presence of the second is

expected. For example, a "summons" calls forth a "response" — the ringing of the telephone virtually demands that it be answered; the offering of a greeting seems to compel its return; the asking of a question demands a response.

As illustrated in these examples, conditional relevance means that an obligation to respond (an obligatory co-occurrence relationship) exists between the first and second part of the pair. This relationship accounts for the constraining influence of adjacently related conversational structures. It also accounts for the response that occurs when an expected second half of the pair doesn't occur (e.g. the anger, frustration, and/or questioning, when a friend does not respond to an offered greeting). When a second half of a conditionally relevant pair is absent, its absence is usually made accountable in some way by the participants. In addition, these "adjacency pairs" are said to be linked together to form chains, which provide a way to understand how stretches of talk longer than the sentence are organized in discourse.

In effect, the three-part Initiation-Reply-Evaluation sequence associated with the classroom contains two coupled adjacency pairs. The Initiation-Reply is the first adjacency pair; the initiation ("What does this word say, Beth?") demands a reply ("one"). When this reply is obtained, a pair is formed. This pair then becomes the first part of a second adjacency pair. The second part of this second pair is the evaluation or the feedback (very good) of the Initiation-Reply pair.



Extended Elicitation Sequences

Once a known information instructional sequence has been initiated, interaction continues until the expected reply is obtained. If the reply appears in the next turn of talk, then the result is an instructional sequence which has three adjacently related parts, the initiation, the reply, and the evaluation of the reply.

However, the reply called for does not always followed immediately after an initiation. Sometimes students do not answer at all, sometimes they give partially complete answers, sometimes they reply incorrectly, or out of turn. If the reply called for by the Initiation act does not appear in the next turn of talk, the teacher may employ any one of the strategies (e.g. prompting replies, repeating elicitations, and simplifying elicitations) until the expected reply does appear. The result is an "extended sequence" of interaction.

Prompting replies. The following instance illustrates the teacher's strategy of promoting incorrect or partially correct replies to obtain the expected reply. The example is from a first grade reading lesson. The lines of a story based on a walk around the school yard were mounted on a large poster. Students were asked to read the line of the story that the teacher indicated. Here, the teacher pointed to the line of the story that said: "See the machine:"

Initiation	Reply	Evaluation
4:1 T: See the . . .	E: Tractors E: Tractors P: Mmmmmmm	T: The, yes, tractors, it says mmm T: It, it, but it is a tractor, but the word I wrote here, I didn't write tractor. But I wrote a word that, another name for tractor that starts with 'mm.'
4:2 T: I called the tractor a 'mmm. . .'	R: Machine	T: It starts with 'mm' Patricia, yes. T: Machine, Rafael, good. I called it a machine.

The teacher receiving an incorrect answer ("tractors"), and a partially correct answer ("mmm"), continued questioning the students adding additional information as a prompt, until she obtained a correct reply. Once the correct reply was obtained the teacher positively evaluated it.

incorrectly, or do not answer at all, teachers sometimes repeat the elicitation to the same or different students until the expected reply is obtained. In a first grade reading preparedness exercise, the teacher had placed the letters 's' and 'm' on the chalkboard, and asked students to suggest words that started with those letters:

Repeating elicitations. When students answer

Initiation	Reply	Evaluation
5:1 T: What else, what else Edward, what do you think we could put there that starts with an 'm'?	C: (Raises hand)	
5:2 T: Somebody in your family Edward	E: (Shrugs shoulders 'no')	
5:3 T: All right, Jerome	A: I know, I know (raises hand)	
5:4 T: What?	A: Man	T: Man, good for you, Audrey, that's a good one for here. Very good.

Edward declined the teacher's invitation to supply a word that starts with 'm.' The teacher did not evaluate Edward's action; instead she asked another student to supply the answer. When a correct answer was offered, the teacher positively evaluated it.

complexity of questions when they do not receive expected replies.

At the outset of the reading lesson about the story described above, the teacher asked the students the following:

Simplifying elicitations. Teachers also reduce the

Initiation	Reply	Evaluation
6:1 T: Ok, what's the name of this story?	All: (no response)	
6:2 T: Who remembers, what's the name, what's the story about?	All: (no response)	
6:3 T: Is it about taking a bath?	Many: No	
6:4 T: Is it about the sunshine?	Many: No	
6:5 T: Edward, what's it about?	E: The Map	T: The map. That's right, this says 'the map.'

In this example, the teacher attempted to elicit the name of the story from the students twice. Unable to obtain this reply, the teacher changed her questioning strategy. She asked the question in such a way that the students could either agree or disagree with her formulation. Once the students replied to this "choice" question, the teacher reverted to a questioning form

that elicited the specific name of the story. The sequence, like the others presented in this section, ended with a positive evaluation.

A similar example occurred in another reading preparedness lesson. In this sequence, the teacher asks Everett if the phrase "jumping jacks" starts with the letter 's' or the letter 'j.'

Initiation	Reply	Evaluation
7:1 T: Everett, you remember, you suggested we do jumping jacks yesterday, remember?	E: Ah ha.	
7:2 T: Does jumping jacks begin like Sabrina or like Jerome?	E: Sabrina	
7:3 T: Say J, J, 'jumping jacks.'	E: Jumping jacks.	T: All right, it's a, it's a beginning of the word jumping jacks.
7:4 T: Does that begin like Sabrina or like Jerome?	E: (no response)	
7:5 T: Jumping . . .	E: Jerome	T: Jerome, that's right.

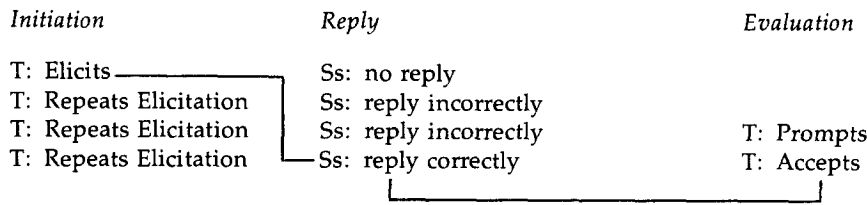
When Everett answered incorrectly, the teacher broke the question down into simpler components, then prompted him until he produced the desired reply to the original elicitation. Again, the extended sequences ended with a positive evaluation of the initiation-reply pair.

Summary. Initiation acts compel replies. When a known information question is asked, interaction between teachers and students continues until the expected reply is produced. If the reply called for by the question appears in the next immediate turn of talk,

the result is an instructional sequence which has three adjacently related parts, an initiation, a reply and an evaluation (see Figure 1). However, if the reply called for the elicitation does not immediately appear, the teacher "works" (e.g., prompts, repeats or simplifies elicitations) until that reply is obtained. As soon as the students supply the expected reply (either immediately, or after extended exchanges), the teacher positively evaluates the content of the replies.

The sequential organization of a typical extended sequence is displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Sequential Organization of a Typical Extended Sequence



Key: T: Teacher; Ss: Students; Braces: and (indicate obligatory co-occurrence relationships)

Note that the ties that bind three-part sequences together (Figure 1), are apparent in extended sequences (Figure 2). These relationships are simply spread over greater stretches of discourse. Because the reply that completes an elicitation sequence may not appear for many turns, not all instructional sequences are composed of two adjacently related pairs. The existence of extended sequences demonstrates that the reflexive structures that tie interactional sequences together are wide ranging, and not limited to adjacently occurring utterances.

Thus, the evaluation act plays a significant role in classroom discourse. While it seldom appears in everyday discourse, it is an essential component of instructional interaction. It contributes information to students about the teachers' intentions, and contributes to the negotiation of a mutually acceptable reply.

Some observers of classroom interaction (Bellack et al, 1966; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) have treated evaluation acts as an optional part of elicitation sequences, while I have found them to be an obligatory

component of instructional sequences. This difference seems to be a result of distinguishing between positive and negative evaluation acts. Positive and negative evaluation of student replies do not fulfill equivalent functions in elicitation sequences. Positive evaluations occur as soon as a correct reply appears, while negative evaluations, prompts, or corrections may or may not appear after incorrect or incomplete answers. Thus, the positive evaluation is a terminal act; it marks the completion of an instructional sequence. Ending one sequence, it signals that another is to begin.

Negative evaluations, prompts, or corrections are continuation acts. They do not appear at the end of instructional sequences, only in their interior. They function to keep the interaction moving until the answer demanded by the initial interaction is obtained. Thus, positive evaluation acts are an obligatory part of elicitation sequences, while negative evaluations, prompting and the like, are optional parts of these sequences. These relationships are displayed in Figure 3, below:

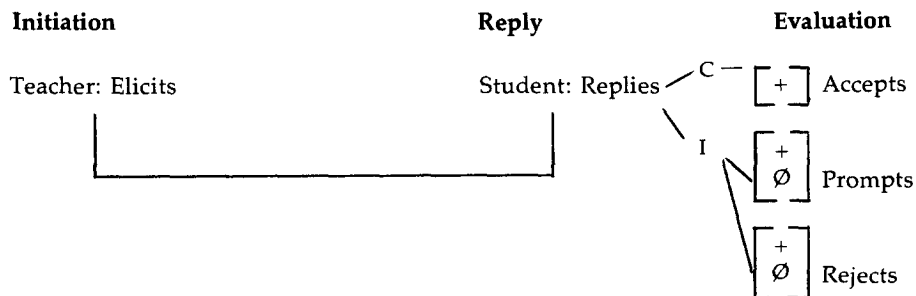


Figure 3

Key: c = correct reply; I = incorrect reply; + = obligatory;

= optional

Some Consequences of Asking Known Information Questions Displaying Knowledge

The use of known information questions has consequences for the knowledge that children display in the classroom. As a way of demonstrating this point, let us return to the first transcript example. The teacher in that sequence asked Beth the question "what does this word say?" Beth answered "one," the teacher complimented her ("Very good"), and asked the same question of a second child, Jenny. Jenny also answered that question correctly. But there was a significant difference in the circumstances available to Jenny and Beth; Jenny had access to the teacher's evaluation of Beth's answer as well as her own knowledge about the numbers on the board. As a consequence, the basis of Jenny's answer was not clear. Did she answer because she "knew" the answer, or because she attended to the surface features of the preceding discourse, notably, the teacher's response to Beth's answer?

The possibility of students "imitating" other answers occurs whenever turns-at-talk are allocated to students in such a way that they can replay in a "chorus" or when the teacher asks the same question of a series of children as in this example. In fact, every way in which turns are allocated to students has consequences for the structural arrangements of instructional interaction. Different turn allocation strategies produce different structural arrangements which are related to the communication of different types of educational material to students, and obtaining academic information from students.

There is a trade off in the use of turn-allocation procedures which provide for individual vs. choral responses, voluntary vs. mandatory responses. On the one hand, if children are encouraged to bid for the floor (e.g., "raise your hands if you know the answer,"), then only students who want to reply need bid. Competition is fostered and encouraged by this "invitation to bid" turn-allocation procedure.

On the other hand, when no bid has been requested and an individual child is nominated by name to reply, the teacher then has some access to what that particular child knows. However, this strategy singles the child out from the group. Such a

procedure has consequences of particular significance at least for some Native American students. An analysis of a videotape of Odowa students (Erickson and Mohatt, 1977) showed that the native teacher seldom directed instructions or questions at individual students. Instructional conversations were organized such that students could respond voluntarily and in a group, a practice which seemed to be consistent with the Indian's cultural patterns and values which exist outside the classroom. According to Philips (1972, 1976) interaction is structured in Indian community settings on a cooperative, voluntary basis. This cultural pattern is undercut in Anglo oriented classrooms in which participation is organized to emphasize individual, not group effort, is mandatory, not voluntary, and is competitive, not cooperative.

It is not my intention here to recommend the use of a particular turn-allocation procedure; that is a teacher's and not a researcher's decision. Rather, it is my purpose to point out that various classroom arrangements impose constraints on interaction, and hence, on children who must operate within those constraints. I do this because teachers are sometimes not aware of the organizational consequences of interactional arrangements. What we know about children is constrained by the structure of the task (Cole, Hood, McDermott, 1978), the style of questioning employed, even the way turns are allocated to students. And, knowledge about the organization of interaction is information that students need to acquire just as much as they learn number facts, times tables, and word attack skills.

"Searching" for Correct Answers

Because there is often only a single correct response to known information questions, and this answer is known in advance of the questioning, teachers often find themselves "searching" for that answer, while students provide various "trial" responses which are in search of validation as the correct answer.

An example of this searching practice is found in the following excerpt from a first grade lesson about prepositional phrases. The teacher first asked students to draw a number of objects on their paper. She then asked them to report on their drawing:

Initiation	Reply	Evaluation
8:1 T: Make a red flower under the tree. (Pause) OK, let's look at the red flower. Can you tell me where the red flower is?	Ss: Right here, right here.	
8:2 T: Dora?	Dora: Under the tree	
8:3 T: Tell me in a sentence	Dora: It's under the tree	
8:4 T: What's under the tree, Dora?	Ss: The flower	
8:5 T: Tell me, the flower . . .	Dora: The flower is under the tree	
8:6 T: Where is the red flower Richard?	Ric: Under the tree	
8:7 T: Can you tell me in a sentence?	Ric: The flower is under the tree	
8:8 T: Cindy, where is the red flower?	Cin: The red flower is under tree	
8:9 T: Ric: Hey, that's not red		

An interview conducted with the teacher both before and after this lesson (Mehan, 1974) disclosed that she wanted the children to report the result of their drawing in complete sentences with certain prepositional phrases, i.e., "the red flower is under the tree." The first time the teacher asked this question, the children responded in unison with an answer which adequately describes the location of the flowers drawn: "on here."

However, the teacher wanted *complete* sentences with prepositional phrases, and so she continued questioning the student. Dora provided an answer which employed a prepositional phrase, "under the tree" (8:2), but since this answer was not in a complete sentence, the teacher continued questioning her:

Teacher: Tell me in a sentence. *Dora:* It's under the tree.

Now, Dora has answered the teacher's question. She has provided an answer which, in fact, is a grammatically complete sentence. However, this sentence did not have the proper subject noun, "The flower," so the teacher continued to question Dora:

Teacher: What's under the tree *Dora?* *Student:* the flower

Teacher: Tell me, the flower . . .

Dora has received information about the desired answer from two sources. First, another child supplies the missing noun phrase. Second, the teacher, employing a "sentence completion" form of questioning, supplied her with the part of the answer she had been after all along; in effect, the teacher has answered her own question here.

The tempo of the lesson picked up. Richard was asked the same question:

Teacher: Where is the red flower, Richard?

Richard: Under the tree.

One more question-answer exchange was sufficient to get Richard to produce the desired answer form:

Teacher: Can you tell me in a sentence? *Richard:*

The flower is under the tree.

The teacher then turned to Cindy with the same question, and Cindy, for the first time in the lesson, provided the answer that the teacher had been looking for, all in one turn of talk:

Teacher: Cindy, where is the red flower? *Cindy:*
The red flower is under the tree.
Richard: hey, that's not red!

There is only one problem. Although Cindy provided exactly the answer that the teacher wanted, it did not accurately reflect the facts of what she had drawn. Richard pointed out, and my examination of her work after the lesson confirmed, Cindy had not, in fact, drawn a red flower; she used a crayon of a different color. Perhaps attending to the cues provided by other children's answers and the structure of the preceding

sequences, Cindy was able to provide the desired answer form.

As a result of the teacher's search for the one correct answer to her question, it is difficult to determine whether this child's answer stemmed from a mastery of the conceptual demands of the academic task, or stemmed from a mastery of the conversation demands of the questioning style.

Another example of what happens when a teacher searches for a previously established answer appears in the following excerpt from a social studies lesson about spices from India:

Initiation	Reply	Evaluation
9:1 T: OK, why did you think people were so interested in getting over to a place, remember where did they get their spices from?	Pep: from ?Nerea? (Near East)	T: Almost
9:2	Many: I know, I know	T: No
9:3	Jose: From California?	
9:4 T: They didn't know about California. Remember we talked about it	Ss: From Europe? Ss: From India	T: From India!
9:5 T: And how did they do it? Did they fly over to India?	Many: Nooooo	T: No
9:6 T: They had to go around what?	Ss: The long way around?	
9:7 T: They had to go around what?	Ss: On a boat?	T: On a boat
9:8 T: Around what? Around what?	Ss: Around Africa?	T: Around Africa!
9:9 T: Around here, up through here (tracing trade route on wall map), and India was over here, see?		

At the outset of this segment, the teacher, looking for "India" as the place or origin for spices, received a series of replies (9:2,3,4). All replies were offered hesitantly, with cautious, rising intonation at the end of the utterances (which I have indicated with the (?) mark). The teacher continued to invite replies until the one he wanted was offered. Although that reply (9:4) had the same characteristics of the previous replies, the teacher accepted it. In so doing, he reified the reply. This pattern was repeated as the teacher searched for "around Africa" as the path to India (9:5-9:9). A number of possible replies were not ac-

cepted, until the particular reply appeared. Again, the teacher's acceptance of this reply transformed it from a possible reply into "the correct answer." One consequence, then, of the teacher's search for answers to know information questions, is that the student does not so much answer the teacher's question, as the teacher and student create the student's answer out of a number of tentative displays.

Conclusions

Children's performance in the classroom involves a wide range of conversational skills which interact

with the academic aspects of education. One important communicative skill required to participate in the teaching-learning process includes knowing how to answer questions appropriately, especially given that a unique aspect of the question-asking process in the classroom is that teachers often ask students questions when they already know the answers. On these occasions, the teacher is testing the students' knowledge, not seeking information from them. Thus, an important part of education for children in school is learning that conversations in classrooms have unique features, and that the demands of classroom discourse must be kept separate from the demands of everyday discourse. The students' acquisition of this interactional knowledge seems to be intertwined with the acquisition of the academic knowledge more routinely associated with schooling.

Each of the examples of teacher-student interaction discussed in this paper demonstrates that teachers and students work together to compose the social fact we call an answer to a question. Answers to questions are generated from knowledge about the academic content implied by the question as well as from knowledge about the social conduct of classroom conversations.

The interactional accomplishment of social facts like answers to questions has implications for the way we view students' competence in educational environments. Instead of seeing children's knowledge as private and internal states, as a personal possession, an interactional view of teaching and learning recommends seeing knowledge as *public* property, *social* constructions, assembled jointly by teachers and students that become visible in social contexts. Teachers are sometimes not aware that the child's display of knowledge is constrained by the structure of the task, the organization of discourse, and the physical parameters of the teaching-learning situation. Since each educational arrangement imposes constraints on learning, educators can examine the interactional demands of various educational and evaluative arrangements to determine if any particular arrangement is consistent with their educational goals and the child's previous experience.

NOTES

1. This example is based on Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).

2. The materials used for illustrative purpose are excerpts from transcripts of videotape taken in a variety of elementary school classrooms. Information about the complete transcripts are available from the author.

3. These three-part sequences are not just the special province of the classroom, as example (1) shows. Shuy (1976), Doeblen (1979) and Fisher (1979) are finding that doctor-patient interaction is organized into three part sequences, perhaps for the same reason that teacher-student interaction is. Goffman (1976) says that riddles also have

three parts: (1) question, (2) thought and give up, (3) answer. Like the elicitation, "the purpose of the asked person's move is not to inform the asker about the answer, but to show whether he is smart enough to uncover what the speaker already knows. But here the interaction falls flat if indeed the correct answer is uncovered (unlike the asking done by teachers), or if upon being told the answer, the asked person does not do an appreciable 'take,' this later constitutes a fourth move" (Goffman, 1976:295).

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