Japanese Learners of English and Rhetorical Questions

Simon COLE

Abstract

This study looks at the use of rhetorical questions by freshmen learners of English at a Japanese university. Part of a broader project examining English learners' argumentation, using a corpus of transcriptions of video recordings of student discussion, the study investigated whether learners used rhetorical questions. It then used Conversation Analysis to investigate how they used them and to examine evidence of any problems that they posed for comprehension. The study found that rhetorical questions were produced by a minority of students, primarily those with experience of studying English in a second language (ESL) context. The paper discusses why this might be so. It was found that the rhetorical questions were principally used to challenge prior assertions, and to elicit commitments to common starting points from antagonists which could be used against their arguments in the discussion. Some, albeit limited evidence was found of comprehension problems resulting from rhetorical question use.

Keywords : rhetorical question, interlanguage pragmatics, argumentation, English, corpus

Introduction

The field of Interlanguage Pragmatics to this day has been dominated by research into learners' realization of a handful of speech acts; such as requests, apologies, refusals and disagreement. Kasper (2006) argues that the bulk of this literature, "examines its focal object in isolation from situated interaction, without considering the theoretical premises and ramifications of such a reductive strategy. This approach to speech acts pursues an empirical extension of speech act theory, especially that of John Searle." She calls for a reappraisal of the theoretical basis of this research and a shift towards a discursive approach to pragmatics utilising Conversation Analysis (Sacks, 1992).

While there have been a number of studies that have taken a different tack, an example that springs to mind is Bouton's (1988, 1992, 1999) examinations of the problems implicature poses for learners, these have been overshadowed by the emphasis on speech acts. Hopefully, along with the broadening of theoretical perspective and research methodology, that we are presently seeing in this field, will also come a broadening of the scope of research. Pragmatics has always been a broader field than the rather limited set of speech acts that have been investigated in the bulk of

Interlanguage Pragmatics (IP) studies.

Rhetorical questions

The present study examines learners' use of rhetorical questions. It is part of a larger corpus based research project conducted by the same researcher, examining the pragmatic features of Japanese learners' of English in argumentation. As Koshik (2005, 36) points out, rhetorical questions, or Reverse Polarity Questions (RPQs) as she calls them, are not syntactically different from ordinary information questions. They gain their force as challenges, or assertions from their interactional contexts rather than from their linguistic form. An account of rhetorical question use therefore falls within the province of pragmatics and the problems these questions may pose for language learners that of Interlanguage Pragmatics.

According to Koshik, "RPQs, as they are used in naturally-occurring talk, have not been studied extensively from either linguistic or a language and social interaction perspective." (ibid, p. 3) She points out that much of the analysis of rhetorical questions conducted by linguists has been based upon intuitions rather than upon analysis of naturally occurring language data.

Perhaps one area of research where rhetorical questions have received attention is in the cross disciplinary field of argumentation theory. This is not surprising considering the important role that rhetorical questions appear to play in debate and argument. van Eemeren et al (2007, 93) point out that in conversational argument questions often appear to have the force of an argument, or an assertion. They give the following dialog between a psychiatrist and his patient as an example:

Patient: It's none of their business how I live. They should only [. . .]

Psychiatrist: Are you still living with your parents?

Patient: Yes.

Psychiatrist: Are they paying for everything you need?

Patient: Yes.

Psychiatrist: Then how can they not interfere in your life?

As they point out, not only is the psychiatrist's final point a rhetorical question having the force of an assertion, but the earlier questions also appear to be doing something very different to an information question and are clearly playing an important role in the argument, according to their analysis, eliciting commitments to starting points, that can be used as part of the argument.

Bleiberg and Churchill (1975) call this kind of argumentative sequence confrontation and they claim that it usually ends with a rhetorical question that contradicts the confronted person's original

statement. Elsewhere in the literature this has been termed a corner sequence. Interestingly Felton and Kuhn (2001) found that use of "corner sequences" had a developmental aspect for native speakers of English. They found that adults were more likely to use confrontation/corner sequences in argument than adolescents.

Koshik (Ibid, p. 3) states that rhetorical questions are widely used by English speakers, "as accusations, challenges to prior turns, complaints, pre-disagreements, or to target problems in a prior utterance." More narrowly focusing on argumentative discourse, van Eemeren et al. (2007, p. 94-95) show that rhetorical questions are used by English speakers to get another party to accept a proposition, either what they term a common starting point, something which is agreed by the other party that they could use as part of their argument, or as a standpoint, a proposition which they are trying to show is true.

Research Questions

Despite the evidence of widespread use of rhetorical questions there has been only very limited research conducted on the problems, if any, that rhetorical questions pose for learners of English. The present study makes use of a corpus of learner discussions to examine the following questions: Do Japanese learners of English make use of rhetorical questions in argument? If they do, then what is their discourse function? Lastly, is there any evidence that learners have problems understanding them?

Method

Participants

The corpus used in the study, consists of transcriptions of some 62 video recorded discussions. Some 66 freshmen at a Japanese university participated in these discussions. The students were enrolled in "advanced" classes in the university's faculty of letters. Although the name of the class included the word "advanced" the students' English speaking ability varied considerably. TOEFL scores which had been used for placement into the classes, ranged between a low of 480 and a high of 593. Participants included, at one extreme, students with what would generally be classed as an intermediate level of English, and at the other, those who had spent a number of years living in an English speaking country. The corpus consisted of 25,714 tokens used across a total of 1,540 turns.

Data collection

Each of the discussions involved four, or in some cases five learners discussing issues arising

from four week content modules on such subjects as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the death penalty, foreign aid, and smoking tobacco. Students were not free to choose the standpoint adopted in the discussion, which was randomly assigned before the discussion. This was done to ensure that at least two students would adopt each standpoint.

As such the discussions do not represent naturally occurring language data. However, the discussions do approximate to the kind of activity, such as debate, which the students might experience in an academic setting. There is a long tradition of using role plays and other elicited conversation in Interlanguage Pragmatics. The data can be characterized as what Kasper and Rose (2002, 84) call a conversation task. This can be distinguished from role plays, in that the students play themselves rather than another person. Unlike other elicitation techniques, such as Data Completion Questionnaires (DCQs), the discussions impose real time constraints on both production and reception.

One of the problems that research into interlanguage pragmatics has faced is that no data collection technique is without its problems. As Kasper and Dahl (1991) put it "IL pragmaticists are caught between a rock and a hard place," with regards to data collection. Even naturally collected data as well has being difficult to collect has its biases as Beebe and Takahashi (1989a) point out.

Data analysis

Initially, what Kasper (2006, 295) calls a "coding and counting approach to discourse", was adopted. The discussions were originally transcribed in a fashion suitable for a sociolinguistics corpus, see Tagliamonte (2006, 54). TAMS Analyzer, an OSX/Linux transcription, tagging and data analysis tool designed for qualitative research was used. Speech acts, such as directives, clarification, pro and contra-argumentation, were identified and tagged according to a coding scheme. Details of this scheme are available in Cole (2008), a report of a pilot of the project. Because of their significance in argumentation, rhetorical questions were amongst those features of learner speech that were identified and tagged. For the purpose of coding, a rhetorical question was defined as a question that has the force of an assertion, and that forms a part of a speakers' argumentation.

However, although this approach was useful in identifying rhetorical questions and providing some insights into their use, it didn't appear to give enough information to give an effective account of the complexities of how students were using them, and it didn't provide much information about the problems that they may present for learners. Conversation Analysis seemed far more likely to provide answers to these questions. See Kasper (2006.) for an account of the limitations of this code

and count approach and the arguments for using CA in ILP research. Sections containing rhetorical questions were re-transcribed from the video using the notation convention listed in Schegloff (2007, 265-269) , a copy of which is included in this paper as an appendix. The discussions were then analyzed using a conversation analytic approach.

Results

Did learners use rhetorical questions?

There were a total of 88 examples of rhetorical question use found in the corpus. Of the total of 1,540 turns 76 , or just under 5%, contained rhetorical questions. This tells us only part of the story though. 38 out of 66   students didn't produce a single rhetorical question. The mean number of rhetorical questions produced by all of the students was only 1.33, with a standard deviation of 2.26. Most pertinently, the mode for the group as a whole was zero. One thing that was clear from the data was that most of the rhetorical questions were produced by the 20 students in the group who had had over 6 months of ESL experience, studying in an English speaking country.
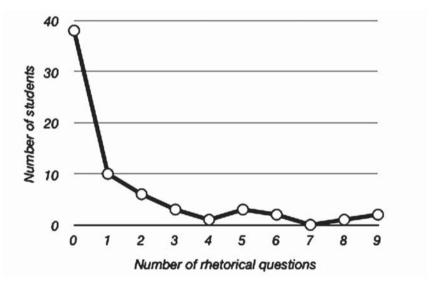

Chart 1   Frequency distribution of rhetorical questions

Students with experience of studying abroad produced a total of 63 out of the 88 rhetorical questions. Of the 20 students with ESL experience, 15 (75%) produced at least one rhetorical question compared to only 14 out of the 46 (32.6%) of students without such experience.

However, the students with ESL experience also tended to speak more often in the discussions, so it is possible that this was simply a result of these students producing more output. To see of this

was the case the average number of rhetorical questions produced per turn was calculated for each student. The table below shows a comparison of students with and without ESL experience.

Table 1 Comparison of rhetorical questions per turn ESL experience v none.

	ESL experience	No ESL experience
Mean RQ/turn	0.096	0.023
Standard deviation	0.070	0.052
Number	20	46

As neither the frequency distribution for the students with, nor for those without ESL experience followed a normal distribution, a Wilcoxon exact test was performed on the data using the open source 'R' statistical software application environment. This indicated that null hypothesis, that there was no significant difference between the means, could be rejected. (W= 718, p-value =3.688e-05.)

What did the learners do with rhetorical questions?

Challenging a prior utterance

Koshik's (ibid) analysis of RPQs would suggest that in the context of a dispute, most rhetorical questions would be used to challenge a prior utterance. The most common use of the rhetorical questions in the corpus was indeed to challenge a prior claim. There were four main types of challenge identified in the study. 1. Yes/no (Y/N) questions and elicits of confirmation, with either rising or falling intonation used to challenge the truth of an assertion. 2. Y/N questions used to question another participant's belief in a claim, or their sincerity. 3. WH questions used to challenge the grounds of a previous assertion (sometimes Y/N questions were also used to do this with questions such as "do you have evidence for this?" or "Can you prove this"). 4. A small number of cases where a challenge took the form of an invitation to accept a negative assessment of a prior assertion. In some cases the challenge appeared to offer the person challenged the opportunity to back down or retract a claim, in others it seems just to indicate disagreement and to simply form a part of counter-argumentation.

Y/N question challenging truth of assertion

In the extract below Yumi and Akiko are discussing whether Japan should increases the amount of aid that it provides to developing countries. Yumi is making the point that Japan only gives to its closest neighbours, and she makes the claim that this is "not global." It is not clear whether

Akiko's initial response of "yeah" at line 6 is merely an indication of receipt of Yumi's opinion or of acceptance of her claim. However, after a short pause, Akiko uses a Y/N question with falling intonation to challenge the truth of Yumi's assertion that, "it's not global." This is definitely not a question aimed at getting any information. Akiko doesn't seem to expect any kind of response and after laughing merely affirms the contrary standpoint that it is global. Here the question seems to serve to simply signal Akiko's non-acceptance of the claim.

Extract 1

1.   Yumi: Neighbouring (.) neighbour
2.   country (1.5) uh (.) Helping neighbouring
3.   countries ° is° (2.0) important (0.5) Bu::t-=
4.   Akiko:=Yes.=
5.   Yumi: =it's not global. (1.0)
->   6.   Akiko: Yeah. (1.5) Isn'it. hhhhhhh (0.5) uh::m (.)
7.   I think it's (0.5) its already <u>global?</u> To
8.   help (1.0) our neighbouring <u>c</u>ountries. (0.5)
9.   because neighbouring country is actually
10.   rela:(.) is actually (0.8) closely related to
11.   <u>Japa::n</u> and (1.0) uh::: (.) Japan (0.5)
12.   actually have to think (0.5) uh::: (.) self
13.   benefit to (0.5) uh::: (.) you know (.) stand
14.   on its <u>ow::n</u>.

Y/N questions challenging sincerity

   In the extract above the Y/N question doesn't seem to require any response whatsoever. However, Schegloff (ibid, 151-55) shows how confirmation questions in particular can play the role of pre-disagreements, which given the preference for agreement, serve to elicit a back-down as the speaker attempts to align with the challenger. There were no clear examples of pre-disagreement found in the corpus, probably because in this case the conversation task forced the participants to disagree. However there were other examples of RPQs being used to elicit a backdown or retraction of a claim.

   In the following example Kenji and Tomoko are arguing about capital punishment, with Kenji arguing for its abolition and Tomoko opposing.

Extract 2

    1.   Kenji: I think if the murderer(.) <u>d</u>idn't executed

    2.   (.) he:: may (0.4) have the feelings for (0.6)

    3.   <u>s</u>orry, for <u>v</u>ictims. (0.5) So:: (3.0) he sh::- (.)

    4.   murderer <u>s</u>hould be:: (0.5) alive. hhh (0.4)

->   5.   Tomoko: You really ↑ <u>think</u> <u>so::</u>. (.) The murderer who have

    6.   so <u>kind</u> <u>feeling</u>. (2.0) ((looks at Kenji, Kenji

    7.   smiles looks down)) If the murderer have so kin-

    8.   (.) kind feeling to (0.4) think (.) sorry for

    9.   victims. (.) do they really (.) <u>kill</u> the person?

    10.   (0.7)

    11.   Kenji: The murderer ma::y (0.3) sometimes kill acc- (.)

    12.   by accident. (.) So::: (1.5) sometimes (0.3) they

    13.   may have that (.) kind of feeling. (2.0)

In the extract above Tomoko challenges Kenji's opinion expressed in lines 1 and 2 that abolition would allow the murderer to feel sorrow for their victims and show regret for their actions. Tomoko's challenge, in line 5 takes the form of a Y/N question, again with falling intonation, which appears to challenge the sincerity of Kenji's previous claim. It is an expression of disbelief that seems to be aimed at forcing a retraction or back down. The question is followed by "The murderer who have so kind feeling" in lines 5-6, which is clearly intended to be ironical, since it is contradicted by her subsequent argument on line 7-9 which also takes the form of a rhetorical question. After the irony there is a two second pause while Tomoko stares at Kenji, apparently waiting for his response. When he averts his gaze by looking down, she appears to take this as a signal that a retraction or a backdown will not be forthcoming and continues with her argument. Her conclusion, while phrased as a question, seems to carry the force of the counter-argument that if murderers could feel sorry for their victims they would not have killed them in the first place. Kenji doesn't give a direct answer to any of her questions, but provides further argumentation aimed at providing an account for his belief in his claim.

Y/N questions eliciting agreement with a negative assessment

Another pattern that was used by students, that seems to be aimed at obtaining a back-down, was elicit agreement with a negative assessment of a previous claim. In the extract below Sonoko and

Kimiko are discussing the assassination of J.F Kennedy. Sonoko makes the claim that she believes he was killed as a result of a conspiracy. Kimiko challenges that and actually succeeds in extracting an admission that is damaging to Sonoko's argument.

Extract 3

1.	Sonoko:	Uh::: I am- I think:u: there was <u>some</u> (.)
2.		conspiracy (.) and <u>if</u> there are conspiracy
3.		(.)I think it would be::: (1,0) <u>m:m?</u> <u>It</u> <u>was</u>
4.		(0.4) s::: CI:A or F<u>B</u>:I <u>a:::nd</u> (.) di'you
5.		rem:ember (0.5) who was uh::: (.) who were
6.		the member of- members of (.) the Warren
7.		Commis<u>sio:n?</u> (1.0)
9.	Kimiko:	Ah,(.) There was (.) so::me- ah one person
10.		who related to FBI or [CIA.]
11.	Sonoko:	((nodding)) [Yeah]. Yeah. (1.0)
12.	Kimiko:	But what (.) is:: yo::ur <u>evi</u>:dence (.) for
13.		theory of CIA or FBI government agency
14.		related to conspira:cy? (0.8)
15.	Sonoko:	There was (.) no evidence. (.) it was only
16.		(0.8) in imag<u>ina::</u>tion. (5.0)
-> 17.	Kimiko:	° (however)° It is a little bit <u>we::ak</u>
18.		opinion to be the- the conspiracy? (0.6)
19.	Sonoko:	Yeah. (1.2)

In this exchange Sonoko is challenged to to provide evidence for her claim of a conspiracy in lines 12-13. This is not a rhetorical question. Kimiko does not yet know Sonoko's reasons for believing this. A direct answer to this question appears to be the response the Kimiko requires. However, instead of presenting her evidence, Sonoko states in lines 15 and 16 that she has no evidence. A claim made in an argumentative discussion needs to be supported by a satisfactory account of why the person believes it to be true. It is clear that Kimiko is taken by surprise by Sonoko's admission, as indicated by the five seconds of silence that follow. In lines 17-18,. Kimiko then responds with what is basically a negative assessment of Sonoko's argument, but delivered with rising intonation, to give it the form of a question. The question is conducive to a yes answer and the fact that it is prefaced by the contrastive conjunction "however," indicates that it seems to

have the force of a counter-argument rather than a request for information. In some circumstances you could expect further argumentation as a response to a challenge like this, but in this case it gets a damaging admission that her claim was weak.

WH questions challenging the grounds of a claim

As previously stated WH questions seemed to be used mainly to cast doubt on the grounds for a claim. They appear to gain their character as rhetorical questions from the expectation of the speaker that they would be difficult or impossible for the person they are challenging to answer, or that answering directly would expose a contradictory or indefensible position. In the extract below Sachiko and Kanayo are discussing the death penalty. Kanayo has argued that, because of miscarriages of justice, the death penalty, like a murderer, also kills innocent people. Sachiko counters with the claim that the number of miscarriages of justice is low.

Extract 4

	1.	Sachiko: About the (.) percent of <u>m</u>iscarriage? (.)
	2.	Kanayo: Yeah. (0.5)
	3.	Sachiko: So. (.) low. (3.0) ° Ah::° (.)
	4.	Kanayo: Mmm? (.)
	5.	Sachiko:The <u>per</u>cent. of <u>m</u>iscarriages. (.) is so <u>lo::[w.</u>
	6.	Ai: [low=
->	7.	Kanayo: =How do you <u>kno::w</u>? (3.0)
	8.	Sachiko: Ah::.
	9.	Ai: hhhhhhhhhh (5.0) I think it cannot be helped. (.) 10.
		[hhhhhhha hhe hh hhh]
	11.	Kanayo:[hhhh Ah (.) So when] your <u>b</u>oyfriend or (.)
	12.	<u>b</u>oyfriend or whoever you <u>lo</u>:ve (1.0) is got like (0.5)
	13.	miscarriage of judge. (1.0) I think you don't want 14. (0.5) them to:::
		(0.5) >you know< (.) di<u>::</u>e? (1.5)
	15.	Ai: Ha[hhhhh No. Of course.
	16.	Kanayo: [hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
	17.	Sachiko: [hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

In line 2 Kanayo confirms that she is talking about miscarriages of justice, which she calls "miscarriage

of judge." In line 3 Sachiko makes the claim that their numbers are "so low". Kanayo's response to this in line 7 is the WH question, "How do you know?" It seems plausible that Kanayo believes that Sachiko will not be able to answer this questions, which challenges her to provide an account or evidence to support her claim. While a direct answer would be possible as there have been a number of studies that have sought to estimate the extent of miscarriages of justice, Kanayo would likely expect that Sachiko would not have access to this information. In this case, the only response from Sachiko is "Ah", which could be a change of state particle indicating receipt of new information. In this case, the change of state appears to be a recognition that she has no answer and an acknowledgement of the weakness of her position. This is accompanied by laughter from her partner, who after a few seconds of silence attempts to salvage their position by claiming that miscarriages of justice can't be helped. The accompanying laughter seems to indicate that she recognizes the weakness of this position. Kanayo's second rhetorical question plays a slightly different role which I'll discuss in the next section.

Questions used to obtain commitments

Challenging a prior utterance is not the only use that the learners appear to make of rhetorical questions. In the dialogue between a psychiatrist and patient quoted in the introduction of this paper, it was noted that even the confirmation questions asked appear to play a role in the argument. They are not information questions. The psychiatrist knows the answers to the questions. The questions are used to get commitments which are then used to build the argument. In the following extract Sadako and Kosuke are debating the issue of banning smoking in public places, Sadako raises the issue of whether a ban on smoking in bars and restaurants would infringe on the property rights of the owners.

Extract 5

1.   Sadako: Even i̲f (2.0) uh:: (.) smoking (1.5) is
2.   banned? (2.0) I think (1.0) uh: (1.0) <whethe::r 3.
                    smoking (0.5) is banned> or not (1.0) depends
4.   o::n (1.5) the:: (3.0) the e̲nclosed s̲pace. (.)
5.   (this is for) (.) o̲wner. (0.5) because there-
6.   (0.5) because it is (0.8) it is the:: (0.5)
7.   p̲roperty? of (.) h̲im? (0.5) (he)/(her). (.) So
8.   (2.0) I think (0.5) all (.) <of the (.) enclosed

9.   public spaces> (0.5) necessarily shou- (0.5)

10.   should not be ° banned° . (5.0)

11.   Kosuke: Is it because (1.0) uh::m (0.5) it is the

12.   property of <u>owner.</u>=

13.   Sadako: =mm((nods))(.)

-> 14.   Kosuke:So does it me::an (.)like (.) uh:m (.) you can

-> 15.   do anything (0.5) if owner (1.0) uh:m (.) It's

-> 16.   OK? (1.0) ((staring at Sadako))It isn't?

17.   Sadako: Mm. hhhhhhhhhhhhhh (0.5) mm. hhh.

After Sadako develops her argument on property rights in lines 1-10, Kosuke responds with a Y/N question with falling intonation, which could, at first sight, be seen as a straightforward confirmation question to check his understanding of her argument. However, the subsequent unfolding of the dispute seems to indicate that more than this is going on here. This is clearly not a challenge to a previous assertion. The question is clearly conducive to a yes answer which doesn't contradict her stated position and which it gets in the form of a nod from Sadako in line 13. Kosuke then follows up at line 14 with an interpretation of Sadako's position delivered with rising intonation, again asking her to clarify her stance on the rights of property owners. This question in particular seems to have the force of an argument. What Kosuke is doing here is to get commitments from Sadako. Her response, bursting into laughter, indicates she understands that the questions are not mere clarification.. The last question in particular has the force of a very powerful argument because everyone can see where his questioning is leading. Kosuke has committed Sadako to a position that she can now see is absurd and untenable. There is no need for Kosuke to point out that the same argument could be used to justify the property owners right to, for example, commit murder on their property. The final argument is left unstated, but the laughter and Sadako's response at line 17 indicates that she understands her predicament quite clearly.

A similar thing also appears to be happening in the previous example, extract 4. In answer to Ai's claim that miscarriages of justice "cannot be helped" at line 9, Kanayo extracts an admission using a statement with rising intonation that she would not feel the same way if someone close to her was the victim of a miscarriage of justice. Although she gets the answer she wants, even if she had not, the question would have had the force of an argument. The argument, left unstated is a kind of circumstantial ad hominem, a contradiction has been shown between a claim made, in the argument and the stance she would take if she was personally involved. If, on the other hand, her response had been to deny that this would make any difference then her argument would have

lacked credibility. She was caught between the metaphorical rock and a hard place.

Expository questions

   Whilst challenges and attempts to gain commitments account for most of the examples of rhetorical questions in the corpus, there are examples where students appear to combine the use of these questions in longer argumentative narratives that sometimes resemble the expositive questions of speeches and written English, with which the speaker or writer asks and then answers questions. In extract 6, below Saki is challenged to state her position on banning smoking in public places. She then begins an extended turn which resembles a speech and which is only broken by audience feedback such as occasional laughter and receipt tokens.

   Extract 6

   1.   Naomi: How about you?=
   2.   Saki: =Oh me? (.) [hhhhhhhh]
   3.   Naomi   [hhhhhhhh]
   4.   Saki: [OK. me.] (1.0)
   5.   Naomi:[hhhhhhh]
   6.   Saki: I think (.) it should be banned. (0.5) Yeah.
   7.   <u>Completely</u>. (1.0) Yeah. (.) For example (1.0)
   8.   uh:: (.) in ↑ <u>schools</u> (1.0) and in <u>hospitals</u>.
   9.   (0.5) Yeah. (1.0) What about if your teacher
   10.   smokes. (1.5) hh[hh (.)=
   11.   Naomi: [hhh ah:::]
   12.   Saki: Would you like that one? (1.5) hhhh
   13.   Naomi: Ah::
   14.   Saki: (>So what about<) your hospitals in. (.) but what 15.
   16.   Naomi: A[h::]
   17.   Saki: [Even] if you don't get the <u>passive</u> <u>smoke</u>
   18.   (1.0) uh:: (0.8) his <u>breath</u> is already (0.5)
   19.   contains that smoke (1.0) thing. (.) 'n it's
   20.   really irritating to non-smokers. (0.8) So it
   21.   should be <u>ba</u>:nned (.) com<u>plete</u>ly. (1.0)
   22.   Especially inside those buildings. (.)

Saki begins her argumentation by stating her position that smoking should be banned at line 6. In line 9 she asks her first rhetorical question, a WH question with the canonical "What about." There are a number of examples of this in the corpus, in some cases it is used to challenge a prior utterance. Here it is not. It appears to be used to change or to introduce a topic or a problem. Saki does stop to elicit tokens of receipt or a reaction from her audience. She follows with a Y/N question in line 12 asking whether the listeners would like it if their teacher smoked. She then repeats the procedure, enquiring about hospitals and smoking doctors in lines 14 and 15. and finishes in lines 17 to 22 with argumentation and a restatement of her position. The use of these questions does bear a certain resemblance to the questions used to obtain commitments. She does pause to elicit feedback from listeners, and carry them along with her argument, but she doesn't make any attempt to commit them or tie them down by forcing them to respond clearly to the questions.

Evidence of problems understanding rhetorical questions

There were a number of instances in the corpus where learners showed evidence that they had problems understanding rhetorical questions. However, there may have been many more cases where learners didn't get the meaning, as often the questions were accompanied by other argumentation which would allow an appropriate response even if the rhetorical question had not been understood.

In the extract below Saki, Hana and Momoko are discussing the assassination of J.F Kennedy. Saki, who is arguing that there was a conspiracy, confronts Hana and Momoko asking them to explain their position on the "magic bullet."

Extract 7

1.   Saki: Can I change the subject, [please.]
2.   Hana: [Yeah.]=
3.   Momoko: =Yeah. (.)
4.   Saki: You two must be supporting the three <u>shot</u> (.) three
5.   shot? (0.5) that Oswald shot (.) three shot
6.   (0.5)   <u>an</u>:::d (.) the <u>second</u> shot is the ma- magic
7.   bullet right? (0.5) Yeah.
8.   (.) Do you support that (.)° but you should be
9.   supporting it.<° (.) I mean like (.) what do you think
10.   about the magic bullet? (1.0)

-> 11.   Hana: \<So:: (.) first of all> uh:: <u>who</u> <u>said</u> (.) the magic

-> 12.   bullet is- (1.5) magic bullet can't be:: (1.0) shot.

-> 13.   (0.3)

-> 14.   Saki: I don't understand. (.) hhhhh Sorry. (.)

15.   Hana: Oh Sorry. (.)

16.   Momoko: ° Can be- (.)°

17.   Hana: Uh:::,

18.   Momoko: ° It could- (.) could be (.)°

-> 19.   Hana: There- (.) there is- (.) I think there is (0.5) \<I

-> 20.   think there are> possibility to make seven wounds?

21.   (0.4)

22.   Saki: Uh huh. (1.0)

23.   Hana: Because (1.0) Uh::, (1.0) there (2.0) It seems to be

24.   really [miracle] (.)

25.   Saki: [Uh huh.]

26.   Hana: b::ut-(.) yet there is <u>possibility</u>.

28.   Saki: You think there is possibility in seven wounds with

29.   <u>one</u> bullet. (.) What do you think. ((gestures to Shoji

30.   who has not yet participated)) (1.0) hhhhh (.) What do

31.   you   think? (6.0) ((S182 covers face)) Do you think

32.   the same as she does? (5.0)

33.   Momoko: Do you think it could be (.) or not? (7.0) ((Shoji

34.   shakes head))

At line 11 Hana responds to being pressed to give an account of the magic bullet with the rhetorical question, "Who says that the magic bullet can't be shot?" A reverse polarity question that should be understood as a claim that that no one says the magic bullet can't be shot, in other words as a challenge to provide evidence that the magic bullet couldn't have been shot. This seems to present a problem even for Saki, a student who has produced a fair number of different types of rhetorical question in the discussions. She initiates repair with a statement that she doesn't understand. Hana repairs in lines 20 and 21 with a restatement of her position, that she thinks it is possible for the one bullet to create seven wounds. The problem with comprehension is so obvious in this conversation because there is no redundancy in the turn that includes the rhetorical question. There is no other accompanying argumentation that gives a hint as to the meaning. Saki's problem here may be

that she is expecting a development of Hana's position on the issue, not a challenge to the position implicit in her questioning about the magic bullet.

There were two other examples in the corpus where a participant appeared not to grasp the meaning of a rhetorical question. However, in both cases there were other factors that could have explained the problem, such as lexis that may not have been known by the learner. This is the only example where there appears to be a clear cut case of learners not understanding the implicature.

Discussion

Probably the most important finding is how limited the learners' use of rhetorical questions is. However, in order to draw firm conclusions about how this compares to native speakers a study like the present one would need to include baseline data of native speakers performing comparable tasks. However, literature from the field of argumentation research, as well as studies such as Kosik (2005), suggest that native speakers do make widespread use of rhetorical questions in argument. It is also notable that those students who had had experience of over six months studying in an English speaking country did make much wider use of rhetorical questions, with the conversation analysis showing that a number of these students were using them very effectively to strategically manage the discourse. However, even among these students the repertoire of rhetorical questions seemed to be severely limited, with usage limited to one or two patterns or the occasional fixed sentence head such as, "What/How about, ..."

One interesting question is why the students with ESL experience should be more likely to produce rhetorical questions in their arguments. Rhetorical questions may well be a linguistic universal. While there may be subtle differences in the ways that they are used in Japanese, they are used to perform broadly the same functions as they are in English. Why then doesn't learners' native speaker pragmatic knowledge result in greater use of rhetorical questions? There are a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. One possibility is that without evidence to the contrary, there is an assumption that this kind of pragmatic knowledge won't transfer. However, an equally plausible explanation, in this case, is that there is a difference in proficiency between the learners with ESL experience and the others. Unfortunately individual TOEFL scores are not available to the researcher to confirm whether or not this is the case. Accounts of language learning that put an emphasis on learners' control of cognitive tasks, such as Bialystock's (1993) model, will predict that a higher proficiency would allow learners to spend less attention on producing the language and devote more attention to strategic management of the discourse, in which rhetorical questions appear to play an important role.

The cause of this difference is quite important. If the problem was processing load, then more exposure to rhetorical question use in English would be unlikely to produce any recognizable effects. If, on the other hand, the problems was merely that there was an assumption that pragmatic knowledge was not transferable such an approach would be likely to succeed. As far as comprehension is concerned, Bouton (1999) makes the claim that learners do benefit from explicit instruction in the use of implicatures, and rhetorical questions can be considered to be a form of implicature.

Conclusion

The study produced some interesting information on learners' use of rhetorical questions. In particular, the evidence that their use was mainly limited to those students who had spent time learning English in a second language context. The reasons for this phenomenon lie beyond the scope of this study. A follow up study examining this question could possibly shed light on the matter.

The Conversational Analysis also provided interesting information about the discourse functions that were being performed with rhetorical questions. Whilst they seem to broadly match the uses described in the literature on English speakers' use of rhetorical questions, it would be interesting to obtain video footage of similar discussions conducted by native English speakers and also discussions in Japanese. This would enable comparisons to be made, possibly allowing for the identification of differences in the way the questions were used.

Probably the least satisfying part of the present study is the limited nature of the information it provided about the problems students had with comprehension of rhetorical questions. Whilst conversation analysis did show some examples where students were having problems, it doesn't seem to be the most appropriate tool to examine this question. A multiple choice questionnaire would probably be a more effective way to conduct research into this question.

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Appendix

Transcription symbols used in extracts. (adapted from Schegloff (2007)

[ ]	Overlap is used where two people speak at the same time.
[ ]	
= =	Equal signs show a single continuous utterance broken only for convenience, or different speakers, latching on without a gap.
(0.5)	Pause, time in seconds
(.)	Micro-pause.
.	Does not represent the end of a grammatical sentence, but falling or final intonation contour
?	rising intonation contour.
¿	rise stronger than a comma but weaker than a question mark.
:::	colons used to show sound preceding them is prolonged.
word	or the first letter of a word underlined is used to show emphasis.
°	talk following or between two degree signs is quiet.
↓ ↑	raised or lowered pitch
((Looks at Yumiko))	Double brackets show transcribers descriptions of events
> <	compressed or rushed talk.
< >	drawn out talk.
-	break off
hhh	aspiration, laughter.
(yeah)	Not clear but this is suspected if there are alternate possibilities, this is shown with a slash ()/()

	between.
( )	inaudible utterance.
_:	If the letters before a colon are underline it shows a falling intonation contour.
:	If the colon itself is underlined it shows a rising intonation contour.

日本人英語学習者と修辞的疑問

サイモン　コール

要　約

　本研究は，日本の大学 1 回生の英語学習者による修辞的疑問の使用に注目している。本研究は，学生の議論のビデオ録画を筆記したコーパスを使用して，英語学習者の討議法を検討する，より広範なプロジェクトの一環であるが，学習者が修辞的疑問を使用したかどうかについて調査した。さらに，修辞的疑問がどのように使用されたか調査し，また，それが理解の上で何らかの問題となった証拠を検討するのに，会話分析を用いた。本研究では，修辞的疑問を使った学生は少数派であり，主として，第二言語として英語を学習した (ESL) 経験のある者であったことがわかった。本論文では，なぜそうであるのか，その理由を考察する。修辞的疑問は，主に，先の主張に異議を唱える場合に，議論中で相手の主張への反論として使いうる，共通の起点への言質を相手から引き出すのに使われることがわかった。修辞的疑問の使用からくる理解上の問題がある証拠が，限られてはいるが，いくつか確認された。

キーワード：修辞的疑問，中間言語語用論，討議法，英語，コーパス