

### **Politeness Strategies in Students' Classroom Questions**

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#### **Overview of politeness features**

Face: positive & negative, professor's & student's  
Power & solidarity; familiarity w/in the classroom context  
Personality, individual style

Linguistic forms of students questions reflect politeness norms of indirectness and attempts not to impose on the hearer (i.e., the instructor), while at the same time attending to their own face needs by displaying knowledge whenever possible, rather than phrasing questions in such a way as to highlight their lack of knowledge.

#### **The data**

20 classroom speech events classified as mostly or highly interactive  
Discussion sessions, Seminars, Small Lectures, Large Lectures  
266,145 words  
927 student questions, 1,460 instructor questions

#### **Linguistic Strategies: How to ask questions in class**

- Preface the question  
Highlights the fact that the very act of asking a question is an imposition
- Use discourse markers as a lead-in to the question
- Topicalize  
Draws the listener's attention to the focus of the question right up front  
A way of accommodating to the hearer, preparing him/her for what is coming next, indicating an orientation of the speaker toward the hearers wants/needs
- Vary the syntactic structure of question for pragmatic effect  
Using yes/no, negative, or declarative questions rather than wh- questions  
less imposing, and allows some display of knowledge
- Hedge, use modality markers

#### **Note:**

Phrasing answers as questions indicates students' reluctance to assume they know

Solicits for confirmation of understanding serve to highlight the instructors' success at explaining something (and are often perceived as gratuitous displays of knowledge – i.e., brown-nosing/kissing up)

### Some Materials for Teaching Questioning Strategies

1. *Question forms and role relationships*

Read each of the following questions (requests for explanation), and guess what the role relationship of the speakers might be. Check those that you think are most likely. Then, circle or underline all clues (hedges, politeness features, etc.) that hint at the speaker's role.

[Teacher's note: follow this up with discussion of the possible and actual answers, and function of some of the strategies/features.]

	Teacher to Student	Student to Teacher	Student to Student
1. can you um, explain part B?			
2. wait can you explain that again?			
3. um okay could you explain that so if the if the			
4. uh could somebody pl- ex- explain (that) to me?			
5. can you maybe explain that? cuz maybe that would help.			
6. can somebody explain that?			
7. now Brody will you please explain the iconography of the cover?			
8. what are_ can you just, explain the percentages again to me?			
9. now how how might you explain this kind of finding...?			
10. could you put your uh, transparency, up from uh reaction part four, um could you explain, um what role the N-H-three plays?			

2. *Ranking questions according to politeness/directness*

A. For each set of questions below, rank them in order from least polite (1) to most polite (3 or 4). (Note: there may not be one correct order for each set.)

1.)

- \_\_\_ Did we already talk about that?
- \_\_\_ We already talked about that?
- \_\_\_ Did we already talk about that or did I miss something?
- \_\_\_ Wait, didn't we already talk about that?

2.)

- \_\_\_ Yeah I didn't understand what you meant by, connotation. Wh- what is the connotation for you of of the word grass here?
- \_\_\_ What is the connotation for you of of the word grass here?
- \_\_\_ Could you tell me, what is the connotation for you of of the word grass here?

3.)

- \_\_\_ Um, could you explain what you mean by imposing a temporal framework?
- \_\_\_ What exactly does that mean when you say imposing a temporal framework?
- \_\_\_ I don't understand what you mean by imposing a temporal framework.

B. Go back to each set of questions and decide which one you would feel comfortable using in a classroom situation. Choose the question that most fits with your personal style – or change it to suit your preferences. If it would depend on the type of class or professor, specify.

3. *Making questions more or less polite/direct*

A. For each of the following questions, take out all of the hedges and politeness markers, and write out the most direct form of the question. (There are many possibilities.)

- Why don't you talk a little bit about your approach here?
- Like with with his, um, with his budget, does that include like does he get one base salary or does he get a salary because he's the president and then something in addition because he's a professor?
- Oh I was just gonna say like, would you just, like have the footnote at the end of the block and still have Hammer underneath it like the way he has there, [S1: no] or you wouldn't have that at all?
- I'm not sure if I understand what you say so you're saying y- you went from, two-to-the-one-seventy to two-to-the-three-forty?
- Sorry\_ I have sort of a lunch meeting, and I mean i\_ would it be possible to leave now?
- Would you mind at all just giving us a hint of what this street distinctions assignment will be?

B. For each of the following questions, add in some words or phrases – or rephrase the question – to make it more polite and indirect.

- 1) Now what's physically going on here?
- 2) Why would I ever wanna do this?
- 3) What made the New York Times switch to color?
- 4) What phases are you comparing?
- 5) Why do you have the three there?
- 6) Are the salaries included in these budgets?

4. *Role-play: Asking questions with a partner according to the following three role relationships.*  
You are a:

- A. Student talking to a fellow student
- B. Student talking to a professor
- C. Tutor/professor talking to a student

1) In a research methods class, you want to know what the expectation is for the final term paper in terms of length of the paper and number of outside sources in your bibliography.

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

2) You are taking a statistics class, and you don't remember what 'Simpson's paradox' is, even though you know it's been covered in the class.

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. (Ask a student, to check their knowledge or refresh their memory)  
\_\_\_\_\_

3) You aren't sure you understand a process that has been described in your business economics class. The procedure involves widgets going to market and how this is affected by supply and demand.

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. (Ask a student, to check their knowledge or refresh their memory)  
\_\_\_\_\_