

Dialogue-enabling questions in academic writing tutorials

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One-to-one academic writing tutorials are now being offered at many universities. They are seen as facilitative for student learning when conducted in a dialogic style. Questions have been shown to play a crucial role in dialogic teaching, and the type of questions asked by the teacher determines the student's opportunity to make substantive contributions to the dialogue. Tutor handbooks tend to recommend the use of open-ended questions and discourage yes/no (polar) questions.

The research presented in this paper examined the frequency, functions and types of tutor questions in ten tutorials involving six tutors and eight students. The objectives were to evaluate the advice on questions in tutor handbooks and offer evidence-based information for tutor training.

The tutorials were ranked according to the frequency of topic-related questions. The results show that in half of the tutorials, fewer than 20% of the questions were concerned with the student's topic or task, and that in some, very few questions were asked, indicating a monologic teaching style. In the more dialogic tutorials, it was apparent that, contrary to the advice in tutor handbooks, the majority of questions were polar and that this type of question was more successful in leading to substantive student responses than open-ended questions.

Whilst questions in dialogic teaching have been widely investigated in classroom settings, this study is the first to examine dialogue-enabling questions in the rather different context of one-to-one academic writing tutorials.

Key words: Academic writing tutorials, dialogue-enabling questions, dialogic teaching.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, an increasing number of universities in the UK have begun to offer one-to-one academic writing tutorials to their students, a provision that has existed in writing centres at universities in the USA since the 1960s and has also been offered in Australian universities since the 1980s. The introduction of tutorials in UK universities seems to be driven by the objective to enhance student satisfaction scores which are published annually in the National Student Survey. The delivery mode varies across universities, which have to make the cost-related choice whether tutorials are provided by learning advisors, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) specialists or, in a more discipline-specific approach, by graduate students from roughly the same field of study. The tutorials are usually available to any student in need as a pre-booking or drop-in service, and

as this service can potentially attract large numbers of students, it is a resource-intensive and costly support measure.

Undeniably, one-to-one tutorials have the potential to be a highly effective way of academic writing instruction, offering students individualized and targeted help with their writing assignments. However, teaching approaches in tutorials have been found to be characterized by tutor dominance and prescriptivism, as tutors tend to take up far more speaking time than tutees, issue frequent directives (Thonus, 1999; Williams, 2005; Wingate, 2019), and do not give students sufficient opportunity to develop their own ideas (Ewert, 2009). Tutor-dominated and prescriptive teaching approaches prevent students from learning to solve problems independently and from becoming more self-regulated and less reliant on advice. There is consensus that to counter these concerns, tutorials should be conducted in a dialogic style, with tutors initiating and expanding exploratory dialogue that enhances students' understanding of their writing task (e.g. Ewert, 2009; Haneda, 2004). Questions have been shown to play a crucial role in dialogic teaching (Nystrand, 1997; Nassaji & Wells, 2000), and as will be discussed later, the type of question asked by the teacher can determine whether the dialogue expands beyond a single exchange and whether students are given the opportunity to make a substantive contribution to the dialogue. The questions that unfold and expand dialogue and lead to substantive student responses are henceforth called "dialogue-enabling".

Whilst the use of questions has been extensively studied in classroom discourse, there has been limited research in higher education contexts. Although there exists a substantial number of studies into one-to-one tutorials, most of them have focused on directives rather than questions (e.g. Reinhardt, 2010; Park, 2014; Wingate & Ogiermann, 2019), and only a few, all concerned with second language learners (Weissberg, 2006; Haneda, 2004; Koshik, 2000), have paid attention to, among other strategies, tutors' use of questions. Addressing this research gap, we examined the frequency and types of tutor questions in ten academic writing tutorials provided by five graduate students, with the objective to identify which types of questions resulted in extended dialogues. In this small-scale study, we provide some examples of tutors' skillful questioning strategies, examples which can be useful for tutor training. Before we present our study, we discuss principles of dialogic teaching, the types of questions that facilitate this approach, as well as the advice on questions provided in tutor handbooks.

2. Scaffolding and dialogic teaching

It is widely recognised that tutorials should be conducted in a collaborative manner in which tutor and tutee interact in the co-construction of knowledge, and tutors encourage students to find their own answers, instead of giving directives (Ewert, 2009; Thonus, 1999; Williams, 2005). This approach is also recommended in tutor guidebooks (e.g. Gillespie & Lerner, 2004) which tend to promote the use of open-ended questions to enable conversations with tutees. The proposal for collaborative tutor-student interaction is underpinned by the concepts of scaffolding and dialogic teaching. The concept of scaffolding originates in socio-cultural theory and describes the assistance given in an interaction by the more expert participant to the novice participant to develop the novice's skills or knowledge (Bruner, 1990). Scaffolding provides affective and cognitive support, as the expert "not only helps motivate the learner by providing just enough support to enable him or her to accomplish the goal, but also provides support in the form of modeling, highlighting the critical features of the task, and providing hints and questions that might help the learner to reflect" (Puntambeker & Hübscher, 2005, p. 2). As Weissberg (2006) explains, the specific techniques used by tutors to create scaffolded dialogue include asking questions that prompt students to explain, discuss and develop further their ideas. Scaffolding, which is an essential element of dialogic teaching, helps students to find solutions for their problems, actively construct knowledge, and develop the ability to take responsibility for their learning.

Dialogic teaching is based on Bakhtin's (1986) understanding of human language as dialogic and his distinction between monologic and dialogic discourse, which he also calls authoritative versus internally persuasive discourse. In relation to teaching, the former aims to impose meanings and transmit knowledge, with the teacher "firmly in control of the goals of the talk" (Lyle, 2008, p. 225). The latter aims at the construction of knowledge "with which the individual has dialogically engaged, that is, questioning, exploring, connecting, in order to develop a newer way to mean" (Lillis, 2001, pp. 48-49). Monologic and dialogic discourse can be clearly distinguished by the structure of the interaction and the type of questions asked by the teacher. Monologic discourse is typically manifested in the widespread IRE (Initiation/Response/Evaluation) structure of teacher-student interaction, in which the teacher tests students' knowledge of certain information by asking a "known-information question" (Mehan, 1979) for which the answer is predictable, and then sanctions the student answer by an evaluative feedback comment, which closes the dialogue and precludes further student contributions. An example of an IRE sequence would be:

T: In which state is San Francisco?	<i>Initiate</i>
S: California.	<i>Response</i>
T: Correct.	<i>Evaluation</i>

By contrast, dialogic teaching is manifested in interactions in which the teacher asks authentic questions (the nature of which is discussed in detail in the first paragraph of Section 3) and takes up student answers to develop a dialogue (Nystrand, 1997).

Although dialogic teaching has been widely promoted in secondary education in the USA and in the UK, it has "not materialized in practice", as Lyle (2008, p. 226) points out. As previous studies suggest (Thonus, 1999; Williams, 2005; Wingate, 2019), dialogic teaching is also not prevalent in academic writing tutorials. The use of questions has been studied in both secondary and tertiary classrooms (Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Chang, 2012); however, there is no research examining the role of different question types in creating dialogue in one-to-one tutorials. Such evidence is important so that appropriate question techniques can be addressed in tutor training courses and guidebooks. In the next section, we will take a closer look at the types of questions that help to extend teacher-student exchanges into a dialogue.

3. Dialogue-enabling questions

Wells (1996) explored how the conventional triadic IRE exchange can be extended into a longer "sequence", that is, a dialogue, by the teacher's choice of the initiating question and of the third move, which he renamed "follow-up". The type of the question in the initiating move determines whether a dialogue can unfold. If the question puts the teacher in the role of the "primary knower", that is, is a known-information question, it restricts students to delivering an expected response. By contrast, if the teacher chooses a "negotiatory information" question, that is, is inviting "students' opinions, explanations and conjectures" (Nassaji & Wells, 2000, p. 385), student answers are likely to be more substantive and, if followed up by a further question or prompt, can lead to "an open-ended discussion between teacher and students together" (Nassaji & Wells, 2000, p. 385). For this type of question, called "authentic" by Nystrand (1997), the teacher does not know the answer in advance. Of equal importance as the initiating question is the follow-up move. As Wells (1996, p. 94) explains, dialogue is facilitated "through the strategic use that the teacher makes of opportunities to follow up on students' contributions", called "high-level evaluation" by Nystrand (1997, p. 90). For instance, if the teacher follows up the student response with another negotiatory information question or a request for clarification, it is likely that another substantive student response is triggered, thus expanding the initial IRF exchange into a sequence. However, neither Nassaji and Wells nor Nystrand explain which grammatical form of questions, that is, open-ended or polar, is more capable of initiating and extending dialogue.

So far, the information on dialogue-enabling questions comes from classroom studies where the teacher is in charge of managing a large group of students, ensuring their participation in the

discussion and monitoring their learning, the latter involving the frequent use of known-information questions in IRE exchanges. One-to-one tutorials are fundamentally different in that tutor and student operate at a more egalitarian level, and in relation to the topic or subject, the student is more likely the primary knower rather than the tutor. This might suggest that dialogue-enabling questions are prevalent in tutorials, as tutors need to elicit information from students. As there is little research evidence on the use of questions in tutorials, we look next at the advice given in tutor handbooks.

4. Advice on dialogic teaching and questions in tutor handbooks

The available tutor handbooks are authored by writing conference tutors in the US and practically oriented. They tend to not explicitly mention the term “dialogic teaching” but pay ample attention to questions and their role in establishing a conversation between tutor and tutee. For instance, Gillespie and Learner (2004, p. 37) ask, “What does the ideal session ... look like?” and answer this question by stating, “[I]t would look like two peers having a *conversation* about writing, where each is equally likely to ask a question, move the conversation forward or point out his or her confusion as a reader” (emphasis in original). In line with Nassaji and Wells’s (2000) notion of negotiatory information questions, the handbooks emphasise the importance of both open-ended and authentic tutor questions. Among the different types of expertise required by a tutor, Gillespie and Lerner (2004, p. 26) list, “knowing how to ask questions that are open-ended (not questions that can be answered with a yes or no)”. In the same vein, McAndrew and Reigstad (2001, p. 26) explain which types of questions facilitate topic-focused conversation: “The tutor encourages the writer, often with open-ended and probe-and prompt-questions, to engage in off-the paper, exploratory talk and to expand upon undeveloped themes in the paper”. Considering what the “right and wrong ways of asking questions” are, Gillespie and Lerner (2004, p. 37) warn of questions that lead to “a kind of inquisition”. Instead, tutors should ask questions only if they really want to know the answer. Such questions, according to the authors, help address “higher-order concerns” (p. 35) involved in text composition.

The tutor handbooks typically list examples of questions appropriate to the different stages of tutorials. For the opening stage of tutorials, for instance, questions should be designed to “break the ice” (Gillespie and Lerner, 2004), and “to establish a comfortable acquaintance and to gather information and assess the writer’s needs” (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2010, p. 13). These initial questions should, according to Bruce (2004, p. 34), be followed “by more specific questions about the student’s piece of writing”. In line with the other tutor handbooks, Bruce also recommends open-ended questions as they “will help you to learn more about the writer and the draft so far”. For this middle stage of the tutorial, McAndrew and Reigstad (2001, pp. 42-64) provide an extensive list of questions addressing higher-order concerns, relating to “thesis and focus, development, structure and organization, and voice” (p. 42). Typical questions recommended for this stage are, “What’s the central issue of your piece?” (McAndrew & Reigstad 2001, p. 43) or “What is your central point or main argument?” (Gillespie & Lerner 2004, p. 29).

The tutor guidelines developed internally by the university where this study was conducted devote relatively little attention to questions but stress the importance of dialogue. The teaching approach recommended in the guidelines indirectly expresses the concept of scaffolding through the “push-and pull” metaphor and an associated figure (Appendix 1), which is widely used in business coaching. The “push” method, in which the teacher predominantly gives advice, leads to “solving someone’s problems for them”, whilst the “pull” method aims at “helping someone solve their own problems”. On the continuum of five tutor activities, those which are closest to “pull” are “Asking questions” (without further elaboration on the type of questions) and “Listening to understand”.

As can be seen, tutor handbooks encourage “conversation” or dialogue that facilitate attention to higher-order issues as well as students’ exploration of the topic and independent problem solving.

For the development of dialogue, they emphasise the importance of, preferably open-ended, questions for which they provide lists of examples. This type of guidance is problematic on two accounts. First, in the absence of a theory-based justification for scaffolding and dialogic teaching, it is difficult for tutors to understand why they should not just offer advice and instructions, which is often what students expect (Clark, 2001). The second problem, which is addressed in this article, is that questions are presented as decontextualised entities, not as part of dialogues. Thus, the tutor handbooks fail to explain that a dialogue usually consists of an initial and a series of follow-up moves and that these need to be linked to student contributions, something that requires careful listening on the part of the tutor.

What is particularly problematic is the categorical promotion of open-ended questions in most tutor handbooks. While these might be useful for initiating a dialogue, they seem unsuitable for follow-up moves that serve the function of scaffolding the student's understanding, focusing their attention on specific aspects, and thus engaging them in deeper engagement with the topic. Therefore, the "pick-and choose" lists of mainly open-ended questions offered in the tutor handbooks are of doubtful value, as they fail to present follow-up questions capable of extending and sustaining dialogue.

In this study, which was conducted with peer tutors (i.e. graduate students with yet relatively limited teaching experience), we were interested in the extent to which they use questions and what functions these perform. We were also interested in the way in which questions lead to substantive student responses, as such responses are not only essential in the unfolding dialogue but also indicative of the student developing new ideas or understandings. Given the fact that Nassaji and Wells (2000) and Nystrand (1997) propose "negotiatory information" or "authentic" questions for dialogic teaching, and that tutor handbooks recommend open-ended questions, we also aimed to find out which types of questions used by the tutors elicited substantive student responses. To achieve these goals, the following research questions were asked:

1. What is the frequency of questions asked in the tutorials and what are the functions of these questions?
2. How do questions lead to substantive student responses?
3. Which types of questions lead to substantive student responses and are therefore dialogue-enabling?

5. Methods

This small-scale study, which was carried out in a university in the UK, follows a previous one concerned with dialogic teaching approaches in tutorials (Wingate, 2019). Five graduate students who worked as tutors in the university's academic writing advice service consented to participate in the larger study. Three of the tutors, Emma, Hannah and Lucy, came from the Social Sciences, and two, Daisy and Steve, from Humanities.¹ All five tutors had participated in a two-day training workshop which included discussions of the push-pull model and the importance of dialogue. The eight tutees who agreed to participate all consulted a tutor from the same field, as advised by the relevant website. Two of the eight tutees attended two tutorials, bringing the total number of observed tutorials to ten. In four tutorials, the tutees had brought a draft to receive feedback; in the remaining six tutorials, the tutees had come to discuss an assignment yet to be written. The tutorials lasted from 24.41 to 60.05 minutes, with an average length of 47 minutes. The ten sessions were audio recorded and the recordings were transcribed. For some of the tutorials (1, 2, 3, 6, 7, see Table 1), the tutees provided feedback through comments within the tutorials or via a feedback section on the tutorial system's website to which we had access, or both.

¹ For confidentiality, the names of tutors and students are pseudonyms.

In the previous study, the tutors were ranked according to the extent of dialogic interaction that occurred in their tutorials. The ranking was based on quantitative measures such as tutor word count and mean student response length (for more details, see Wingate, 2019). As quantitative measures have limitations in determining dialogicity, this study goes further by investigating the tutors' use of questions, as these are regarded as central to dialogic teaching. We identified all questions asked by the tutors and examined their functions and forms. Based on this analysis, a new rank list was created, in which the percentage of "Topic engagement" questions (see an explanation below) was the leading measure. It was expected that the ranking of this study would be similar to that of the larger study, as the frequency and type of questions asked are likely to reflect the level of dialogicity in the tutorials.

To answer research question 1, all questions were categorized according to functional criteria. The two main functional categories are "Practicalities" and "Topic engagement". "Practicalities" comprises two subcategories: (1) "Organisational" are questions concerned with the tutee's (henceforth referred to as 'student') background, reasons for attending the tutorial, and assignment details (e.g. "What is the word count?"); (2) "Procedural" are questions eliciting the student's confirmation or agreement and checking comprehension (e.g. "Does this make sense?"). "Topic engagement" questions (TEQs) focus on the task or topic at hand and have the potential of engaging the student in a topic-related dialogue.

In relation to research question 2, we only included TEQs in the analysis as we were interested in dialogue that facilitated students' exploration and understanding of the topic. We defined substantive student response (SSR) as two or more utterances containing an explanation, description or idea which was topic-focused and responsive to the tutor question. This means that even when an extended answer was prompted by a tutor question, if that answer digressed from the question and contained unrelated information, it was not counted as an SSR. We first calculated the percentage of TEQs leading to substantive student responses (see column 9 in Table 1: SSR %). The result showed that in most tutorials, fewer than 50% of all TEQs led to an SSR, with a mean value of 48.6%, and made it clear that questions and responses cannot be analysed in individual exchanges and that a single TEQ rarely leads to an SSR. Responses are typically embedded in a sequence, that is a series of exchanges related to the same topic (Wells, 1996), in which the tutor facilitates, through an initial and as series of follow-up questions, the development from initial non-substantive student utterances to an SSR. We therefore identified all sequences containing SSRs across the tutorials and explored the pattern in which initial and follow-up questions led to substantive student responses.

To investigate which type of questions lead to SSRs, we analysed the questions according to their grammatical form. Within linguistics, the identification and categorisation of questions has been approached based on syntactic, lexical, prosodic and pragmatic criteria. The framework that appeared most useful for the purposes of our study is that proposed by Quirk et al. (1972), who classified questions according to the type of answers they elicit. The authors distinguish between three main categories of questions: yes / no questions, also referred to as polar questions (Stivers & Enfield, 2010), which elicit a dis/confirmation; alternative questions, which restrict the answer to two possibilities; and wh-questions, which can elicit answers of different lengths and are also called open-ended questions. Similar syntactic distinctions were also used by Haneda (2004) to evaluate the potential of questions to elicit certain types of answers. A common assumption, as evidenced in the tutor handbooks, is that only open-ended questions can lead to dialogue, as polar and alternative questions restrict student answers to one option. In addition to identifying the grammatical form of all questions leading to SSRs, we also considered the "authenticity" of the questions (i.e. whether they target known or unknown information).

6. Discussion of findings

6.1. Frequency and functions of questions asked in the tutorials

As can be seen in Table 1, the tutorials were ranked from the one with the highest percentage of “topic engagement” questions (TEQs) (1. Daisy- Hanad: 73%) to the one with the lowest percentage (10. Emma – Sam: 12.5%), which also had the lowest frequency of questions per minute (see column 3). In this ranking, the percentage of TEQs broadly corresponds to the number of substantive student responses (SSRs), which is particularly obvious in the three lowest ranked tutorials where the percentage of TEQs was 12.5 and there were no SSRs. As can be seen in columns 7 (TEQ %) and 9 (SSR %), the number of SSRs is in all but two cases less than half the number of TEQs. This phenomenon will be explained in the next section, where we show *how* questions lead to SSRs, that is, that it often takes a series of questions to elicit them. As to the overall frequency of questions, in view of the crucial role of questions in the development of dialogue, it is not surprising that the tutorials which had been identified as most dialogic in the previous study (tutorials 1 and 2) had the highest overall frequency of questions per minute (0.96; 1.1) and that those which had been identified as the most monologic ones (tutorials 9 and 10) had the lowest (0.3; 0.1).

Table 1. Tutor questions in the ten tutorials.

Tutorials (Tutor/ student/mins)	No/ Qu ^a	Freq/ Mins ^b	Practicalities		% ^d	Topic engage- ment (TEQ) ^e	TEQ % ^f	SSR ^g	SSR % ^h
			Org	Pro- ced ^c					
1. Daisy-Hanad 24.41	26	1.1	6	1	27	19	73	9	47.4
2. Daisy-Tessa 47.02	45	0.96	19	1	44.4	22	55.6	15	68
3. Hannah-Hanad 58.53	26	0.5	10	2	46.2	14	53.8	6	40
4. Steve-Yasuf 46.17	32	0.7	14	1	46.9	17	53.1	5	29.4
5. Hannah-Denise 46.36	37	0.8	18	1	51.4	18	48.6	8	44.4
6. Lucy-Edith 46.54	16	0.3	12	1	81.3	3	18.8	2	66.7
7. Lucy-Mei Li 45.34	27	0.6	19	3	81.5	5	18.5	2	40
8. Emma-Mika (1) 48.22	24	0.5	21	0	87.5	3	12.5	0	0
9. Emma-Mika (2) 54.38	16	0.3	5	9	87.5	2	12.5	0	0
10. Emma-Sam 60.05	8	0.1	7	0	87.5	1	12.5	0	0

a. No/Qu: Overall number of questions asked by tutor

b. Freq/Mins: Frequency of questions measured by number of questions divided by length of tutorial

c. Practicalities: Org: Organisation of tutorial, clarification of topic/question; Proced: Procedural: eliciting student’s confirmation, agreement

d. Percentage of Practicalities questions

e. Topic engagement: Questions focused on the assignment topic/task

f. TEQ %: Percentage of topic engagement questions

g. SSR: Substantive student response (only topic-related responses were counted)

h. SSR %: Percentage of topic engagement questions that led to SSR

In relation to the functions of tutor questions (research question 1), it is striking that in half of the tutorials (6–10) more than 80% of all tutor questions were concerned with practicalities. As can be seen in column 7 of Table 1, TEQs were fewer than 50% of all questions in six of the ten

tutorials, with one, tutorial 5, coming close with 48.6%, whilst five (tutorials 6–10) have a percentage of under 20%. In these tutorials, tutor questions were mostly concerned with “organisational” issues, as column 4 shows. We found a remarkable difference in the distribution of “practicalities” questions between the tutorials with high percentages of TEQs (1–5) and the those with low percentages (6–10). In tutorials 1–5, the “practicalities” questions appear in the beginning and closing stages. In the beginning stage, organisational questions typically elicited the student’s background and assignment requirements, whilst the closing stage typically involved procedural questions such as the evaluation of the tutorial or comprehension checks. In tutorials 1–5, these two stages are considerably shorter than the middle or core stage in which the student’s topic was discussed. By contrast, in the three tutorials with the lowest percentage of TEQs (8–10) the questions remained at the practicalities level throughout. These tutorials lacked the middle part that in tutorials 1–5 consisted of extended topic-focused sequences. To provide examples, in tutorial 9, most of the tutor’s (Emma’s) questions were implicit corrections and critiques of linguistic errors in the student’s text, whilst tutorial 10 was entirely monologic, as Emma lectured the student on what to write in his assignment without ever eliciting his ideas.

6.2. How questions lead to substantive student responses

As already mentioned, an SSR is in the majority of cases not the result of a single TEQ but that of a series of follow-up questions that are either required for the clarification of the initial question, or, more often, posed by the tutor to probe more deeply into the topic, thus turning the initial exchange into a sequence. Sequences in which questions elicit SSRs are representative of dialogic teaching, as shown by Nassaji and Wells (2000) in the context of classroom dialogues. To provide an example, we present the first exchanges of the third sequence in tutorial 2. In this tutorial, Daisy, a PhD student in English Literature, helps Tessa, a student of International Conflict Studies, plan her MA dissertation on counter-terrorism policies in Germany. The sequence was preceded by Tessa explaining possible categories of groups of people who are a threat to national security, a categorization with which she struggled. Tessa’s explanation was summarized by Daisy’s statement, “So my understanding is a lot of these are sort of blurred territories, blurred in terms of policy”. This summary represents a “high-level evaluation” (Nystrand, 1997) of Tessa’s contribution and at the same time the starting point for Sequence 3. The extract, in which the questions are underlined, shows the first six turns of Sequence 3 which contains a total of 32 turns.

Extract 1, from Tutorial 2, Sequence 3 (consisting of turns 75–107)

75. D: I mean do policies themselves distinguish between these different sorts of foreign fighters?
76. T: Uhm
77. D: or do they kind of lump them into similar groups, so is that what you are trying to sort of tease apart? (.3)² Is that a hard question? (laugh)
78. T: Right, no it’s a very good question because that is basically where I am at (laugh)
79. D: oh ok
80. uhm so the thing is I uhm in my proposal I divided it into these three groups and I kind of feel like I have to stick to it. I uhm I saw my professor and uhm she told me that anything that is reasonable uhm in terms of for the analysis uhm I should do it or not and uhm I might include the last two groups uhm into one and say generally radicalisation and then terrorism uhm and then within the group of terrorism I will distinguish more because there is some policies that uhm are applicable to both groups but then especially when you get the justification and some policies have been mainly uhm enacted to focus on this one group.

² The figure indicates the length of a pause, i.e. 3 seconds in this case.

The first exchange of this sequence is initiated by Daisy with a polar question about related policies (the topic of this sequence), a question that probes Tessa to explore further the categories about which she is uncertain. Tessa responds with an expression of hesitation, which Daisy follows up by asking an alternative and two further polar questions. The first repeats the initial question by stating the alternative, whilst the second directly names Tessa's problem with the categorization. When Tessa does not answer immediately, Daisy asks another polar question, "Is this a hard question?" Accompanied by laughter, this procedural question is likely to be an attempt to soften the problem and encourage the student. As can be seen in Tessa's response in turn 78, Daisy has correctly identified her difficulty in distinguishing the groups which are a threat to national security and the policies related to them. In the SSR in turn 80, Tessa begins to consider a new categorization, supported by frequent backchannelling from Daisy. For space reasons, the larger second part of this sequence (turns 81–107) cannot be shown; however, it continues in the same dialogic pattern in which Daisy elicits substantive responses mainly with polar questions. For instance, the last turn (80) in Extract 1 is followed up by Daisy with another polar question, which triggers Tessa's extended discussion of the various groups and associated policies. The overall sequence contains ten tutor questions, eight of which are polar and two alternative, and six SSRs, which show that Tessa arrives at a clearer understanding of the different types of terrorism and policies, as well as a plan where to present them in her dissertation.

Sequence 3 of Daisy's tutorial with Tessa, from which Extract 1 was taken, exemplifies how an initiating and several follow-up questions serve to unfold a dialogue, prompt the student to engage with the problem or task, and trigger substantive student responses, which, as in Tessa's case, signal deeper understanding and learning. To find further evidence for this pattern of questioning, we identified all sequences containing SSRs across the tutorials. These are presented in Appendix 2, which shows only tutorials 1–7, as no SSRs occurred in tutorials 8–10. Table 2 shows, as an example, tutorial 2 as a highly dialogic one and tutorial 6 in which the tutor took a more monologic approach. The table presents in the second column the number of sequences containing TEQs, and in the third column the number of turns (first number), topic engagement questions (first number after colon) and substantive student responses (number after hyphen). As Table 2 shows, Daisy is skilful in developing dialogue and eliciting substantive student answers. The tutorial with Tessa contains four sequences, two of which extend over 32 and 37 turns respectively. The one with 32 turns contains 10 topic engagement questions and 7 substantive student responses. As can be seen later in Table 3, Daisy uses the highest number of polar questions, which follow up on student contributions and probe further, thus functioning as scaffolding devices. By contrast, in Lucy's tutorial with Edith, there are only two sequences with a limited number of turns and student responses. This reflects Lucy's tendency not to follow up on student contributions, thus preventing the development of dialogue.

Table 2. Sequences with TEQs and SSRs in tutorials 2 and 6.

Tutorial	No/Seq ^a		No/Turns ^b		
2. Daisy-Tessa	4	9:2-1	12:3-2	32:10-7	37:7-5
6. Lucy-Edith	2		3:1-1		5:1-1

a. No/Seq: Number of sequences that contain TEQs (topic engagement questions)

b. No/Turns: First number: turns; second number (after colon): TEQs; third number (after hyphen): SSRs (substantive student responses)

The difference between tutorial 2 and 6 is representative for the divide between tutorials 1–5 and 6–10 mentioned earlier. As can be seen in Appendix 2, tutorials 6–10 have a small number of sequences containing SSRs or even none, and where there are sequences, these are considerably shorter than those in tutorials 1–5.

6.3. Types of questions leading to substantive student responses

To address research question 3, we first analysed the frequency of open, polar and alternative questions, and the results are shown in Table 3. All TEQs were included in the analysis and their frequency is shown in column 2, whilst the distribution of question types is presented in columns 3–5.

Table 3. Types of TEQs occurring in sequences.

Tutorial	TEQs	Open	Polar	Alternative
Daisy-Hanad	19	6	12	1
Daisy-Tessa	25	7	12	6
Hannah-Hanad	14	7	7	
Steve-Yasuf	17	7	10	
Hannah-Denise	18	8	9	1
Lucy-Edith	3	3		
Lucy-Mei Li	5	2	3	
Emma-Mika 1	3		3	
Emma-Mika 2	2		2	
Emma-Sam	1		1	

Given that tutor handbooks recommend the use of open questions and discourage questions “that can be answered with a yes or no” (Gillespie & Lerner, 2000, p. 26; McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001), it is surprising that in all but two tutorials, more polar than open questions were asked. In the most dialogic tutorials 1 and 2 in particular, polar questions and alternative questions considerably outnumber open questions, and in tutorial 2, only 28 percent of all TEQs were open-ended. To understand why, in contrast to the recommendations in tutor handbooks, the high number of polar questions did obviously not impede the development of dialogue, we analysed the authenticity³ of all open and polar questions in tutorials 1–7. In the discussion of the findings from this analysis, we refer mainly to tutorials 1 and 2 as they contain the highest number of polar questions. Also, for both tutorials, the students provided highly positive feedback via comments during the tutorial and on the website, indicating that the tutorial enhanced their understanding of the topic and task.

The analysis showed that almost all open questions were authentic as the tutor did not know the answer, as well as concerned with the tutee’s stance on the essay question or the argument they wanted to develop, for instance:

“So, what’s your opinion on the question?” (Hannah – Denise, turn 35), or

“... how would you go about that in a couple of sentences?” (Lucy – Mei Li, turn 125).

This type of broad open question that requires tutees to summarize complex ideas works to a certain extent with those who have already invested time and effort into planning their assignment. But even when these broad open questions are posed to well-prepared students, their responses tend to be broad-brush or one-sided. They are therefore typically followed up by a series of polar questions which prompt the student to expand on their statements or consider other aspects of the topic. In these cases, it is common that a fruitful exploratory dialogue unfolds. By contrast, initial

³ As defined in the first paragraph of Section 3.

open questions of this type are unsuccessful with students who have not sufficiently engaged with the assignment task or do not fully understand it. An example is Hanad, an undergraduate student who consulted Daisy on the planning of an essay in English Literature with the title: “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a very bad novel, of self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality (James Baldwin). Discuss.*” (tutorial 1). Hanad had read secondary literature about the author, the novel and James Baldwin and talked extensively about this background information. However, as can be seen in Extract 2, when Daisy uses an open question to focus Hanad on the essay content, Hanad vaguely refers to two aspects she wants to include, literary impact and religion, and then abandons the topic with an unrelated comment.

Extract 2, from Tutorial 1, Sequence 2 (consisting of turns 35–42)

35. D: so maybe it’s a good idea to first to know what you think the argument and the structure might be and then we can think about how your reading can match that (.6)
36. S: ok so can you say that again?
37. D: so I was thinking how will your argument flow or what will the structure be
38. S: yeah
39. D: and then we can look how your reading can match that
40. S: ok so uhm I was going to look at anything to do with literature so like literary impact even looking at the literary time when James Baldwin was publishing it
41. D: yeah that’s a good point
42. S: and then religion (.9). Did you do English literature?

Throughout the tutorial, Daisy tries, with limited success, to focus Hanad on the essay title and the reasons for Baldwin’s critique of the novel. As in Sequence 2, her use of open questions in the other sequences never leads to more than vague or unrelated responses, and Daisy therefore turns to the strategic use of polar questions, an example of which is shown in Extract 3. This sequence begins with turn 92, in which Daisy asks the open question “...so what’s what sort of things have you thought about politics?” Hanad responds with several vague comments, such as the one in turn 97:

Extract 3, from Tutorial 1, Sequence 5, Daisy- Hanad (turns 92 – 114)

97. S: (.4) I think its impact politically was huge ‘cause it’s really I know she goes on to meet Abraham Lincoln in a couple of years, there was
98. D: in fact on the strength of the book?
99. S: on the strength of the book, yeah
100. D: so is it immediately very popular?
101. S: it was I know it sold a lot within its first year of release, it was published in London, three times in Welsh and it has been translated like into numerous different languages, so it had this big Western sort of (.2) reaction to it uhm
102. D: and is it something that black people themselves read?
103. S: uhm
104. D: in America or
105. S: sorry say that again?
106. D: is it something that black people were reading in America? Or was it sort of more a white privileged Western audience?
107. S: it was definitely a white audience, privileged white audiences
108. D: yeah, I would mention that definitely in the reception of the book.

Unlike in the tutorial with Tessa, the questions Daisy directs at Hanad in this sequence are known-information questions. With the one alternative and six polar questions in this sequence, Daisy

scaffolds Hanad's understanding of why Baldwin criticized the novel, written by a white woman for a white audience, as being "of self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality". There are two further sequences in which Daisy poses polar questions to direct Hanad's attention to the essay question and scaffold her understanding of Baldwin's quotation, for instance by a series of questions about the representation of black people in the novel.

The example of tutorial 1 shows that tutor handbooks are unjustified in their categorical discouragement of polar questions. In this context, there was no other way of helping the student to understand and address the essay title than by suggesting specific answers through polar questions. Daisy, as an English Literature expert was "primary knower" for the questions she asked, and it might be argued that she imposed her knowledge on Hanad. However, having recognised what level of guidance Hanad needed, Daisy still asked questions rather than issuing explanations, thus maintaining the dialogic nature of the tutorial and giving Hanad the feeling that knowledge was co-constructed.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Daisy also used polar questions frequently in her tutorial with Tessa, although the context of this tutorial is remarkably different. Unlike Hanad, Tessa had already given the outline and content of her dissertation much thought and was also, unlike Hanad, "primary knower" for most questions posed by Daisy. What makes the use of the polar questions in Extract 1, presented earlier, as well as in other sequences, effective in developing dialogue, is the fact that all questions are "authentic" (Nystrand, 1997), seeking specific, and to Daisy yet unknown, information that is important for Tessa's deeper understanding of aspects of her topic. As can be seen in Extract 1, the questions are posed strategically to probe Tessa to deal with the problem with which she was struggling. Here, and in other sequences in tutorial 2, it is clear that polar questions were more effective than some of the preceding open questions in engaging the student in a dialogue about, and in the subsequent understanding of, difficult concepts. Even if open questions are successful in initiating dialogue (and our data shows that often they are not), they typically need to be followed up by polar questions to sustain and extend the dialogue. Daisy's skilful use of polar questions is in direct contradiction to the tutor handbooks' recommendation of open question; as we have shown, in tutorials these tend to be of limited use for creating a dialogue.

The examples from tutorials 1 and 2 show that polar questions tend to be more effective in developing dialogue and focusing students' attention to yet unexplored and problematic aspects of their topic than open questions. Polar questions seem to have the two main functions of scaffolding and prompting. Scaffolding requires at least some subject knowledge, as in the case of Daisy, who as an English literature specialist knew the novel and its reception. Prompting requires the tutor's willingness to intensely listen to the student's concerns and engage with an unknown topic and subject-specific content to an extent that makes probing into detail possible, as was the case in Daisy's tutorial with Tessa. There was little sign of that level of listening and engagement in tutorials 6–10, a fact that suggests training needs which are not sufficiently addressed in existing tutor handbooks.

7. Conclusion

This study has illustrated how questions can facilitate tutor-student dialogue in one-to-one academic writing tutorials, a context that is rather different from classroom settings. It has also shown that the advice on questions in tutor handbooks is not particularly helpful. In view of the argument made in most handbooks for the use of open questions that focus on higher-order concerns, the evidence emerging from this study suggests that this practice is not widely followed. If the finding that in five of the ten tutorials fewer than 20% of all tutor questions were "topic engagement" questions whilst up to 87.5% were related to practicalities was representative for tutorial services elsewhere, this should be concerning to university managers. It would mean that in a cost-intensive service, there is not enough focus on the topic, whilst too much time is spent on organisational

and procedural issues, thus reducing learning opportunities for students. Adequate time allocation to the different phases of tutorials is not something that is currently addressed in tutor handbooks; however, the findings from this study show that this is something that tutors should be made aware of.

The emphasis on open questions and the rejection of polar or “yes/no” questions in tutor handbooks are not backed up by the evidence from this study, which shows that the use of open questions does not necessarily help to develop a dialogue and support student learning. By contrast, open questions often lead to unspecific responses and, if not followed up by polar questions that focus the student on specific aspects, do not trigger substantive student responses that reflect deeper exploration of the topic. At least McAndrew and Reigstad (2001, p. 26) recommend “probe-and prompt-questions” in addition to open questions, but it must be explained to tutors that these are often polar questions and that their use is not only legitimate but also facilitative for the development of dialogue and for student learning. Tutors should also be made aware of situations in which polar questions are crucial for scaffolding the learning of a struggling student.

Lastly, we come back to our previous critique of the “pick-and-choose” lists of questions presented in tutor handbooks. As we have shown, questions are not free-standing items that can be chosen from a list, but highly dependent on the discursive context and on the tutor’s ability to listen carefully to student contributions as well as formulate questions that are sensitive to the problem at hand and enable the student to develop new ideas and perspectives on the problem. This process requires more than a single question; it involves a dialogue that is typically initiated by a targeted (and often polar) tutor question and maintained through a series of follow-up questions.

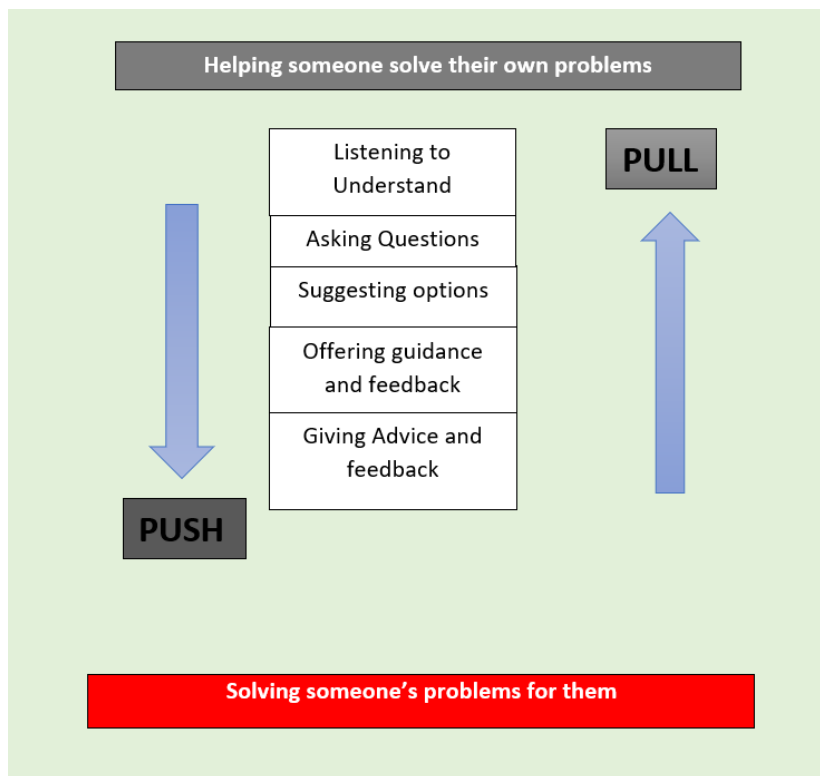
To train tutors to conduct dialogic tutorials, an emphasis on the use of questions is necessary. This cannot be done by providing lists, but requires contextual information, such as scenarios from tutorials and examples of questions asked in tutor-student dialogues, as shown in the extracts presented in this paper.

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Appendix 1. The 'push-and-pull' model from the university's tutoring hand-book



Appendix 2. Sequences with TEQs and SSRs in tutorials 1–7

Tutorial	No/Seq ^a	No/Turns ^b			
Daisy-Hanad	4	5:2-2	5:1-0	5:2-1	22:8-2
Daisy-Tessa	4	9:2-1	12:3-2	32:10-8	37:7-5
Hannah-Hanad	5	6:4-1	8:1-0	12:2-2	5:1-0 5:1-0
Steve-Yasuf	2		12:3-2		7:2-2
Hannah-Denise	2		11:5-3		11:2-1
Lucy-Edith	2		3:1-1		5:1-1
Lucy-Mei Li	2		5:1-1		5:1-1

a. No/Seq: Number of sequences that contain TEQs (topic engagement questions)

b. No/Turns: First number: turns; second number (after colon): TEQs; third number (after hyphen): SSRs (substantive student responses)