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Requests for assistance in the third-age language classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this conversation analytic study, we investigate requests for assistance in the third-age (65+) language classroom. Seven Dutch seniors participated in a one-month course of English as a foreign language. We found that these seniors asked many language-related questions which fell into one of three categories: (1) production-oriented questions, (2) comprehension-oriented questions and (3) wonderment questions. These questions differ in the ways the sequences are shaped: (a) what precedes the request for assistance, (b) the person who is recruited to provide the assistance, (c) the person who offers the assistance, and (d) the response to the provided assistance and the subsequent interaction. We found wonderment questions to be the most prevalent category. Our findings suggest that the senior learners in our data show clear ownership and agency over their own learning process, demonstrated by their active participation and frequent (wonderment) questions in the classroom.

KEYWORDS

Third-age language learning; senior language-learning; ESL/EFL; classroom interaction; requests for assistance; conversation analysis

1. Introduction

Language learning in the third-age is a relatively new phenomenon but with life expectancy increasing and an associated need for older age leisure activities, it will most probably become more prevalent. Despite all the Conversation Analysis for Second Language Acquisition (CA-for-SLA) work done investigating classroom interaction in younger learners, there is no similar tradition for older adults. Markee and Kasper (2004) argue that CA-for-SLA captures language learning as a process by means of analysing participants' interaction. Hence, a CA-for-SLA approach can help us begin to shed light on the 'black box' that third-age language learning is at this point. In this small-scale study, taking a CA approach, we examine instances where senior learners explicitly request assistance (Kendrick and Drew 2016) during English lessons. We focus on different types of language-related questions that emerge in the senior classroom and show that third-age language learners exert agency in their language learning process by asking many questions and, more specifically, many wonderment questions, i.e. matters of interest that are not necessary for the progressivity of the task/interaction.

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2. Background

When looking into questions in the classroom, it is important to distinguish who asks these questions and for what purpose. Much research on classroom interaction has focused on teacher conduct. Teachers are known to ask many questions in the classroom, among others to test or advance students' knowledge and skills (Cazden 1988; Koole 2010; Mehan 1979). Questions initiated by the teacher usually launch the canonical IRE/IRF sequence: the teacher's Initiation; the Response by one or more students; and the teacher's Evaluation or Feedback on the Response (Cazden 1988; Mehan 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Thoms 2012). Within the Evaluation/Feedback, FL teachers have been shown to use variations (Hellermann 2003; Ko 2014; Lee 2021) to perform multiple didactic actions (Lee 2007). Indeed, it is mainly the teacher who asks the questions in the classroom: in an older paper, Dillon (1988) found less than 1% of students' turns to be questions seeking information versus 66% of teachers' turns. More recently, Yuksel and Yu (2008) found students to ask 3% of the questions that instructors ask. As stated by Koole and Berenst (2008), student participation in whole-class interaction is very often 'an opportunity to show what you know, rather than an opportunity to ask questions' (p.107). As a result of more recent task-based, learner-centred language learning pedagogies, the number of learner-initiated questions is reported to have increased (Avila 2019; Mori 2007; Rusk, Pörn, and Sahlström 2016; Seedhouse 2005). Regardless of the amount of questions, there is general consensus that asking questions is important for learning: when (L2) learners work through difficulties and ask questions along the way, their language develops (Gass, Mackey, and Pica 1998).

Research focusing on the learners and their agency in the language classroom shows that learners employ different practices to take initiative for their own learning, without necessarily matching the curriculum. Waring (2011) distinguishes three types of learner initiatives and their purposes in the ESL classroom: (a) initiating sequence to display knowledge and to seek understanding, (b) volunteering response to provide learning opportunities, and (c) exploiting assigned turn to display knowledge beyond the teacher's request and to create a playful learning environment. The work by Skarbø Solem (2016) demonstrates how knowledge claims are initiated in whole-class interaction and how they are subsequently negotiated with regard to accuracy and relevance by both student and teacher. Jakonen and Morton (2015) focus on information requests by students in peer groups and demonstrate how these students discover objects of learning and orient to each other's knowledge to resolve knowledge gaps in content-based language classrooms. Such knowledge gaps may include spelling, meaning of vocabulary, or the class contents, but importantly do not necessarily match the learning objectives in the curriculum or the teacher's agenda. Our own data of senior language learners contain numerous instances of student initiative, and especially of student questions. These questions often constituted requests for assistance in language-related matters.

To categorise recruitments of assistance, Kendrick and Drew (2016) proposed a continuum of recruitments of assistance varying from verbal utterances that explicitly seek assistance ('can you help me open this jar?') to reports or displays of

trouble that more implicitly elicit an offer of assistance (showing difficulty opening the jar). Even though their study is based on everyday interactions between native speakers, this continuum can also be applied to L2 classroom settings as learners run into trouble there too. Buckwalter (2001) investigated university students of Spanish reporting trouble with the language in a whole-class setting. Her results show that students mainly report problems by using trouble alerts (e.g. 'uhm'; Kendrick and Drew 2016); only rarely do they explicitly seek assistance (e.g. 'what is X?').

Other studies have shown that one type of explicit request for assistance in the L2 classroom is actually frequent, namely word searches (Brouwer 2003; Koshik and Seo 2012). In these word searches where learners do not know a word, they 'display their incomplete competence in the target language' (Svennevig 2018, 4). Word searches are not necessarily only explicit requests for assistance, often they constitute more implicit assistance searches. Markee and Kunitz (2013), for example, showed that intermediate learners of Italian use both talk and embodied actions to construct word and grammar searches. Duran, Kurhila, and Sert (2019), in their English as a medium for instruction content-classes, found word searches to be constructed using visible resources such as gaze and gestures, as well as explicit formulaic expressions (e.g. 'how can I say'). Interestingly, Pekarek Doehler and Berger (2019) found that, over the course of ten months, an L2 speaker's methods to recruit assistance for word searches became less explicit and the progressivity of the conversation was less disrupted by these word searches. It does need to be noted that not all word searches are intended for the other to join in to help; there is a preference for speakers to find the word themselves (Goodwin and Goodwin 1986; Lerner 1996; Schegloff 2007). Therefore, Brouwer (2003) talks about 'doing language learning' where others are invited to participate as opposed to speakers finding the word themselves (also see Svennevig 2018). For a word search to qualify as doing language learning, another participant needs to be invited to help and 'the interactants demonstrate an orientation to language expertise, with one participant being a novice and the other being an expert' (p.542). Brouwer notes that this expert does not need to be a native speaker nor a person who is a more proficient speaker. Koshik and Seo (2012) widen the scope of word searches by talking about 'searching for language', comprising words, word forms, syntactic structures or pronunciation. Indeed, all of these searches are immediately relevant for the interaction as they are needed to produce L2 in the classroom. These search-sequences shed light on the identities as learner/teacher in language learning that are constructed in and through talk (Koshik and Seo 2012).

Where word searches are usually produced by the speaker, the recipient can also request assistance in the L2 classroom when they do not understand the interaction at hand. Recipients can use confirmation checks ('What is X?'), comprehension checks ('you know what I mean?') and clarification requests ('they are what?') (Long and Sato 1983). In an older paper Skilton and Meyer (1993) show that these types of questions are very frequent in the language classroom: 50% of ESL students' questions were confirmation checks, comprehension checks and clarification requests. More recent research show the same pattern: McGrew (2005) found English learners of Hebrew to ask mainly questions related to the meaning and form of the word followed by questions concerning grammar.

Finally, research has also pointed to questions that are not immediately linked to the interaction at hand. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1992) coined the term ‘wonderment questions’, for questions reflecting ‘curiosity, puzzlement, skepticism, or a knowledge-based speculation, in contrast to a groping for basic orienting information’ (p.187; e.g. ‘What would happen if ...’). The authors collected student questions both in naturally occurring questions during/after science lessons and questions from a question-asking task (i.e. students had to come up with questions) before science lessons. Unfortunately, no conclusions regarding the frequency of wonderment questions in classrooms can be drawn as wonderment questions only manifested in the question-asking task before the lessons. Chin and Brown (2002), however, did investigate the frequency of wonderment questions in their classroom observation case-study. They identified the types of questions asked by students in science classes and found that wonderment questions were the least frequent in the classroom, as did other studies (Buckwalter 2001; Dillon 1988). It must be noted here that the term ‘wonderment question’ is not commonly used in CA research and that further scrutiny by means of CA may show whether these questions are indeed different from other requests for assistance and in what ways.

Currently, the work on classroom interaction has mainly focused on younger learners, while seniors remain understudied. Although some work has been done on requests by seniors in other settings, for example towards home-helpers (Lindström 2005) and elder-care recipients (Heinemann 2006), no work, to our knowledge, has looked into explicit requests for assistance, or questions asked, in the senior (L2) classroom. The fact that seniors indicated in interviews that they want engaging classroom activities and communication-based classes (Duay and Bryan 2008) might influence their participation and question behaviour in the classroom and, therefore, it is important to investigate requests for assistance in the senior classroom.

Our small-scale data-driven inventory of requests for assistance by senior language learners reveals seniors to ask many questions, mainly explicit requests for assistance. A bottom-up categorisation of these explicit requests reveals different types of questions, of which wonderment questions (Scardamalia and Bereiter 1992) are surprisingly particularly prevalent. This study presents the question types found in the data and describes how they differ from each other, how they function in the interaction, and which factors contribute to their occurrence.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. The research project

The data presented in this paper are part of a research project investigating third-age language learning. The focus of the language course was on English speaking and listening skills, as the participating seniors had indicated earlier that they would like to focus on communicative abilities (van der Ploeg, Richter, Lowie & Keijzer, 2021). Participants voluntarily participated and had not been enrolled in a language course before the start of the study. Reasons for participating varied from interest in scientific studies to wanting to improve their language skills for an upcoming

vacation. Group sizes were kept small, with 5 participants maximally per course. Seniors received classroom instruction once a week for the duration of one month from the same proficient and experienced English teacher. The teacher was an L1 German speaker with C2 level English (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001). Each session lasted 1.5 hours including a break in between the sessions. The seniors were asked to work on homework assignments. The dataset for the present study consists of 3 hours of data.

3.2. Participants and recording

Participants were 7 seniors (2 women, mean age of participants = 66.1), all living in the north of the Netherlands. Their level of education varied from vocational to university education. Inclusion criteria were the absence of cognitive problems (based on Cognitive Failure Questionnaire; Ponds, Van Boxtel, and Jolles 2006) and English proficiency of B1 at most, assessed by means of an IELTS listening task (Council) and an IELTS-inspired prepared free speech task.

The participants gave informed consent for the lessons to be video recorded. The video camera was positioned in the corner of the classroom facing the learners so that they were visible and audible and the camera was in close proximity to the teacher and the blackboard. This positioning meant that the teacher was audible at all times, albeit not always visible. The recordings continued throughout the lesson, also capturing the breaks. To ensure the privacy of the learners, transcripts of the video data have been anonymised.

3.3. The Lesson

We analysed the third lesson, because of the increased familiarity between the learners. The lesson theme was 'jobs' and proceeded as follows: revision of lesson 2, vocabulary introduction and acquisition of job-related items, further familiarisation with the topic and grammar instruction (the indefinite articles a/an), dialogue/speaking exercises, evaluation of the class, and homework explanation. Classroom activities included individual, partner and group work, and few teacher-fronted explanations.

3.4. Analysis

To study the language learners' requests for assistance in our data, conversation analysis (CA) was used. The objective of this method of research is 'to describe, analyze and understand talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life' (Sidnell 2011, 1). It does so by taking members' perspective (Ten Have 2007) and hence focusing on what participants make observable to each other and how they understand each other (Koole 2015), instead of, for example, categorising the data by means of a predefined coding scheme. By means of precise transcription and close analysis of video-recorded data, one can inductively uncover the details and patterns of interactants' conduct and practices (Ten Have 2007). Hence, CA is a bottom-up rather than a top-down method for studying language interaction. In classroom

interaction research, CA has become an increasingly important method to investigate classroom practices and learning, as its attention to detail uncovers important subtleties that influence the course of the interaction (Gardner 2013). In the current study, CA allowed us to identify the phenomenon of requests for assistance in the data and inductively categorise the instances of this phenomenon into different types. In this way, the study sheds light on the interactional processes in the under-researched setting of the third-age language learning classroom.

The particular focus of this analysis is on recruitment of assistance in the third-age classroom. We identified 51 requests for language-related assistance (explicit requests, trouble reports, trouble alerts, and embodied requests). We decided to focus on explicit requests for assistance as these comprised 38 (74.5%) of the instances. All 38 instances were transcribed in accordance with the Jeffersonian conventions (e.g. Jefferson 1986).

4. Results

The requests for assistance found in our data can be divided into three categories: (1) production-oriented questions, i.e. word searches or pronunciation problems that require prompt solving for immediate use in the interaction; (2) comprehension-oriented questions that need to be answered in order for the learner to comprehend the ongoing interaction; and (3) wonderment questions (Scardamalia and Bereiter 1992): questions that are not necessary for the progressivity of the activity but seem to be brought up for the learner's own learning process. Contrary to what has been found in prior studies (Buckwalter 2001; Chin and Brown 2002; Dillon 1988), these wonderment questions are the most prevalent of the three categories in our data and make up two thirds of the entire collection (production-oriented questions 18%; comprehension-oriented questions 16%; wonderment questions 66%). The analysis revealed that the categories differ in their sequential properties: the conversational actions leading up to the request for assistance, as well as the subsequent treatment of the offered assistance varied. In all categories, however, the questions typically take the form of WH-questions and learners recruit the teacher's assistance or that of the other learners, or ask both the teacher and other learners for help at the same time. Content-wise, the majority of questions concern vocabulary (69%), followed by pronunciation (21%) and grammar (11%). The percentage of questions asked by each learner varied between 8 and 35%.

4.1. Production-oriented questions

We identified production-oriented questions as problems that arise in the production of an utterance and that need to be resolved for the progressivity of the activity. Production-oriented questions are preceded by a problem orientation in the learner's turn. Then, when the production-oriented question has been posed and the teacher offers assistance, learners receipt the assistance by using the offered solution in their utterance thereby returning to the main sequence. Although both the teacher and

other learners can thus be recruited for assistance, it is mainly the teacher who offers the assistance. In our data, the production-oriented questions all took the form of word or pronunciation searches (cf. searching for language, Koshik and Seo 2012).

In [Extract 1](#), we see an example of a production-oriented question, where the assistance of the teacher is recruited. The class is engaged in a course book activity in which they match pictures of jobs to their descriptions. These pictures have letters so that they can be linked to the descriptions (e.g. ‘an actor’ and a picture of an actor labelled ‘L’). In the extract, Loes asks a production-oriented question about the pronunciation of the letter ‘L’. Note that Dutch utterances are in bold and utterances of interest are marked by means of an arrow.

Extract 1. How do you call the l? (3.l.14).

1. Teacher: [so:, let's ge-
 2. Loes: [(says something to Klaas))
 3. Teacher: let's get started with the (.) e:hm (.) with the first exercise,
 4. and we can jus[t do it and just-
 5. Koen: [match the job with the photo[s:, ((reads))
 6. Teacher: [yes
 7. so we see [all of the pictures,
 8. [(moves hands above book))
 9. (.)
 10. let's just discuss.
 11. s[o:,
 12. Koen: [who is an actor.
 13. Teacher: [the one,
 14. Loes: → [l: l: >l:< l l (/l/)
 15. → how do you call l l: (/l/) **de e1**, (/εL/) ((looks at teacher))
 Transl.: how do you call l l: (/l/) the e1, (/εL/) ((looks at teacher))
 16. Loes: → the l: (/l/)
 17. [(laughs))
 18. Teacher: [(laughs))
 19. the what,
 20. Loes: the e[l (/εL/) ((points to notebook))
 21. Teacher: [a::h the- e1. (/εL/)
 22. Loes: e1, (/εL/)

After the teacher’s explanation (lines 1–11), Koen asks: ‘who is an actor’. As the second pair-part to this question, Loes offers a few candidate solutions of the pronunciation of the correct answer *L* (line 14), with a rising intonation (a way for learners to present their candidate solutions; Koshik and Seo 2012), thereby reporting trouble (Kendrick and Drew 2016). In line 15, Loes requests the teacher’s assistance by looking at her and asking a WH-question (‘how do you call l l: the e1’), which initiates a repair sequence. Subsequently, she adds another candidate solution (line 16) and thereby again ‘does pronunciation’ (Brouwer 2004). The teacher, however, does not immediately answer her question, but initiates repair (‘the what’, line 20). In line 20, Loes provides additional explanation by repeating the letter and pointing at her notebook. When the teacher provides the correct pronunciation in line 21, Loes responds (line 22) by repeating the correct pronunciation. In doing so, she transitions

back to the main sequence, by answering the question which picture depicts an actor while using the newly acquired pronunciation in the completion of this utterance (‘I’, line 22; Lerner, 1996).

In this extract, we see that the progressivity of the activity is halted by the request for assistance as an answer to the question is needed. The teacher’s answer is receipted by Loes’s immediate use of the provided word in the interaction, thereby transitioning back to the main sequence. This is what constitutes a production-oriented question: a request for assistance for immediate use in the ongoing interaction.

Extract 2 presents another production-oriented question, but this time both the teacher’s and the other learners’ assistance is recruited. The class has just covered the pronunciation of the whole alphabet and Anton asked about the pronunciation of Z (‘zee’ and ‘zet’). Next, Loes asks a production-oriented question recruiting the assistance of both the teacher and the other learners.

Extract 2. So so what is so? (3.l.18).

1. Anton: [both can eh be,=
2. [((gestures with hands and leans in))
3. Teacher: =I think so.
4. I [think↑ yeah.
5. [((hand gestures))
6. Anton: okay.=
7. Teacher: =I think if you say zet (/zet/) than it’s definitely fine.
8. Loes: → **dus↓ dus↓** what is [**dus**,
- Transl.: so↓ so↓ what is [so,
9. Loes: → ((looks around the room))
10. Teacher: [<so>,=
11. Loes: =>**dus<**,=
- Transl.: =>so<,=
12. Teacher: =so:,
13. Loes: so:↓ it is a b c d ((continues listing the alphabet))

In this extract, we see Anton asking how to pronounce the Z (line 1), to which the teacher responds in lines 3–5. Anton accepts this answer using a sequence-closing third (line 6, Schegloff 2007). This allows Loes to self-select and initiate a new sequence in line 8, where she begins to link back to the whole alphabet they have just practised, using the Dutch discourse marker ‘dus’ (so; Rendle-Short 2003) for which she seems to lack the English equivalent. Similar to **Extract 1**, the word search is initiated by producing the trouble source (‘dus, dus’, line 8). By doing so in Dutch and using language alternation (Gafaranga 2018), she provides a clue as to the word she is looking for (Greer 2013), while using Dutch as a backup resource (Tran 2018) and initiating the repair sequence. The actual request for assistance is

also produced in line 8 in the form of a WH-question ('what is so'), mirroring what we saw in [Extract 1](#). The difference with [Extract 1](#), however, is that this time Loes does not only request the teacher's assistance, but also selects and mobilises responses from the other learners with her gaze (Stivers and Rossano 2010) by looking around the room (line 9), thereby orienting to them as potentially knowledgeable (Jakonen and Morton 2015). Nevertheless, it is the teacher who provides Loes with the solution (line 10, 12). The teacher's answer is again receipted by immediate use of the discourse marker in the interaction ('so it is ...', line 13), thereby transitioning back to the main sequence initiated in line 8.

Similar to [Extract 1](#), the progressivity of the activity is halted by Loes, who initiates a repair sequence and poses a production-oriented question.

The picture that emerges from all of the production-oriented questions in all our third-age classroom data is as follows: production-oriented questions halt the progressivity of the classroom activity, as they launch a repair sequence. The repair is firstly initiated by means of attempts at producing the trouble source word or item, and the assistance is receipted by means of immediate use by the learner, thereby transitioning back to the main sequence. A final characteristic of production-oriented questions found in our data is that they do not seem to be handled in two-party interactions only (with the teacher as one party and the other students together as the other party, Schegloff 1987). Instead, there are varying participation frameworks in which these questions are dealt with: the seniors recruit assistance not only from the teacher, but also from other seniors by using their gaze, thereby orienting to them as potentially knowledgeable as well (Jakonen and Morton 2015).

4.2. Comprehension-oriented questions

Comprehension-oriented questions are identified as requests for assistance in troubles where the problem does not arise in the utterance of the speaker asking the question, as is the case for production-oriented questions, but rather emerges from the preceding interaction, such as an earlier utterance by another speaker. Comprehension-oriented questions are therefore recipient-initiated. Similar to the production-oriented question instances, the answers to comprehension-oriented questions are receipted by the learners using acknowledgement tokens and subsequently transitioning back to the main activity. Usually, the teacher's assistance is recruited and provided, but sometimes the other learners provide the requested assistance as well. All of the comprehension-oriented questions found in our data are related to vocabulary.

In [Extract 3](#), the learners have been paired up and are instructed to tell each other a story about a character role they have been told to take on (based on key-words on a card handed to them) so the other person can guess who they are. Anton and Koen are collaborating and ask a comprehension-oriented question, recruiting the teacher's assistance.

Extract 3. What is a stepmother? (3.I.38).

1. *((students speak in pairs))*
2. Koen: I am a stepmother
3. but I do not know what is a <stepmother>.
4. Anton: <step[mother (0.5) stepm]other>
5. Koen: [stepmother ()]
6. Anton: u::h m[mmmm]
7. Koen: [*((Koen looks at Anton))*]
we will ask.
8. *→ ((Koen looks at teacher))*
9. *→ we- we have a question.*
10. *→ what is <step>mother, =*
11. Teacher: =stepmother=
12. Loes: =**stief- stiefmoeder**,
- Transl.: =step- stepmother,
13. (2.0)
14. Teacher: can you try and describe it [in English] what it is,
15. Koen: [yeah English *((touches Loes's back))*]
16. (2.0)
17. *((Loes turns around to look at Anton and Koen))*
18. Loes: I am eh eh [stepmother of] [your children.
19. *[[points at Koen]]*
20. Teacher: [no no but [then]
21. Loes: [*((Loes turns around to face the teacher))*]
22. Teacher: [but then you] won't [understand so you have [to find]
23. Koen: [yes↑ okay.]
24. Loes: [*((Loes turns to face Anton and Koen))*]
25. [[I - I-]
26. [*((grabs Koen's arm))*]
27. [I am the second wife [of Koen,
28. [*((gestures))*]
29. Anton: [yeah *((nods))*]
30. Loes: and his- his eh children,
31. I am the step[mother.] *((points at herself))*
32. Anton: [a::h.]
33. Anton: ah yes I understand=
34. Teacher: =stepmother
35. so they are your stepchildren.
36. Koen: step ah okay,
37. Loes: yeah?
38. Koen: yes oke.
39. Anton: **ja.**
40. Transl.: yes.

The problem orientation can be found in line 2–3, where Koen reports trouble by telling Anton he is a stepmother but does not know what it means. The two men then pronounce the word a few times (lines 4–5), indicating that Anton cannot provide an explanation either, and subsequently Koen explicitly announces that they will ask for assistance ('we will ask', line 8). He recruits the assistance by turning around, looking at the teacher (line 9) and using gaze to mobilise her response (Goodwin and Goodwin 1986; Stivers and Rossano 2010) and then initiating a pre-expansion ('we have a question', line 10) followed by the actual request for assistance formulated as a WH-question ('what is stepmother?', line 11). Although the teacher starts to answer the question by repeating the word stepmother (line 12), it is Loes, one of the other learners who overheard the interaction, who provides the assistance by offering the Dutch translation of the word (line 13), using rising intonation (to present a candidate solution; Koshik and Seo 2012). After a two-second pause, the teacher responds

to Loes's translation. She encourages her to describe the meaning of the word in English (line 15), providing room for her to demonstrate her understanding in the target language. Anton and Koen subsequently produce minimal verbal responses ('yeah', 'okay'; lines 24, 30, 33, 37) and a literal claim of understanding ('ah yes I understand', line 34). Contrary to the instances of production-oriented questions, the men merely accept the candidate solution with an acknowledgement token. That is, they do not use the word immediately in the interaction. Hence, whereas production-oriented questions halt the progressivity and learners return to the main sequence by immediate use of the provided answer in the interaction, comprehension-oriented questions also halt the progressivity, but learners close the assistance sequence using acknowledgement tokens (Schegloff 2007). Just like production-oriented questions, the trouble is addressed and dealt with before transitioning back to the main activity.

What is furthermore interesting in this extract, is that Loes not only offers the assistance, but also invites another acknowledgement token in line 38 ('yeah?'). As such, she seems to have, for now, taken on the role of expert. The men provide the acknowledgement in line 39 and 40.

In the following extract (Extract 4), the entire class discusses jobs of relatives. Koen and the teacher discuss the best description for his daughter's job (psychology assistant) at which point Loes asks a comprehension-oriented question. She initially recruits the assistance of the teacher but later also recruits Koen's assistance.

Extract 4. What means psychology? (3.l.26).

1. Koen: e::h our other <daughter>.
2. Teacher: hmhm,
3. Koen: <is (.) ·Hh **psychologie assistent**>
Transl.: <is (.) ·Hh a psychology assistant>
(2.0) ((Koen shrugs shoulders))
4. Teacher: hm|hm,
5. Teacher: so she studi[ed psychology,
6. Koen: [she did
7. Koen: **ja**,
8. Transl.: yes,
9. Teacher: aha:,,
10. Koen: and then she is| (.) **assistent**.
Transl.: and then she is| (.) assistant.
11. Teacher: a::h,
12. (2.0)
13. Teacher: maybe we can call it a: <psychology↑ assistant>,
14. Loes: → what means psychology,= ((looks at teacher))
15. Teacher: =psychology.
16. Loes: → what mean[s ((looks at Koen))
17. Teacher: [it's got to do with the- the mind,
18. you go to a psychologist.
19. Loes: oh.
20. Koen: it means in in in Dutch (.) she did **toegepaste psychologie**,
Transl.: it means in in in Dutch (.) she did applied psychology,
21. Teacher: hmhm::,
22. so she's not a psychologi↑st herself↑ bu[t,
23. Koen: [no.
24. Teacher: okay.

After the teacher proposes a candidate solution to describe Koen's daughter's job ('maybe we can call it a psychology assistant', line 13), Loes self-selects and poses a comprehension-oriented request for assistance in the form of a WH-question ('what means psychology?', line 14), whilst recruiting the teacher with her gaze. When the teacher starts responding by repeating the word, Loes recruits assistance again, using the same design, but this time from her peer Koen to whom she now gazes (line 16). What needs to be noted is that the word psychology is missing in this second request, possibly due to the overlap with the teacher starting to explain the word (line 16). With her second recruitment of assistance, Loes treats Koen as possibly knowledgeable on the matter (cf. Jakonen and Morton 2015). The teacher, however, proceeds to answer Loes's question (line 17–18). Loes responds to this with a free-standing change-of-state token 'oh' (line 19; Heritage 1984). Koen then provides more information by explaining the word in Dutch (line 20). The teacher closes the sequence and returns to the main activity (lines 21–22), by asking Koen a follow-up question that starts with the discourse marker 'so'. Just like in [Extract 3](#), the comprehension-oriented question halts the progressivity and a transition back to the main activity is made, in this case after an acknowledgement token is provided.

The analysis of the comprehension-oriented questions in our data demonstrates that, similar to the production-oriented questions, these halt the progressivity of the activity and are typically shaped as WH-questions. However, the two question types also differ in important ways. With regard to the problem they address, production-oriented questions point to a problem in the learner's turn while comprehension problems point to a problem in the preceding interaction. Production-oriented questions, then, are preceded by attempts to produce the trouble source, while comprehension-oriented questions are initiated by a pre-sequence or by 'just' recruiting the assistance. Furthermore, while production-oriented questions in our data recruit both the teacher's and other learners' assistance and are only responded to by the teacher, comprehension-oriented questions are mainly directed towards the teacher and it is the teacher, or sometimes another learner, who offers the assistance. Therefore, again, we do not just see a two-party interaction but a multi-party interaction. Additionally, this also constitutes a deviation from the teacher's role as the epistemic authority, as other interactants join in the interaction and provide the assistance requested from the teacher. Finally, while learners receipt assistance in response to their production-oriented questions by immediate use of the word or pronunciation, thereby transitioning back to the main sequence, the assistance in response to comprehension-oriented assistance is typically receipted with acknowledgement tokens.

4.3. Wonderment questions

The third and largest category of questions found in our data are questions we labelled wonderment questions, following Scardamalia and Bereiter (1992). These questions are not preceded by a trouble source like production-oriented and comprehension-oriented questions, and do not follow from the interaction to the same extent: an answer to a wonderment question is not necessary for the progressivity of the activity. Wonderment questions are often explicitly made relevant within the interaction in pre-sequences. Furthermore, as is the case for comprehension-oriented questions but not production-oriented questions, wonderment questions typically solely recruit the teacher's assistance and the answers are usually receipted by means of acknowledgement tokens. Similar to production-oriented questions, however, it is the teacher who typically responds to the request, but learners sometimes join in as well.

In **Extract 5**, the teacher explains the difference between WH-questions and yes/no-questions. Subsequently, Pim has a wonderment question about tenses and recruits the teacher's assistance.

Extract 5. Do you play tennis or are you playing tennis? (3.E.45).

1. *((Cees nods continuously during the teacher's turn below))*
2. Teacher: and that's an example of the other type of question right?
3. the wh question
4. what will you do?
5. and then I want some explanation from you.
6. and then you said
7. you want to go sightseeing.
8. (1.0)
9. Pim: could I ask a questio[n, *((raises finger, looks at teacher))*
10. Teacher: [yeah?=
11. Cees: =you want to go.
12. Pim: *((Pim gestures towards Cees))*
13. (1.0)
14. Teacher: me,
15. sightseeing,
16. Pim: sight[seeing
17. Teacher: [sightseeing mea[ns] I am a to[urist and I'm
18. Cees: [o::h] [I thought you said
19. () *((nods))*
20. Teacher: through the city and I try to take pictures
21. and look at things and maybe go to a museum.
22. Pim: → [what's the difference when you say
23. [*((points))*
24. → do you play tennis
25. → or
26. (1.0)
27. → are you playing tennis, *((points))*
28. Teacher: aha?
29. [are you playing tennis; means right now=
30. Cees: [no you do play are you playing tennis is () *((shakes head))*
31. Pim: =okay=
32. Teacher: =so for example when I'm c[alling you on the ph[one and I
33. Cees: [when you (fall) [o::h yeah
34. Teacher: hear the other person huhuhuhu *((fakes heavy breathing))*
35. sounds exha[usted I can ask are you playing t[ennis
36. Pim: [ja [yes of course
- Transl.: [yes [yes of course
37. Teacher: okay?
38. but this is just in general.
39. (1.0)
40. very good question.
41. (1.0)
42. okay,
43. (0.5)
44. do you have any questions about; this. *((points to board))*

When the teacher has concluded her explanation of different question types, there is a one-second pause. Pim then initiates a pre-expansion ('could I ask a question', line 9) and thereby signals his question to be marked or somehow misplaced. The teacher grants him his question (line 10) and, after an inserted sequence about a word that Cees did not understand, Pim asks

his WH-question in lines 22–27, directed to the teacher, who then answers the question (lines 29, 32, 34, 35). During the teacher's explanation, Pim provides acknowledgement tokens ('okay', line 31 and 'yes', 'yes of course', line 36). Just as in previous examples, the two-party interaction is turned into a multi-party interaction, this time by Cees, who chimes in by offering an explanation ('no you do play are you playing tennis is ...', line 30) but also by producing acknowledgement tokens of his own ('oh yeah', line 33). Subsequently, the teacher evaluates the question in line 40 ('very good question') and thereby closes the sequence before initiating a new sequence (line 40–44).

The distinguishing factor between this question type and the production-oriented and comprehension-oriented questions is the fact that it is a request for extra information that does not need to be applied instantly. The question is asked after a sequence has been closed and an answer to the question is not needed for the progressivity of the activity, as is the case for the other two types of questions.

In the final extract, [Extract 6](#), the class discusses how many (adult) children of senior parents live abroad nowadays and what that is like for parents. The teacher uses the word 'common', which leads to a comprehension-oriented question (see [Section 4.2](#)). Next, Anton asks a follow-up wonderment question.

Extract 6. Can you say usual? (3.1.34).

1. Teacher: I think (.) it's getting more and more common nowadays,
2. Loes: **sorry**, ((looks at teacher))
Transl.: pardon, ((looks at teacher))
3. Teacher: it's getting more <common>>,
4. Loes: more,=
5. Teacher: =so it's-
6. Loes: common,=
7. Teacher: =common.
8. Loes: what's more c[ommon,
9. Anton: **[ja.**
Transl.: [yes.
10. Teacher: so it's [not special anymore.
11. [((gestures))
12. becaus[e (.) it happens [more and more=
13. [((gestures))
14. Loes: [yeah yeah more normally
15. Koen: **=ja ja ja** [:(. (international)
Transl.: =yes yes yes[:. (international)
16. Teacher: [it gets to be more norm↑al yeah.
17. Loes: **>ja ja ja ja** **[ja<**
Transl.: >yes yes yes yes [yes<
18. Anton: → [can you say usual,
19. Teacher: usual,
20. you could [also say usual, ((looks at Anton))
21. Anton: **[ja**
Transl.: [yes
22. Teacher: [things get more usual,
23. Loes: [hm.
24. Koen: okay
25. Teacher: ye↑p.
26. (2.0)
27. Loes: okay,
28. Koen: ((continues discussion))

The first part of the extract shows the teacher stating that children living abroad is becoming more and more common (line 1). Loes asks what the word common means ('what's more common', line 8), which is a comprehension-oriented question. The teacher then proceeds to explain the meaning of the word (line 10–13). After Loes's acknowledgement, which closes the comprehension-oriented assistance sequence (line 17), Anton has the opportunity to take the floor for a follow-up question, namely whether 'usual' and 'common' are synonyms ('can you say usual', line 18). This wonderment question is formulated as a yes/no-question, which is different from the WH-questions attested until now. Like in this extract, such yes/no-questions in the data usually constitute follow-up questions. With his question and gaze direction, Anton recruits the teacher's assistance and it is indeed the teacher who responds (line 19–20). Anton accepts the answer ('ja', line 21) and, similar to the other wonderment questions, but contrary to the questions in the other two categories, the other learners also produce acknowledgement tokens ('hm', 'okay', lines 23, 24), after which the main activity is resumed in line 28 (Schegloff 2007).

Once again, the question is a request for extra information that does not need to be applied instantly. Hence, an answer to the question is not needed for the progressivity of the activity at hand as production-oriented and comprehension-oriented questions are. Whereas the wonderment question in [Extract 5](#) was made relevant to the interaction in a pre-sequence, the question in [Extract 6](#) was not, probably because it emerges as a follow-up question on the same topic.

Similar to production-oriented and comprehension-oriented questions, wonderment questions often take the form of WH-question. Wonderment questions are, however, different from the other two types of questions in important aspects. First of all, unlike production-oriented and comprehension-oriented questions, the answers to the wonderment questions are not indispensable for the progressivity of the activity. The questions do not appear to arise directly from problems in the interaction nor are they necessarily related to the topic at hand ([Extract 5](#)). Indeed, wonderment questions appear as follow-up questions (in 20 out of 25 instances) or are made relevant to the interaction in pre-sequences marking the question as somehow misplaced.

With regard to the participation framework, we find that wonderment questions are generally directed only towards the teacher and it is usually the teacher who provides the answer. However, this does not mean that the other learners do not join the interaction as well, not by providing the assistance (as we saw with comprehension-oriented questions), but by also producing acknowledgement tokens in response to the assistance. Hence, similar to the instances of production-oriented and comprehension-oriented questions, we see a pattern of multi-party interaction evolving in the handling of the learners' requests for assistance.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the ways in which requests for assistance are manifested in the third-age language classroom. Conversation analysis enabled us to study the details of these questions in interaction and to distinguish between different categories. The analysis identified the interactional positions of these requests for assistance as well as their formats and demonstrated how the assistance itself is treated and which participation frameworks are at work. We found the seniors in our data to mainly recruit assistance explicitly and most of these requests were wonderment questions.

Our analysis revealed that seniors request language-related assistance of three different types: production-oriented questions, comprehension-oriented questions, and wonderment questions. Although the questions in all categories are most often formatted as WH-questions, they differ in the ways the sequences are shaped: (a) what precedes the request for assistance, (b) the person who is recruited to provide the assistance, (c) the person who offers the assistance, and (d) the response to the provided assistance and the subsequent return to the main activity.

Firstly, regarding the preceding interaction of the request for assistance, production-oriented questions are mainly initiated by attempts at the trouble source word or pronunciation. Wonderment questions, on the other hand, are typically explicitly made relevant in the interaction, for example in pre-sequences or as follow-up questions, as they request more information instead of resolving trouble that prevents the activity at hand from successfully proceeding. Comprehension-oriented questions take an intermediate position as they are sometimes preceded by a pre-sequence.

The person who is recruited to provide the assistance also differs between categories; for production-oriented questions both the teacher and learners are recruited, whereas comprehension-oriented and wonderment questions typically merely recruit the teacher.

Regarding the person that offers the assistance, our analysis shows that in all three categories the teacher offers assistance. The difference, however, lies in what the other learners do or do not do. In comprehension-oriented questions, the other learners sometimes provide the requested assistance along with the teacher, whereas this is not the case for production-oriented and wonderment questions.

Finally, the three categories differ in the way the assistance is responded to. For production-oriented questions this is mainly done by immediate use in the interaction and thereby returning to the main activity. Answers to comprehension-oriented questions and wonderment questions are largely responded to using acknowledgement tokens (Schegloff 2007). Interestingly, the acknowledgement tokens in wonderment questions are provided not only by the student asking the question but also by the other learners. Combined with the fact that the other learners do not participate in providing this type of assistance, this may indicate that the wonderment questions indeed enquire about information outside of the curriculum (cf. Jakonen and Morton 2015) that provides the other learners with new information as well.

5.1. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Even though not all participants asked the same number of questions, our data and analysis give rise to the notion that seniors show ownership and agency over their learning process. Indeed, the learner initiatives in our data all launched a sequence in which knowledge and understanding were sought and constructed (cf. Waring 2011). Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) stated that seniors ‘actively engage in constructing terms and conditions of their own learning’ (p. 147) such as discovering their knowledge gaps, which are unpredictable and even vary across learners within a classroom (Jakonen and Morton 2015). Our seniors exert agency by discovering their knowledge gaps and they appear to construe their own learning goals that do not necessarily overlap with the teacher’s agenda (Jakonen and Morton 2015). For wonderment

questions, this holds true even more as the learnables identified by seniors here do not directly relate to successfully being able to complete a task. This is an interesting finding as the wonderment questions from the literature were found in content (science) classes (Chin and Brown 2002; Scardamalia and Bereiter 1992) whereas most language classes are often skill-based. Hence our seniors' investment and agency is reflected in their interest in knowledge about the language rather than learning to use it.

Our seniors' agency is in line with results found in a questionnaire study on seniors' language learning needs (van der Ploeg, Richter, Lowie & Keijzer, submitted) reporting that seniors have clear motivations as to why they want to learn new languages and how such a course should take shape. Moreover, seniors do not only have these beliefs but also explicitly communicate them. Regarding the topics of the requests for assistance, most were related to vocabulary (69%) and, to a lesser degree, pronunciation (21%) and grammar (11%). This finding ties in with Buckwalter (2001) and Shonerd (1994), who found young adults' questions to be mainly related to the lexicon. Our finding might be explained by the fact that the English course was mainly focused on form (FoF; Long 1991) where attention is paid to linguistic elements of the L2, but the main emphasis is on meaning and communication.

It is important to note that the third-age language classroom in our study differs in important respects from the typical language classrooms: (a) the learners were seniors who participated in the course voluntarily, (b) the course did not result in formal assessment, (c) the age difference between learners and teacher was substantial: learners were about 40 years older than the teachers, and (d) the groups were small. Especially regarding small groups, it is reasonable to assume that larger language learning groups will lead to seniors – and students more generally – asking fewer questions. Studies have, for example, found that younger learners do ask more questions in one-on-one situations (Koole and Berenst 2008). Additionally, it needs to be noted Loes and Koen were partners which may have modulated the interaction to some extent. However, in our sample, half of the seniors signing up did so with their partner, which may indicate that the composition of our participant groups was actually not unusual. Furthermore, the third-age is a term used to refer to seniors but seniors are not necessarily a homogenous group as their age-span is substantial (65+). Finally, a possible contributing factor to the large number of questions is the fact that the teacher and learners had a similar language background (German and Dutch) which meant they could more easily ask about translations.

For future studies, we suggest a comparison between younger and older learners. An interesting area of investigation will be whether the interaction turning into a multi-party interaction is also commonly observed in younger groups of learners. Additionally, the question arises whether younger learners request the same amount of explicit assistance in the classroom, especially when attending language courses in smaller groups. Most importantly, however, as our data show a skew to wonderment questions, the question arises whether younger language learners also ask wonderment questions, since non-CA studies appear to label them as rare in science classrooms (Buckwalter 2001; Chin and Brown 2002; Dillon 1988). Additionally, in *Extract 6*, we witnessed Anton wondering whether usual and common are synonyms. He understands the meaning of both words and has made a connection between them. It appears as if he is thinking beyond the interaction at hand by drawing parallels between the interaction and his already existing vocabulary. Therefore,

future work could investigate if wonderment questions might show a different cognitive process than the other two types of questions. It might be the case that wonderment questions go beyond production or comprehension, as learners form cognitive associations by connecting different pieces of knowledge leading to the wonderment question. Wonderment questions might have the potential to stimulate higher-level cognitive talk (Chin and Brown 2002).

6. Conclusion

Our conversation analytic study shows that wonderment questions are the most frequently asked type of request for assistance by the senior learners in our data. Furthermore, the seniors often turn two-party interaction into multi-party interaction by engaging (each other) in these request sequences. These findings suggest seniors to clearly have ownership and agency over their learning process by inserting own agendas (cf. Jakonen and Morton 2015). This has important implications for practice; teachers can use this ownership to allow or even stimulate seniors to pose (wonderment) questions and thereby enhance their language learning process. As we explore the new field of third-age language learning, this study has laid the foundations for much-needed insights into the interactional processes at work in the third-age language classroom.

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