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Item Type	Article
Authors	Carrell, Patricia L.
Publisher	Mid-America Linguistics Conference;University of Kansas
Download date	2024-08-30 02:07:07
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/1808/22881

CHILDREN'S REQUESTS: A FUNCTIONAL-INTERACTIONAL ANALYSIS

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Two converging theoretical traditions form the basis for this study of children's requests: (1) the theory of speech acts (Austin 1962, Searle 1969), looking at individual utterances from the point of view of what is done in the saying of something, and (2) the theory of conversational or discourse analysis (Sachs, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), looking at sequences of utterances from the point of view of turn-taking. But coherent conversations are more than just sequences of conversational turns or moves consisting of individual utterances or speech acts; each speech act turn or move has a functional role in the discourse. According to Labov & Fanshel (1977:25) "sequencing rules do not appear to relate words, sentences, and other linguistic forms, but rather form connections between abstract actions such as requests, compliments, challenges, and defenses. Thus sequencing rules presuppose another set of relations, those between the words spoken and the actions being performed." Labov & Fanshel (1977) are interested in the flow of discourse and the functional connections between utterances viewed as speech acts. They are interested in the coherence of sequencing in conversations between speakers not only in the sense of conversational turn-taking, but in the sense of the interactional functions served by those turns. Labov & Fanshel show how the rules of sequencing in conversations must refer to very abstract levels of speech act analysis. Labov & Fanshel's functional-interactional approach to conversational analysis provides the theoretical underpinnings of this investigation of children's requests.

One large and important class of speech acts analyzed by Labov & Fanshel (1977) in functional-interactional terms is the class of requests, cf Figure 1. (Figure 1, next page.) Because of the compelling character of requests, the conditional relevance of what follows a request is much greater than in some other speech act types.

This interactional analysis of requests consists of three basic parts:

Part 1): A makes a request for X, where X is information, action, an object, etc.

SPEECH ACTIONS
(Verbal Interactions)

A	B	A
request X	give X [carry out] X put off	acknowledge reinstate redirect retreat mitigate
	refuse with account refuse without account	renew accept reject withdraw in a huff

Figure 1
Labov & Fanshel (1977)
Interactional Analysis of Requests

Part 2): In response to the request from A, B may either give X the information or whatever is requested, or he may carry out the action with or without speech, or he may put off the request, or he may refuse it, with or without an accounting.

Part 3): If the request is complied with, A may in turn acknowledge this action. If the request is put off, A may reinstate the request with or without aggravation, or redirect the request; he may also retreat from his request, including abandoning it altogether, or he may mitigate it. If the request is refused without an account, a break in social relations is likely, and A may withdraw in a huff (Goffman's terminology according to Labov & Fanshel, 1977:63-64). For this reason, most refusals supply an accounting. Labov & Fanshel observe that the division between a "put off" and a "refusal" is difficult to maintain: most refusals appear as "putting off" and most examples of "putting off" are really refusals (1977:64).

Armed with this basic outline from Labov & Fanshel (1977), I approached the analysis of request interactions of over 40 pairs of children, grades K through 5, from middle and upper-middle class public schools. The requests were spontaneous productions

in a natural but controlled context; the children were each constructing individual art projects but they had to share equipment (colored markers, scissors, and a hole puncher). One child was brought into the room, was told and shown how to do the art project, and got started. Then the second child--a friend of the same sex from the same schoolroom--was brought in. The first child explained to the second child how to do the art project, and then each child proceeded to work on his/her own project on opposite sides of a table. Their work spaces were delimited by a modest wooden barrier which prevented the children from merely rolling or pushing the equipment back and forth. They had to request the objects and hand them back and forth.¹

I examined the types of basic requests made by the children, as well as their compliances, put offs, refusals, acknowledgements, mitigations, aggravations, reinstatements, etc. In the process, I also gradually modified and extended Labov & Fanshel's initial outline to include several additional subcategories of interaction not provided for in their original schema. These new categories are mentioned in the course of the paper, and at the end of the paper I present a revised functional-interaction model.

The children's interactions were examined not only from the point of view of formal, syntactic/semantic criteria, but also, and I believe more significantly, from the point of view of social function. I was looking for language differences related to the children's growing social understanding.

Basic Request Forms

The first analysis performed was on the basic request forms produced by the children--the first A-term in Labov & Fanshel's schema. During the project, each pair of children made from a minimum of 4 to a maximum of 46 requests to each other, or, averaging these per child, each child made a from a minimum of 2 to 23 requests. The median number per pair was 30 requests, or 15 per child. These requests were classified as follows according to form:

Imperative form - defined as consisting of an imperative form of the verb, with an understood second person subject.

e.g. Give me the X, Pass (me) the X, Send over the X, Let me have the X, Hand me the X, Let's see the X.

Declarative form - defined as consisting of an inflected form of the verb, with a preceding 1st person subject, except in some cases in which the subject was ellided.

e.g. I need the X, I want the X, I'll have the X, I'll take the X, I could use the X, I'll trade (you) the X for the Y, and elliptical Need X, Trade X for Y. .

Interrogative form - defined as consisting of inverted subject-verb order, with or without modal, sometimes with ellided auxiliary and question intonation only, and including both yes-no and wh-interrogatives.

e.g. Do you have the X?, You have the X?, Can, Could I have the X?, Can, could you give me the X?, Can, could I use the X?, May I use the X?, Would you pass me the X?, Where's the X?.

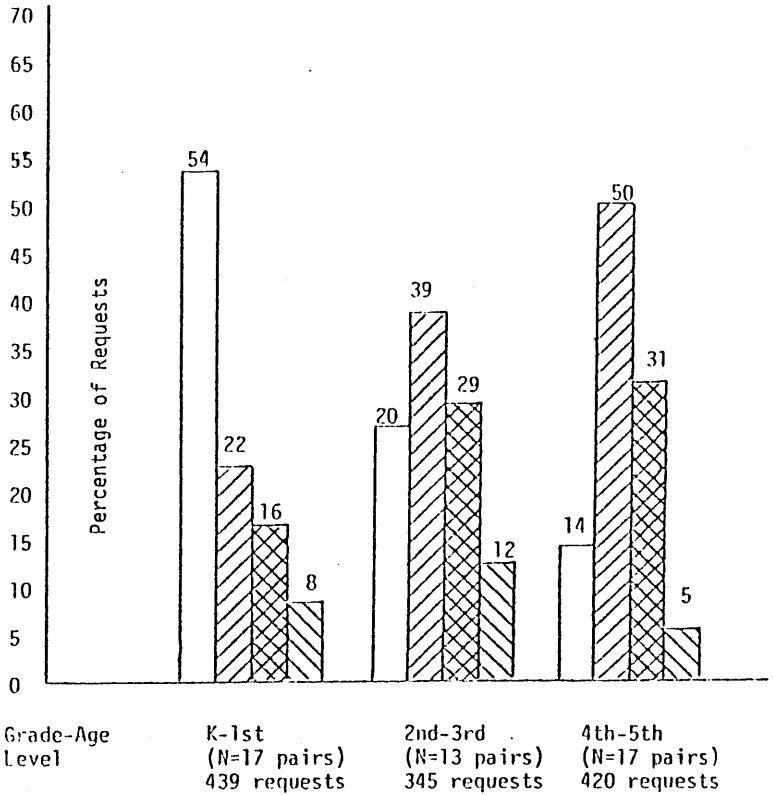
Object-name only - defined as consisting of object name only, X, with no verb form.

e.g. (The) X, (please), That X you cut, color, punch with, X for Y.

This last category was included as a separate category because it was impossible to tell whether these were elliptical forms of imperatives, declaratives, or interrogatives or whether they were elliptical at all.

Figure 2 presents the percentages of each type of request form according to the children's grade-age levels. (See Figure 2, next page.)

Imperative forms such as Give me X, Let's see the X were used infrequently at all grade-age levels. Declarative forms, consisting primarily of "need" statements such as I need the X, I want the X, declined dramatically from the youngest grades (K-1st) to the intermediate grades (2nd-3rd), dropping from 54% to 20%, with a continued decline to the oldest grades (4th-5th). Interrogative forms such as Could I have the X?, May I use the X?, and object name only forms such as The X, please, increased steadily from youngest to intermediate to oldest subjects. I would argue that these differences in the forms used at each grade-age level do not arise out of the children's increasing syntactic or semantic abilities; all children at all ages included in this study already have command over all forms. Rather, these differences reflect the children's increasing social knowledge and skill, and a sense of contextual/situational appropriateness. The change is also not simply one of increasing use of marked or conventional politeness, for as the supposedly more indirect and therefore more polite







-  = Imperative
-  = Interrogative
-  = Object Name Only
-  = Declarative

Figure 2
Children's Basic Request Forms

interrogative forms increase, so do the direct and conventionally less polite object-name-only forms. (In a previous study, cf. Carrell and Konneker, 1980, it was found that object-name-only forms were judged by adults as being least polite on a scale with imperative, interrogative, and declarative request forms.)

Modifications to Basic Requests

The children did several things to their basic request forms to either modulate/mitigate them or to reinforce/aggravate them during the same first A-turn in Labov & Fanshel's (1977) schema. They similarly used attention-getting adjuncts with their basic requests.

(a) Attention-getters

The children used a variety of attention-getting adjuncts with their basic request forms. These include: (1) most frequently, saying the other child's name, either before or after the request (see examples 2, 4 and 7 in the Appendix); (2) preceding the request with things like OK, Now, Let's see, and various combinations of these, like OK, now, Now, let's see, OK, now, let's see; (3) using other preceding expressions like Well, Hey and Um; and (4) adjoining whole sentences like Let me see...what do I need now? Children of all ages used all these attention-getting devices. However, the younger children used them far more frequently than the older children. In general, the younger children had more trouble getting and holding each other's attention than did the older children, who, in general, evidently already had each other's attention and didn't require as much use of attention-getting devices. In this regard, the older children showed greater social sensitivity to the situation of having to share equipment, as if they had each other's attention "on call" through the entire time, and the form of language they used tended to reflect this social awareness. The fact that the younger children had more attention-getting problems also shows up in the results for aggravations, as well as reinstatements and contingent queries.

(b) Mitigation

A variety of prosodic, lexical, phrasal and clausal features were used by the children to soften or mitigate their basic requests. The prosodic include nasalization and a sing-song

intonation pattern (e.g. green), as well as use of a baby talk register with concomitant syntactic shift (e.g. Me need X). These were used primarily by the younger children, K through 2nd grade; baby talk was used only by the kindergarteners. A variety of lexical qualifiers were used by children of all ages, words such as the conventional politeness marker please, but also only (e.g. as in I only need the X), some (e.g. I need some X), just (e.g. as in Just give me the X, I just need it a little), again (e.g. as in Could I have the X again?), borrow/your (instead of give, use, pass, implying X belongs to the other child, the first child brought into the room, e.g. Can I borrow the/your X?), a little (e.g. I just need it a little), OK? (e.g. I need the X, OK?). These were used by all ages, but more frequently by the younger children than the older children.

Phrasal and clausal mitigating adjuncts were used by all ages, but these were more often used by the older children than the younger: e.g. All I have to do is...; The last thing I need is...; I think I need; X, after you; just for the bow; just for a minute (older kids said more often just for a second or even more frequently just for a sec); When you're through with X...; All I have to do is...; That's all I need.

Although I haven't quantified this finding, it appears as though most mitigations used by the younger children centered around statements of their needs and desires and reasons or explanations of why the other child could and ought to comply in the face of this need, while the mitigations used by the older children are these but also those which center around reciprocal, cooperative behavior.

e.g. Young children - Because I have only one color left.
It'll be fair.
I gotta have them.
I want to finish this thing.

e.g. Older children - While you take X, I'll take Y.
X, after you.
borrow
Can I exchange X for Y?

(c) Aggravation

The children used basically three strategies for strengthening or aggravating their basic requests. Infrequently, they either

used the prosodic feature of increased loudness--to the point of yelling and screaming at each other--or they used certain aggravating lexical or phrasal forms, such as the words quick, and hurry, and my and back as in I need my scissors back, and the phrase right now. These two infrequent prosodic and lexical strategies were confined to the younger children, K through 3rd grade, and were used predominately by K through 1st graders. By far more frequent was the third aggravating strategy, that of reinforcing a request through immediate repetition, either repeating with the same form or with another form.

Kindergarten examples:

- (1) A. I need my scissors. Scissors. I need my scissors.
- (2) A. I need the hole punch. Punch, punch, punch.
I need the hole punch! [Louder]
- (3) A. I need the green. I need the green.

Additional examples are shown in numbers (1) and (2) in the Appendix.

Aggravation of a basic request through immediate repetition occurred far more frequently among the youngest children--K through 1st grade. Figure 3 shows the average percentage of all basic requests aggravated by immediate repetition for each of the three groups of children. (Cf Figure 3, next page.) There is a significant decrease in the use of this strategy between the youngest children (K-1st) and the next age group (2nd-3rd). Again I believe this reflects the children's growing social awareness and older children's general recognition that such aggravation is not necessary or socially acceptable.

However, it should be noted that there was a great deal of individual variation in the use of this strategy by all grade-age groups, as indicated by the ranges shown in Figure 3. At every level there were children who did not use this strategy, and there were children who used it to a considerable extent. Thus, there were some kindergarteners and first graders who didn't use it at all, and there were some fourth and fifth graders who used it as much as some kindergarteners.

Responses

The second analysis performed was of the types of responses

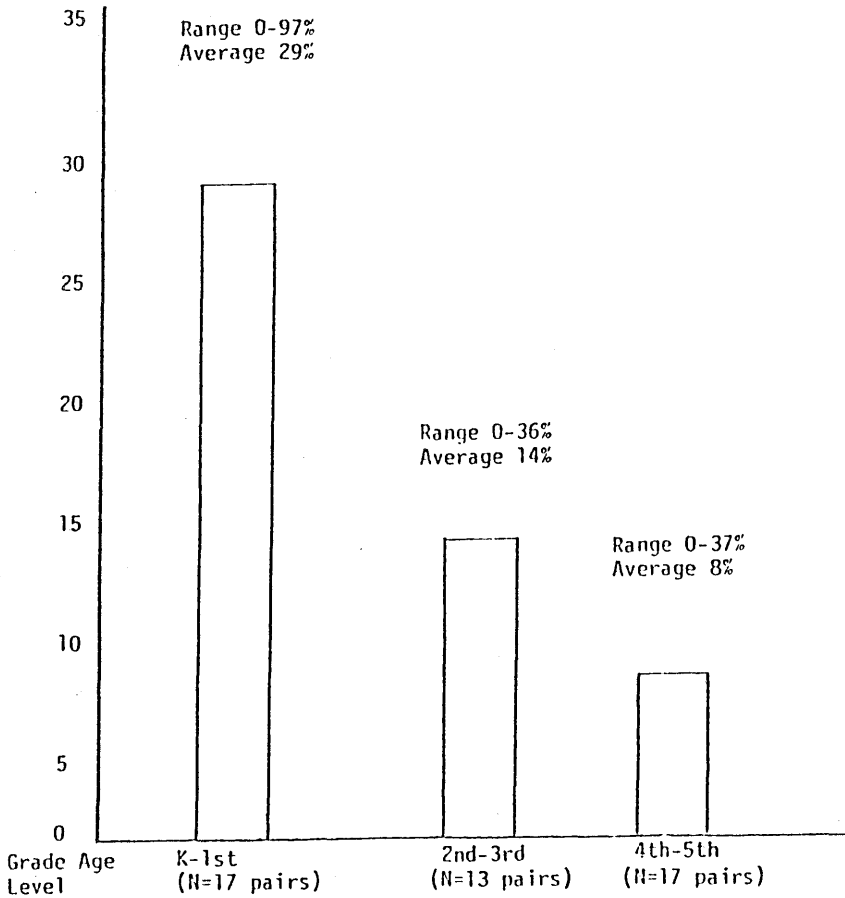


Figure 3
 Average Percentages and Ranges of Percentages
 Basic Requests Aggravated through Immediate Repetition

to the basic requests--the B-turns in Laboy & Fanshel's schema. Several different kinds of things happened during B's turn.

(a) Compliance

The most common behavior was simply compliance by the giving of the requested object, most often without any verbal accompaniment, but also with words like here, here you go, here it is, okay, etc. In addition, there were instances of compliance with the reason for ability to comply: e.g. I'm just finished, Just when I finished it. Since the children all figured out very quickly that they had to share the equipment provided by the experimenter in order for each child to complete the art project--the reason for their being out of their regular classroom--compliance was the order of the day. That is, compliance was the situationally determined outcome in this task. However, in other situations or contexts, compliance to requests may vary considerably. While compliance was expected and was eventually obtained within the total interaction of a pair, of interest are some of the things that happened in B's turn after the request from A but before compliance.

(b) Inattention

Due to lack of attention on the part of some of the children, especially among the youngest ones, requests often were simply ignored or not heard by B, thus forcing reinstatement of the original request by A. These reinstated requests were usually aggravated: e.g. I need the X right now.

(c) Contingent Query

A similar response, possibly also due to the lack of close attention paying, was B's response with a contingent query, e.g. What? The what? or Green? Scissors? Such response by B similarly forced reinstatement of the original request by A.

(d) Challenges

A small proportion of the B-responses were challenges, especially when B was using the requested object; e.g. Do you really need it? These challenges also forced reinstatement of the original request by A.

(e) Reluctant Compliance

Occasionally B would comply with the request while expressing reluctance to do so; e.g. B (gives X) and says Just when I was gonna use it. Such statements seem to have been intended as indirect requests for return of the object, although they were often not successful in so functioning; the object had to be re-requested.

(f) Counter Requests

While complying, some of the children made explicit counter requests. One type of counter request was for the future return of the given object; e.g. When you get finished, can I see it? and I'll need it later.

A far more common type of counter request was for a different object, a kind of exchange. E.g. I'll give you X, (if) you give me Y. In these cases, although B is complying, B is also assuming the A-role of requester. The original A then assumes the role of B, as the complier. Therefore, these counter requests perform the function of shifting the roles played by the interlocutors.

(g) Incorrect Compliance

There were several instances of incorrect compliance, B giving A the wrong object. These also triggered reinstatement of the original request by A.

(h) Put-off or Refusal

Next to compliance to the requests, the largest subgroup of B-responses were put-offs. For example, Just a minute, Just a second, I'm almost done with X, I'm not through, I need 'em first, Let me finish, I'm using it, Not yet. Because I need it, and I have it. I only have to do one more. Notice that these are all first-person, speaker-based reasons for delaying compliance; that is, "I can't comply right now due to some reason relating to me, the speaker, and my needs, desires, situation, etc." There was only one instance of what appeared to be an outright refusal. (As mentioned before, the low incidence of refusal was probably due to the task in which compliance, at least eventual compliance, was situationally determined.) In the one case of refusal, B responded to A's I need red with No you don't. A came right back with I need red, spoken louder and more emphatically. B then

complied with Oh, yeah, here. So even in this case there was eventual compliance.

Of course, in addition there were instances in which A requested something which was already on his side of the table, which B did not have and could, therefore, not give. This situation elicited things like I ain't got scissors from B.

Children of all grade-age levels produced all these types of B-responses; the older children were more likely to simply comply, put off with an accounting, make a counter request, or ask a contingent query due to failure to hear the request; the younger children were more likely to simply comply, put off with an accounting, make a counter request, ask a contingent query due to failure to pay attention to what their partner was asking, or simply fail to respond at all--also due to inattention.

Reinstatements

The nature of A's subsequent response was a function of what B's response had been. In response to contingent query, A usually simply repeated his original request without mitigation or aggravation. The form of the request may or may not have been the same. See example (7) in the Appendix.

Inattention on the part of B, B's failure to respond to the original request, inevitably resulted in A reinstating the request with aggravation (e.g. louder, more emphatic, use of the same lexical and phrasal devices mentioned previously in the discussion of aggravation used with the basic request forms).
e. g. Kindergarten

- A. B, I need the hole puncher.
- B. (Is using, ignores A)
- A. HEY! Give me the hole puncher! (loud, emphatic)

In response to put offs the children did a number of things; (a) reinstated their original requests with aggravation, see example (2) in the Appendix; (b) reissued their requests with mitigation, see examples (4) and (6) in the Appendix; (c) redirected their requests to another object, see example (3) in the Appendix; or (d) infrequently, retreated and abandoned the attempt, see example (1) in the Appendix.

Acknowledgements

The final stages of each requesting episode, after compliance was finally achieved, was an optional stage of acknowledging the compliance, e.g. with something like Thanks or Thank you. This was optionally followed by acknowledgement of the acknowledgement, e.g. with something like You're welcome. There were some, but not many instances of these in the data. Due to the task and the large number of requests each child had to make of his/her partner, it would have gotten very boring very quickly if each child had had to say Thanks and You're welcome after each compliance. Since there are many factors which may affect the incidence of acknowledgements, this is also something one might expect to vary considerably in other situations.

Conclusion

Figure 4 illustrates my attempt at revising Labov & Fanshel's (1977) model to highlight the various subcategories of functional interaction found in this study of children's requests to one another. (Cf Figure 4, next page.) The relationships schematized in Figure 4 are ordered relationships, not only horizontally, from left to right as in Labov & Fanshel (1977), but hierarchically, i.e. vertically, from top to bottom as well. Parentheses () indicate something which is optionally present. If B does not pay attention to A's request, the interaction must proceed through the top or (1) "ignore" B-A interaction first. Only if B pays attention to A's initial request may that loop be skipped. Next, if B is paying attention but has not understood A's request, the interaction must proceed through the (2) "contingent query" B-A interaction. Next, if B is paying attention and has understood the request, but is for some reason unable or unwilling to comply at this time or unable or unwilling to comply at all, the interaction must proceed through the (3) "put off/refusal" B-A interaction. Finally, if B is paying attention, has understood A's request, and is willing and able to comply with the request, then the interaction proceeds through the (4) "compliance" B-A interaction.

Several things can be noted in this revised model. First, the minimal interaction is A's request and B's compliance--a simple adjacency pair if all the prior conditions on B's attention, understanding and ability and willingness are met. Second, very long, complex interactions may result if it takes several turns or cycles

A	B	A	
Request X + (Adjunct) Adjunct = { Mitigation Aggravation	(1)	Ignore	Reinstate (Aggravation)
	(2)	Contingent query	Reinstate
	(3)	Put off/ Refusal	Reinstate { Aggravation Mitigation}
	(4)	Compliance	(Acknowledgement)
			B
			(Acknowledgement of Acknowledgement)

Figure 4
Functional-Interactional Analysis of Children's Requests
Ordered Relationships

through the same loop to obtain B's attention, and then to obtain B's understanding, and then to obtain B's willingness.

The older children in this study were more socially adept than the younger children, and, therefore, their request interactions flowed smoothly through the interactional model. Their interactions were shorter, consisted of no instances of ignoring requests, few contingent queries, some accounted put offs, and lots of straightforward compliance. The younger children had longer, more complex interactions, consisting of more aggravations, reinforcements, inattention, contingent queries due to lack of attention, and put-offs, as well as straightforward compliances.

The analysis of these data, which have been quantified only for the basic request forms, must now proceed to a more detailed, quantified analysis of the B-responses within each of the sub-categories indicated in Figure 4, as well as of the A-reinstatements. There are many sociolinguistic insights into the development of children's requesting speech acts to be gained from this type of functional-interactional analysis.

NOTES

¹I'm grateful to Susan Ervin-Trip and David Gordon, on whose research project the data were gathered, for allowing me access to these raw data.

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APPENDIX

Examples of Request Interactions:

(1) Kindergarten

- A. Hole punch. Hole punch. ... (Repeated 3 times more)
 Hole punch. Hole punch. ... (Repeated 2 times more; louder)
 Hole punch. Hole punch. ... (Repeated 1 time more; quieter)
 Hole punch. I need the hole punch.
 I need the hole punch. (louder)
- B. (Using h.p. with difficulty)
- A. I need the little thingie, the hole punch.
- B. I have it. I only have to do one more (annoyed)
- A. Well, all I have to do is this.
 I'm gonna start coloring.
 (Abandons attempt)
- B. (Complies when finished with h.p.)

(2) Kindergarten

- A. I need the purple. B, I need the purple.
- B. Just a minute.
- A. The purple, the purple. (louder)
- B. (Complies)

(3) Kindergarten

- A. May I have the hole puncher?
B. Let me finish.
A. B, can I have the scissors?
B. (Complies)
A. Thanks.

(4) First Grade

- A. Could I have the red, B?
B. The red? Oh, I need the red right now. Oh, well.
A. I could do it fast.
B. OK, there. (Complies, although not finished)
.
.
.
A. Here, B. (Spontaneously returns red.)

(5) Third Grade

- A. Purple.
B. Oh, I'm using it.
A. Uh...green.
B. (Complies)

(6) Fifth Grade

- A. I need a light blue
B. Oh, Oh, hold on a minute. (Using it)
A. I just need it for a second.
B. (Complies, although not finished)
A. (Returns after using)

(7) Fifth Grade

- A. Could I get the green, B?
B. The what?
A. The green.
B. OK. (Complies)
A. Thank you.
B. You're welcome.