

Beyond Grammar, the Pragmatics of Questions in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT: The pragmatic functions of questions in second and/or foreign language (SL/FL) instruction are often overlooked even though they are an integral part of classroom discourse. Aside eliciting information, questions serve important interactional and relational roles. This paper explores the socio-pragmatic dimensions of question types, drawing on insights from second language acquisition, intercultural pragmatics, and classroom discourse studies. It critiques existing FL/SL textbooks and syllabuses for their limited focus on pragmatic competence and advocates pedagogical strategies that combine explicit instruction, awareness-raising tasks, and CEFR-aligned (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) descriptors. Taking samples from 30 naturally collected classroom questions, the article proposes pragmatics-informed evaluation practices that emphasise communicative appropriateness over structural accuracy in language teaching.

Keywords: *language teaching, pragmatic competence, classroom discourse, question types, pragmatics.*

Abstract

दूसरी और / या विदेशी भाषा (SL / FL) निर्देश में प्रश्नों के व्यावहारिक कार्यों को अक्सर कक्षा प्रवचन का एक अभिन्न अंग होने के बावजूद अनदेखा किया जाता है। जानकारी के अलावा, प्रश्न महत्वपूर्ण पारस्परिक और संबंधपरक भूमिकाओं को पूरा करते हैं। यह पेपर प्रश्न प्रकारों के सामाजिक-व्यावहारिक आयामों की पड़ताल करता है, दूसरी भाषा अधिग्रहण, इंटरकल्चरल प्रैग्मेटिक्स और कक्षा प्रवचन अध्ययन से अंतर्दृष्टि प्राप्त करता है। यह व्यावहारिक क्षमता पर उनके सीमित ध्यान के लिए मौजूदा FL / SL पाठ्यपुस्तकों और सिलेबस की आलोचना करता है और शैक्षणिक रणनीतियों की वकालत करता है जो स्पष्ट निर्देश, जागरूकता बढ़ाने वाले कार्यों और CEFR- गठबंधन (भाषाओं के लिए संदर्भ के सामान्य यूरोपीय फ्रेमवर्क) वर्णनकर्ताओं को जोड़ती है। 30 स्वाभाविक रूप से एकत्र किए गए कक्षा के प्रश्नों से नमूने लेते हुए, लेख डिजिटल व्यावहारिकता के महत्व को अनुक्रमित करता है और व्यावहारिक-सूचित मूल्यांकन प्रथाओं का प्रस्ताव करता है जो भाषा शिक्षण में संरचनात्मक सटीकता पर संचारी उपयुक्तता को प्रभावित करते हैं।

कीवर्ड: भाषा शिक्षण, व्यावहारिक क्षमता, कक्षा प्रवचन, प्रश्न प्रकार, व्यावहारिक।

1. Introduction

Generally defined as the study of language in context, pragmatics remains a focal point of communicative competence. It defines the ability to use language accurately and appropriately in different sociocultural settings (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 29; Bachman, 1990, p. 87). In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, the place of pragmatics has remained underemphasised. Pedagogy tends to prioritise formal accuracy, especially in grammatical structures at the expense of pragmatic appropriacy (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996, p. 150; Taguchi, 2011, p. 291). Resultingly, learners usually find it difficult to involve in socially appropriate and context-sensitive interactions, despite possessing well-developed grammatical competence.

One area where this pedagogical gap is obvious is in the treatment of questions, the integral part of the nexus of grammar. Serving as the most frequently used linguistic forms in both classroom and natural communication, questions are central to classroom discourse (Cazden, 2001, p. 31). Regrettably, questions are generally presented as mere syntactic exercises (wh- questions, yes/no questions, and question

tags) without adequate attention being paid to their pragmatic functions in many curricula. This blurs the rich social work that questions perform: eliciting information, asserting power, maintaining politeness, managing turns in interactions, and revealing speaker intentions (Levinson, 1983, p. 318; Blum-Kulka, 1987, p. 141).

Again, the same syntactic structure can serve diverse pragmatic aims depending on the speaker's intention, the relationship between discourse participants, and the situational context. For instance, "can you pass me the salt?" asked at a dining table would not necessarily be functioning as seeking information about ability to pass the salt to the speaker. Instead, it's more as a request. To teach these pragmatic diversities requires taking steps beyond decontextualised form-based teaching to a more holistic approach that integrates sociopragmatic and interactional dimensions of questioning (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 62).

Using 30 purposively selected data, we set to examine the pragmatic dimensions of question use in ESL/EFL classrooms. The foundation of our argument is that overlooking these dimensions implies undermining learners' communicative effectiveness and risking the promotion of pragmatic failure, that is, misuse or misunderstanding of language in context. The paper provides theoretical insights and practical strategies towards helping teachers equip learners with the ability to ask and respond to questions in manners that are not only grammatically accurate, but pragmatically appropriate and pedagogically instrumental.

The attention of this study is on questions due to their position in human interactions. Human interaction is built on questions. They enhance information exchange, signal speech acts (Searle 1976), negotiate identities, and highlight power relations (Cazden 2001; Nassaji & Wells 2000). Questions in classroom discourse are used by teachers to control learners' participation or maintain authority (Long & Sato 1983). Conversely, learners are not often trained to interpret or deploy questions with an awareness of their pragmatic functions vis-a-vis indirectness, face-saving, or stance-taking (Brown & Levinson 1987; Holmes 1995).

The EFL/ESL teacher's question such as "do you think that's right?" may function not only as an inquiry but as a prompt for critical thinking, a challenge, or a mitigation strategy. Without a guide, learners are open to pragmatic failure (Thomas 1983). Pragmatic failure can lead to communication breakdown or unintended offence (and in some worst cases, wrong response) (Kasper 1997).

Understanding the type of question asked in the EFL/ESL classroom is basic for developing learners' interactional competence. The main forms of questions and their functions are briefly listed:

- i. Referential vs. Display Questions: While referential questions solicit unknown information (e.g., "How do you celebrate a new year in your country?") Display questions assess recall (e.g., "What is the plural of 'boy'?"). The overuse of display questions may limit authentic engagement (Brock 1986).
- ii. Yes/No vs. Wh-Questions: Yes/no questions limit response length, while wh-questions promote negotiation of meaning and learner agency (Lynch 1991). To teach when to use each form and how they affect interaction is important in the EFL/ESL classroom.
- iii. Tag Questions: Pragmatically complex, tag questions (e.g., "He's hungry, isn't he?") perform functions such as seeking confirmation, softening assertions, or inviting solidarity.
- iv. Rhetorical Questions: Largely absent in formal language instruction, rhetorical questions are common in emotional or persuasive speech (e.g., "Who doesn't want to be happy?"). Rhetorical questions convey can stance and implicature.
- v. Clarification and Echo Questions: These enhance conversational repair and express disbelief or attentiveness (e.g., "You mean what?"). Though relevant, they are underrepresented in textbooks and syllabi (Vellenga 2004).

Many question types serve interactional, affective, and metacommunicative purposes, and should be embedded in English language instruction curricula.

Pragmatic assessment remains a challenge due to its context-dependent nature (Hudson et al. 1995). But tools like role-plays, discourse completion tasks, and self-

assessment checklists can provide valuable insights into learners' pragmatic awareness. They should prioritise appropriateness over grammaticality; flexibility across social roles and settings; and effectiveness in achieving the goals of communication. For instance, being able to rephrase a direct question into a more polite form (e.g., “What did you say?” and “Would you mind telling me what you said?”) reflects not only linguistic knowledge but socio-pragmatic sensitivity.

Despite policy endorsements such as CEFR's pragmatic descriptors, many textbooks do not incorporate pragmatic variation meaningfully (Vellenga 2004; Nguyen 2019). Questions are always decontextualised, formulaic, and limited to lower-order thinking tasks. Teachers can address this gap by incorporating authentic discourse samples from interviews, media, and social platforms; designing context-rich tasks that require learners to adapt questions based on interlocutor status or setting; encouraging ethnographic inquiry where learners collect and analyse real-world examples. Curriculum designers must move beyond structural syllabuses to pragmatically-oriented frameworks that foreground communicative relevance.

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic approach grounded in Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 2005; Holmes & Marra, 2022) to investigate the pragmatic functions of questions in the ESL/EFL classroom. Interactional Sociolinguistics provides a rich framework for examining how meaning is constructed and negotiated in real-time interactions, particularly through contextually sensitive linguistic cues such as intonation, turn-taking, and framing.

As Gumperz (1982, p. 131) explains, “Interactional sociolinguistics is concerned with the analysis of face-to-face communication and the contextualisation cues that speakers use to interpret utterances.” This approach is particularly apt for the current study because questions in classroom discourse do more than elicit responses. They manage power dynamics, maintain social relations, and reflect embedded cultural norms (Walsh, 2011, p. 33). The ESL/EFL classroom, therefore, serves as a fertile ground for analysing how pragmatic competence is both taught and enacted.

The study draws on naturally occurring classroom interactions, recorded and transcribed with attention to both linguistic and paralinguistic features (e.g., pauses, overlaps, intonation shifts). These features function as what Gumperz (1982) terms

"contextualisation cues." As cotextualisation cues, they are subtle indicators that guide how utterances are pragmatically understood. For example, the rising intonation in a yes/no question may signal either genuine inquiry or disciplinary challenge, depending on the classroom context (Tannen, 2005, p. 112).

In line with recent calls for more pragmatic-sensitive language teaching, this study aligns with Holmes and Marra's (2022, p. 95) assertion that "the classroom is a rich discursive site where power, politeness, and learning intersect in complex ways." The framework enables a fine-grained examination of how questions perform multiple functions simultaneously: requesting information, exercising control, expressing solidarity, or scaffolding learner responses.

Data analysis follows a multi-layered process: identification of all question forms in the classroom interaction dataset; categorisation of these questions into functional types (e.g., referential, rhetorical, directive); interpretation using Interactional Sociolinguistics to determine how each question type aligns (or fails to align) with the sociopragmatic goals of communication.

The framework also supports a critical orientation. While questions may appear neutral or pedagogical, their use can implicitly signal authority or marginalisation (Norton, 2013, p. 47). For instance, a teacher's question like "Why didn't you study for the test?" can function more as a disciplinary rebuke than a genuine request for information. Such layers of meaning become analytically accessible through the sociolinguistic focus on situated interaction.

Ultimately, the adoption of Interactional Sociolinguistics provides a feasible and robust theoretical grounding for exploring the pragmatic dimensions of questions in EFL/ESL classrooms. It moves beyond structural analysis to reveal how social meaning is actively co-constructed and contextually negotiated in language teaching contexts.

2. Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

For want of space, this study has engaged 30 purposively selected questions for the recorded classroom discourses for representative analysis. The data is shown in the table below.

S/N	Classroom Excerpt/Data Type	Discourse Feature	Pragmatic Import
1	What is the... uh... meaning of this word?	Pause (filled)	Signals lexical search or hesitation; maintains floor and signals cognitive effort.
2	Why do we use the present tense... in this case?	Pause (mid-clause)	Highlights importance or invites anticipation.
3	Can you explain that again (.) more slowly?	Pause (short, unfilled)	Marks politeness; softens request.
4	Yes, but (.) why did you say that?	Pause + contrastive marker	Signals disagreement or challenge.
5	What is the answer↗	Rising intonation	Indicates information-seeking; maintains openness to response.
6	You think so↘	Falling intonation	May indicate skepticism or a rhetorical function.
7	You said you saw her (.) and then↗	Rising intonation + pause	Indicates turn continuation and expectation.
8	What does that mean? ↘	Falling intonation (direct)	Used for direct questioning or assertive stance.
9	So... anyone?	Pause + ellipsis	Encourages participation; signals open floor.
10	But I... I don't... understand this part.	Broken syntax + pauses	Indicates confusion or uncertainty; seeks clarification.
11	No but I think... / Wait, let me finish...	Overlap (student-teacher)	Signals eagerness or urgency to contribute.
12	Do you mean that... he (.) already left?	Pause before clarification	Signals interpretive caution.
13	Do we put the comma here↗ or here↘	Rising and falling intonation	Contrasts options; signals request for decision.
14	You didn't do the assignment↘?	Falling intonation + question form	Used to express mild reprimand or surprise.
15	You don't remember? (high pitch)	Intonation shift	Suggests disbelief or emphasis.
16	What do you think (.) about this	Pause for	Encourages thoughtful

	ending?	engagement	response.
17	Hmm... what's another example?	Pause with paralinguistic cue	Reflective; invites collective contribution.
18	Why do we (.) always forget this?	Pause adds irony or exasperation	Expresses shared frustration humorously.
19	Let's try that again↗ Shall we?	Rising intonation (inclusive)	Encourages group cooperation; softens directive.
20	You got it... (pause)... finally!	Pause for dramatic effect	Emphasises achievement or teasing.
21	So, when do we use— / —the present perfect?	Overlap (teacher completes)	Reflects co-construction of meaning.
22	Right? ↗	Tag with rising intonation	Seeks confirmation or alignment.
23	Wait (.) that's not right.	Pause signals correction	Manages face-saving and turns.
24	I don't quite get it (.) Can you?	Strategic pause	Elicits teacher support politely.
25	Can you read it again↗ slowly↘ please?	Intonation contrast	Modifies directive into polite request.
26	Excuse me (.) what's the difference between <i>say</i> and <i>tell</i> ?	Pause adds formality	Heightens politeness; signals respect.
27	Is it... could it be... passive voice?	Multiple pauses	Indicates self-monitoring and low confidence.
28	Could you maybe↗ go over that again?	Rising intonation + modal	Politeness strategy to mitigate imposition.
29	You know what I mean↘?	Falling intonation tag	Assumes shared understanding; closes topic.
30	I...I don't know (laughs) what just happened.	Repetition + paralinguistic cue	Softens embarrassment; injects humour.

A closer look at the above data shows how questions in ESL/EFL classrooms extend beyond their grammatical forms to perform a variety of context-sensitive pragmatic functions. Drawing on Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982; Holmes & Marra, 2022), we critically interpret how features such as pauses, intonation shifts, overlaps, and paralinguistic cues serve as contextualisation cues, that is, signals that guide how speakers and listeners interpret meaning in interaction. These questions are examined based on how effective they are in signaling the management of power

and discipline; encouragement of classroom participation and inclusion; co-construction and engagement; politeness and mitigation: emotion, irony, and affect.

2.1 Managing Power and Discipline

Entries 4, 14, 18, and 23 highlight how teachers employ questions to exercise classroom control and correct behaviour while preserving politeness. For instance, entry 4 (“Yes, but (.) why did you say that?”) illustrates how a teacher challenges a student’s response through a contrastive marker (“but”) and a short pause. This move indicates disagreement, but it is softened by the interrogative form, allowing the teacher to maintain authority without issuing a direct rebuke. Similarly, entry 14 (“You didn’t do the assignment↘?”) uses a falling intonation in question form to express reprimand or mild disappointment. Although structured as a question, the intent is evaluative, not inquisitive.

Entry 18 (“Why do we (.) always forget this?”) embeds irony and shared frustration. The pause after “we” serves a dual purpose: it draws attention to the emotional weight of the question and also encourages reflection. Gumperz (1982) explains that such contextualisation cues help listeners infer speaker stance. Here, the question acts as a rhetorical device to foster a sense of collective responsibility while indirectly criticising recurring mistakes. Entry 23 (“Wait (.) that’s not right.”) is another subtle act of correction. The initial interjection “wait” combined with a strategic pause helps manage face-threatening acts, ensuring that the teacher corrects the student without public embarrassment.

These examples align with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) face theory, where teachers use negative politeness strategies, such as hedging, questioning, or pausing, to mitigate the force of potentially face-threatening acts. Questions in these cases function as both disciplinary tools and pragmatic softeners.

2.2 Encouraging Participation and Inclusion

Questions in entries 1, 2, 9, 16, 17, and 19 reveal efforts by teachers to create an inclusive, participatory environment. Entry 1 (“What is the... uh... meaning of this word?”) uses a filled pause (“uh”) to indicate hesitation or cognitive search. Such a pause reflects the teacher’s thought process, making space for students to think or

even offer help. Entry 2 (“Why do we use the present tense... in this case?”) includes a mid-clause pause, which creates an opportunity for learners to anticipate the answer or engage in reflection.

Entry 9 (“So... anyone?”) features an ellipsis and a rising intonation, effectively opening the floor. This move shifts the responsibility of knowledge production to the learners, democratising the classroom space. Entry 16 (“What do you think (.) about this ending?”) uses a pause for engagement. The question does not seek a correct answer but encourages personal opinion, promoting a learner-centred approach.

Entry 17 (“Hmm... what’s another example?”) adds a reflective paralinguistic cue, “hmm”, which lowers the authoritative tone and invites collective brainstorming. Entry 19 (“Let’s try that again ↗ Shall we?”) is structured to promote cooperation. The rising intonation and inclusive pronoun “we” transform what might otherwise be a directive into a collaborative invitation.

These strategies reflect what Holmes and Marra (2022, p. 95) describe as classrooms being “rich discursive sites where power, politeness, and learning intersect.” Questions in this category perform dual roles: they solicit input and restructure power dynamics, encouraging student voice and agency.

2.3 Clarification, Repair, and Reformulation

Entries 3, 10, 12, 20, 24, and 27 illustrate how questions are used for clarification and repair. In entry 3 (“Can you explain that again (.) more slowly?”), the brief pause softens the request and signals politeness. Rather than demanding repetition, the teacher or student uses indirect language to facilitate understanding while preserving positive face.

Entry 10 (“But I... I don’t... understand this part.”) features broken syntax and repeated pauses, signaling the speaker’s confusion or emotional struggle to articulate difficulty. Such repair sequences are critical in language classrooms, as they model self-monitoring and learner vulnerability, legitimising not knowing.

Entry 12 (“Do you mean that... he (.) already left?”) uses a rising tone and a hesitation pause to propose an interpretation cautiously. This demonstrates the

pragmatics of inference-checking, a key component of communicative competence. Entry 20 (“You got it... (pause)... finally!”) employs a dramatic pause to emphasise the achievement or teasing, often signaling humorous reinforcement.

Data 24 (“I don’t quite get it (.) Can you?”) is a face-saving request for help. The initial declarative softens the imposition of the question, encouraging the addressee to assist without appearing demanding. Entry 27 (“Is it... could it be... passive voice?”) reflects low epistemic certainty and a desire to confirm understanding. Multiple pauses suggest that the speaker is negotiating between knowledge and uncertainty.

These examples reinforce the claim that “language is rarely about information alone; it is often about negotiating meaning and managing relationships” (Tannen 2005, p. 109). These questions enhance learning by modelling interactional sensitivity and interpretive caution.

2.4 Co-construction and Engagement

Entries 7, 11, 21, and 22 reflect real-time co-construction of meaning. In entry 7 (“You said you saw her (.) and then↗”), the pause and rising intonation signal an incomplete turn, inviting continuation from the student. The teacher here builds discourse by encouraging narrative elaboration.\

Entry 11 (“No but I think... / Wait, let me finish...”) demonstrates turn competition and repair, reflecting the dynamic nature of classroom talk. The interruption and correction mark a struggle for conversational floor, common in high-engagement settings. Entry 21 (“So when do we use .../... the present perfect?”) shows teacher-student overlap in which the teacher completes the student's utterance. This collaborative completion is a hallmark of built learning, where linguistic forms and ideas are co-produced.

Item 22 (“Right? ↗”) uses a tag question to seek alignment or confirmation. It is not a request for new information but a prompt for agreement, reinforcing shared understanding.

These examples align with Gumperz's (1982) notion that meaning is constantly negotiated and co-constructed. Overlaps, interruptions, and joint utterances are not communication breakdowns but indicators of engagement and learning.

2.5 Politeness and Mitigation

Questions in entries 5, 13, 25, 26, and 28 function as mitigated speech acts. Entry 5 (“What is the answer↗”) uses rising intonation to maintain a non-threatening tone. Entry 13 (“Do we put the comma here↗ or here↘”) contrasts options using intonation to avoid imposing a choice.

Entry 25 (“Can you read it again↗ slowly↘ please?”) incorporates both rising and falling tones to structure the request as polite and precise. Entry 26 (“Excuse me (.) what’s the difference between *say* and *tell*?”) embeds a pause and a respectful opener to heighten formality. Entry 28 (“Could you maybe↗ go over that again?”) layers modality and hesitation to mitigate imposition.

These questions demonstrate what Kasper and Schmidt (1996) call “interlanguage pragmatics,” where learners and teachers navigate social interaction rules using linguistic politeness. Questions thus become tools for maintaining harmony and navigating social distance.

2.6 Emotion, Irony, and Affect

Entries 6, 8, 15, 29, and 30 illustrate affective and rhetorical uses of questions. Entry 6 (“You think so↘”) features falling intonation to express skepticism or disbelief. Entry 8 (“What does that mean? ↘”) is a direct demand for clarification, often signaling frustration or a challenge to the speaker.

Entry 15 (“You don’t remember? (high pitch)”) uses a shift in pitch to suggest surprise or incredulity. Entry 29 (“You know what I mean↘”) is a solidarity-seeking move, using a falling intonation tag to close the topic while assuming shared understanding. Entry 30 (“I—I don’t know (laughs) what just happened.”) includes repetition and laughter to soften confusion, inject humour, and manage embarrassment.

These affective questions signal that emotion and social rapport are central to classroom discourse. Holmes and Marra (2022) would always opine that language in the classroom serves as a resource for identity and affective positioning as much as for cognitive instruction.

3. Conclusion

So far, this study shows that classroom questions are not simple monolithic linguistic tools. Instead, they are flexible, socially loaded speech acts that shape and are shaped by classroom dynamics, cultural norms, and individual relationships. The data underscore the value of using an Interactional Sociolinguistic framework to expose the nuanced meanings encoded in everyday classroom talk. Teachers and learners alike benefit from heightened awareness of these pragmatic elements, which support not just language acquisition but also social integration and communicative competence in multilingual educational settings.

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