

## **“What does x mean?” as contingent teacher questions in university conversation classes**

This paper deals with teachers' “what does x mean?” (“Was heißt x?”) questions in non-topic-initial positions in university L2 conversation classes. The focus of a teaching approach on oral communication, together with a fairly heterogeneous student population, requires intensive linguistic-interactional negotiation in the classroom. Here, research is needed to shed empirical light on this type of classroom practice. Against this background, natural classroom events in L2 conversation classes for prospective German teachers at a Turkish state university were recorded during the winter semester 2016/2017 in order to gain insights into these negotiation processes. The recordings were made using four video cameras and four audio recording devices. The data included in the study amounts to 15 hours and 43 minutes and were examined from a conversation analytic perspective. Especially striking was the teachers' pronounced use of “what does x mean?” questions in non-topic introductory positions and their next variations. Looking at the literature on the overarching topic of questioning practices in interaction, it appears that an epistemically motivated categorization between questions with known answers (display questions) and unknown answers (referential questions) has become prevalent (Mehan 1979; Searle 1969; Long/Sato 1983). While some authors advocate the efficiency of referential questions in the foreign language classroom (Long/Sato 1983), others criticize the generalization of this dichotomy (Banbrook/Skehan 1990; van Lier; Schwab 2009; Koshik 2010). Koshik, for example, was able to show through her work (for a comprehensive review, see Koshik 2010) that a finely differentiated view on questioning can explain important patterns of pedagogical action. Similarly, Lee (2006) criticized Long and Sato's (1983) view that known-answer questions are ineffective teaching variables. He emphasized that questioning practices should be studied within the context of their sequential organization and local contingency in interaction. However, with regard to “what does x mean?” questions in interaction, little work can be found (e. g. Günthner 2015; Sumruk 2019). Günthner (2015) for instance differentiates between other-responsive and self-responsive “what does x mean?” constructions, both of which however do not imply specific questioning practices but are used to somehow relativise the preceding turn (in everyday and institutional interactions as well as media interaction). The data from Sumruk (2019), by contrary, stem from a TaF (Turkish as a Foreign Language) class at a Turkish university language learning center. She deals with the Turkish equivalent of “what does x mean?” questions, to be considered as a phrase that denotes the interactional environment of word explanations. In contrast to these studies, “what does x mean?” questions in our research is considered as a kind of ‘packaging’ (for packaging see ten Have 2007). This refers to linguistic forms that a speaker invokes to realize actions (ten Have 2007). Moreover, the present study concerns university conversation classes for prospective German teachers in Turkey, and to our knowledge, no other work has been done so far examining contingent teacher questions in such a context while applying conversation analysis. Based on our analyses, we identified the following four types:

- Type 1: narrowing “what does x mean?” questions.
- Type 2: “what does x mean?” questions as focused repetitions
- Type 3: “what does x mean?” questions as nonspecific elicitation questions in dispreferred learner responses
- Type 4: knowledge-checking “what does x mean?” questions in referential follow-up turns

The first two types can be considered two important components of pedagogical scaffolding. Type 1 is related to the teachers' orientation to gradually support learners when potential difficulties during a speaking activity occur. Such narrowing questions by the teacher also project a delayed/deferred return to the actual topic-introducing question of the interaction. In some cases, this return to the overarching interactional frame occurs through the complementary use of type 2, in which the teacher repeats the topic-introducing question after first having directed the learners' attention – using type 1 – to a possible solution. Therefore, we consider type 2 a focused repetition. Thus, the combination of both practices in the prototypical order mentioned above implies that learners are first supported and then obliged to answer. For this reason, we can consider it a type of scaffolding. The very significance of this type lies, among other things, in the fact that it requires an immediate learner response (ad-hoc inference). It should be noted, however, that this does not imply a strictly planned procedure on the part of the teacher. Type 3, moreover, is characterized by the somewhat ambiguous attempt of the instructor to elicit an (additional) learner contribution in the case of an dispreferred response. Here, for example, a basically correct learner answer may still constitute a dispreferred response if the teacher's pedagogical agenda requires a different form of response (such as a longer answer or a response in one's L1). The use of “what does x mean?” in such cases may lead to ambiguity and thus confusion among learners, which is why we consider this type to be non-specific. In contrast to the other forms, type 4 occurs in those slots where no negative features such as missing, incorrect, or dispreferred learner responses are evident. Instead, it serves as a subordinated comprehension check aimed at maintaining mutual understanding among interlocutors. In its sequential position, type 4 contributes to a more casual conversational mode in classroom interaction. All four types clearly aim at the interactional involvement of learners and they are employed as elicitation techniques. In conclusion, “what does x mean?” questions are used to accomplish different pedagogical situations in the L2 conversation classroom. Certainly, further research is needed to explore this field of practice. However, we hope our work can make a considerable contribution to contingent teacher questions in L2 teaching and learning in general and in L2 conversation classes in particular.

## **References**

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