Teacher questions and their functions in Turkish as a foreign language (TFL) classes

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Abstract

Discursive structure of foreign language classes has been a widely studied issue lately. With increasing focus on such theories as sociocultural theory and interactionist hypothesis, the importance of participation to language acquisition has become more significant. The aim of this study is to identify the types and functions of teacher questions in Turkish as a foreign language (TFL) classroom. The data of this study consist of 10 hours of classroom discourse in B2 level TFL classrooms. The analysis was carried out with the help of the classification of teacher questions in ESL classrooms made by Long and Sato (1983), which includes echoic (comprehension checks, clarification requests, and confirmation checks) and epistemic questions (referential, display, expressive and rhetorical questions). The findings of the study indicated that the majority of the questions in the data set belong to epistemic questions and under the title of epistemic questions; the most commonly used question type is display questions and under the title of echoic questions; the most commonly used question type is confirmation checks.

Keywords: discourse analysis; teacher questions; sociocultural theory; display questions, referential questions

1. Introduction

Discursive structure of language classrooms and the relationship between the happenings in the classroom and the process of language acquisition has started to attract a lot of attention lately in language teaching methodology. The studies focusing on the nature of language classrooms not only tried to reveal what is actually happening in language learning and teaching settings but they also tried to “suggest some variables of particular interest in second language teaching” (Long & Sato, 1983, p.269). The main rationale behind these studies is that “conversation and instructional exchanges between teachers and students provide the best opportunities for learners to exercise target language (TL) skills, to test out their
hypotheses about the TL, and to get useful feedback” (Chaudron, 1988, p.118). For this reason, classrooms are unique places providing learners countless opportunities to use the TL and to be exposed to it simultaneously.

Different aspects of classroom interaction in the language classrooms have been studied up to now; namely, turn-taking structures, strategies used to negotiate for meaning, mistakes and repairs, etc. In addition to these, teacher questions, which are another important component of classrooms in general, have attracted attention because of the fact that it is not possible to find a classroom in which teachers do not ask any questions. Teacher questions are considered to be important because of their potential power “to facilitate either TL production or correct and meaningful content-related responses by students” (Chaudron, 1988, p.126). Chaudron (1988, p.126) also mentions some other important benefits of teacher questions such as “engaging learners’ attention, promoting verbal responses, and evaluating learners’ progress.”

Studies focusing on teacher questions have mainly focused on developing different classifications. Nystrand & Gamoran (1997) classified teacher questions into two groups; namely, authentic questions and test questions. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) and Biber et.al, (1999) suggested a form-based classification of teacher questions including yes/no questions, wh- questions, tag questions and alternative questions. Chinn et al., (2001)’s classification of questions includes assessment questions, genuine information questions, open-ended questions, and challenge questions. Barnes (1969, 1976) distinguished 4 types of questions, which are factual questions, reasoning questions, open questions and social questions. One of the most commonly used and cited classifications of teacher questions is the one made by Long & Sato (1983), in which teacher questions were analyzed in different categories such as echoic questions and epistemic questions. The following table shows the sub-categories of these two categories:

Table 1. The categories suggested by Long & Sato (1983, p.276)
| Teacher questions       | Echoic Questions                                                                 | Epistemic questions                                                                 |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                        | Comprehension checks (All right?, OK?, Does everyone understand?)                  | Referential (Why didn’t you do your homework?)                                      |
|                        | Clarification requests (What do you mean?, What?, I don’t understand)              | Display (What’s the opposite of “up” in English?)                                   |
|                        | Confirmation checks                                                              | Expressive (It’s interesting the different pronunciations we have now, but isn’t it?) |
|                        | (S: Carefully T: Carefully?, Did you say “he”?)                                   | Rhetorical (asked for effect only, no answer expected from listeners, answered by the speaker. Why did I do that? Because I ……..) |

2. Turkish as a Foreign Language
Starting from 1980s, Turkey has had important relationships with different countries and it required some extra effort to teach Turkish as a foreign language. With this idea in mind, TÖMER (The Centre of Turkish Teaching) was founded in 1984 at Ankara University. After Turkey started to take part in ERASMUS program, the importance of institutions teaching Turkish as a foreign language increased. As TFL is a new field, the studies related to teaching programs, learner needs and material development are rather limited. For this reason, it is believed that this study will positively contribute to this field.

3. The significance of the study
Classroom discourse-based studies have started to gain importance in Turkish settings recently; therefore, the studies based on classroom discourse are not very common. Especially studies related to TFL are very rare (Yılmaz & Yüksel, 2011; Kayı, 2010), to our best knowledge, this analysis of teacher questions is the first study in a TFL context.

4. Methodology
By employing qualitative data collection and qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods, this case study examined the nature of teacher questions in a TFL class. In this examination of teacher questions, the classification made by Long & Sato (1983) was taken into consideration.

4.1. The Setting and Participants
In this study, data collection process took place in two different B2 level TFL classes in DEDAM at Dokuz Eylül University, İzmir, Turkey. Both of the classes were taught by experienced native speaker Turkish teachers. The students in both classes were from different countries such as Ukraine, Greece, Russia, Syria and the USA. All the participants were informed about the content of the study and signed a consent form before they took part in this study.
4.1. Procedure

The data of this study were collected with the help of video-recording but before that all of the students and teachers signed a consent form related to the process of data collection and later on, the researchers transcribed and coded the data gathered. Afterwards, teacher-student dyads were chosen and question-answer patterns were analyzed and grouped depending on the classification suggested by Long & Sato (1980).

4.2. Interrater Reliability

In order to ensure interrater reliability, 2 raters (1 researcher and a second rater) worked on the chosen samples of classroom discourse episodes. The second rater has a PhD in language teaching and 10 years language teaching experience.

Before the process of reliability measurement started, a guide consisting of examples related to Long & Sato’s classification of teacher questions (1983) was prepared for the second rater and he was asked to evaluate the sample dyads in accordance with this guide. For the analysis, interrater reliability was found to be “93%”.

4.3. Limitations

As this is an on-going project, the findings supplied below belong to the parts of the data that have been analyzed by the researchers up to now. For this reason, after the data analysis is over, it might lead to some changes in the percentages given in the tables.

5. Findings and Discussion

The following tables indicate the percentages of different types of questions in the TFL classrooms in DEDAM.

Table 2. The Percentages of Echoic and Epistemic Questions

| Question types       | %   |
|----------------------|-----|
| Echoic questions     | 19.23 |
| Epistemic questions  | 80.27 |
| **TOTAL**            | **100** |

According to Table 2., the majority of the questions belong to epistemic questions; namely, referential, display, expressive and rhetorical questions, with the percentage of 79.8.

In Table 3, and Table 4, the percentages of questions under the title of epistemic and echoic questions are presented.
Table 3. The Percentages of Echoic Questions

| Echoic questions          | %  |
|---------------------------|----|
| Comprehension checks      | 20 |
| Clarification requests    |  8 |
| Confirmation checks       | 72 |
| **TOTAL**                 |100 |

According to Table 3., the majority of the echoic questions belong to confirmation checks, which refer to “any expressions by a speaker designed to establish whether that speaker’s preceding utterance has been understood by the interlocutor” (Long & Sato, 1983, p.275). The percentage is 75 %. It might be concluded that the teacher of the classroom tried to understand whether the student understood what she was talking about with the help of expressions like “Anladınız mı? (Have you understood?)”, “Tamam mı? (OK?)”. On the other hand, the least commonly used echoic question type is clarification request, which refers to “any expressions designed to elicit clarification of the interlocutor’s preceding utterance” (Long & Sato, 1983, p.276). The percentage is 5 %. Table 4. shows an example dyad including a “comprehension check”.

Table 4. An example dyad including a comprehension check

| Sequence | Time   | Teacher or Student | Questions and answers |
|----------|--------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 47       | (21.52)| T                  | evet [kamuran]/ biraz/ farklı bir kişi. Onun bazı sorunları olmuş. Evet onun sorununu/ anladınız mı? (Yes, Kamuran is a different person who has had some problems. Have you understood what his problem is?) |
| 48       | (21.56)| S                  | Evet (Yes)            |

The following table shows a teacher-student dyad including a clarification request demanded by the teacher.

Table 5. An example dyad including a clarification request

| Sequence | Time   | Teacher or Student | Questions and answers |
|----------|--------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 87       | (11.22)| S                  | Parodi gibi. (Like a parody) |
| 88       | (11.24)| T                  | Ne gibi? (Like what?)   |

A teacher-student dyad exemplifying a confirmation check is shown in Table 6.
Table 6. An example dyad including a confirmation check

| Sequence | Time | Teacher or Student | Questions and answers |
|----------|------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 32       | (2.27)| T                 | italiani sadece aşk değil sosyal bir sorun da var demek istiyorsun. (Hmm, you mean, it is not just love, there is also a social problem) |
| 33       | (2.30)| S                 | Evet evet. (Yes, yes) |

Table 7. shows the percentages of question types under the title of epistemic questions. As can be seen in the table, the majority of the epistemic questions belong to display questions and interestingly, neither of the teachers used expressive questions during their TFL classes.

Table 7. The Percentages of Epistemic Questions

| Epistemic questions       | %  |
|---------------------------|----|
| Display questions         | 51.43 |
| Referential questions     | 41.90 |
| Rhetorical questions      | 6.67  |
| Expressive questions      | 0    |
| TOTAL                     | 100  |

Table 8. shows an example dyad showing how the teacher uses a display question in the TFL classroom during a discussion based on a movie in Turkish called “Başka Dilde Aşk”. Display questions are the ones that “request information which is already known by the asker” (Brock, 1986, p.48). As the teacher of the class knows what the topic of the film is, the question given below may be considered as a display question.

Table 8. An example dyad including a display question

| Sequence | Time | Teacher or Student | Questions and answers |
|----------|------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 47       | (3.52)| T                 | Figen sence bu filmin konusu neydi? (Figen, in your opinion, what is the topic of this film?) |
| 48       | (3.56)| S                 | İmkanız asık (Unrequited love) |

Table 9 shows an example dyad showing how the teacher uses a referential question in the TFL classroom. Referential questions are the ones that “request information which is not known by the asker” (Brock, 1986, p.48). As the teacher does not know whether there is an impersonator among students or not, the following question asked by the teacher might be considered as a referential question.
Table 9. An example dyad including a referential question

| Sequence | Time | Teacher or Student | Questions and answers |
|----------|------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 26       | (2.56) | T | Var mı taklitçi aranızda? (Is there an impersonator among you?) |
| 27       | (2.58) | S | Christina güzel yapıyor. (Christina does it well) |

Table 10 shows an example dyad showing how the teacher uses a rhetorical question in the TFL question. A rhetorical question is the one asked for effect only, generally no answer is expected from listeners, it is answered by the speaker (Long & Sato, 1983).

Table 10. An example dyad including a rhetorical question

| Sequence | Time | Teacher or Student | Questions and answers |
|----------|------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 63       | (5.23) | T | Burda bilmediğiniz sözcük var mı? Yok di mi? (Are there any unknown words here? I think no?) |
| 64       | (5.26) | S | Yok. (No, there aren’t.) |

The findings of this study indicate a lot of similarities when they are compared and contrasted with the previous studies carried out related to teacher questions. The first similarity between this study and Long & Sato (1983)’s study is that both of them have more epistemic questions than echoic questions in the classroom corpus. Similar to Long & Sato (1983)’s and Long & Pica (1986)’s study, the percentage of display questions (51.43) is higher than that of the referential questions (41.90). As Chaudron (1988, p. 127) suggests, “the more language-oriented the classroom, the more the teacher finds it appropriate to elicit linguistically constrained student contributions in order to promote practice in the language.” However, this tendency might have a negative effect on students’ productivity in the target language. In a study conducted by Brock (1986), it was found out that students in the treatment group, who were asked more referential questions, were able to produce responses that were significantly longer and more syntactically complex and students’ responses contained greater numbers of connectives. In this study, too, as there are more display questions than referential questions, the answers given by the students are shorter, they are less syntactically complex and they include fewer connectives.

In addition to the findings given above, because of the lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic nature of Turkish, the researchers had some difficulty in identifying and classifying certain questions during analysis. While conducting further studies, different classifications might be applied for the questions like “Sizce Zeynep işaret dilini öğrenebildi mi?” (In your opinion, has Zeynep learned the sign language?) in which the use of “in your opinion” in the question makes the choice between referential and display question difficult.

Another finding of this is study is related to the questions that are neither in the question form syntactically nor include a rising intonation as it is also shown in Table 6. An example is “Başka bir şey daha var, onu da söyle, tamam (There is one more thing, if you are able to say it, that’s OK). Here, the teacher, in fact, wants to ask “what is it?, can you find it?”.
Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to thank all the participants and the course instructors at DEDAM. We especially would like to thank Prof. Dr. V. Doğan Günay, the principal of DEDAM, for his endless support during data collection.

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