A Case Study of an EFL Teacher’s Types of Questions: An Investigation into Classroom Interaction

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Abstract

Types of teachers’ questions play an important role in teaching since they affect students’ participation in the process of negotiation of meaning. Therefore, in the present study, an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher’s questions along with the students’ responses to his questions were classified. A structured interview was also employed in the study. It was found that the number of coded/display and yes/no questions exceeded open/referential questions. Although the use of such questions was due to the students’ level of proficiency, it was revealed that the teacher’s low level of proficiency and lack of experience played a great role in asking such questions. It was also revealed that the main reason for the learners’ silence or reluctance to participate may be because of the teacher’s ineffective questioning technique(s).

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Keywords: Teachers’ questions; coded/display questions; yes/no questions; open/referential questions

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1. Introduction

Rejection of language teaching methods as the principal determinant of success in second language learning has been one of the reasons for researchers to be interested in the analysis of classroom discourse. After the disappointment to find the ideal method, researchers began to collect language data from the classroom itself and hypothesized that classroom interaction was the major variable affecting second language acquisition (SLA) (Ellis, 1990). Since teachers have determining roles in learning and due to the fact that teacher talk often dominates the classroom, studying teacher talk has been one of the aims of classroom discourse analysis. Teacher talk plays a
crucial role in language learning since teachers typically have a superior status in the classrooms and they control topics of discourse. Moreover, they provide the only live target input that the students are likely to receive (Cullen, 1998).

One manifestation of teacher talk is a teacher’s question. A teacher’s questions may serve various functions such as focusing attention, exerting disciplinary control, getting feedback and most important of all, encouraging students to participate. This is why different scholars (Brock, 1986; Gall, 1970; Wu, 1993) regard questioning as a worthwhile activity in teaching and consider it a popular method of involving students in a lesson and a tool for facilitating student participation.

Teachers’ questions have been categorized into 1) open and closed questions, 2) display and referential questions, and 3) yes/no questions. Dalton-Puffer (2007) compares the terms referential and display questions and explains that “referential questions are frequently seen as more ‘natural’ and are expected to generate student answers that are somehow qualitatively better, more authentic, more involved, longer, and more complex than answers” (p. 96). On the same page, he further adds that “answers to display questions [contrary to referential questions] are seen as notoriously restricted, quite often consisting of one word”. Therefore, it seems that yes/no questions are helpful for beginners who are not competent enough to produce language as well as for those who emotionally do not feel ready to talk.

The majority of the questions that teachers ask in these exchanges are display questions or questions which are intended either to prompt the learners to display comprehension and/or command of accurate English (Thornbury, 1996). In addition, they seem to be favored by most teachers; however, as Cullen (1998) argues, these types of questions if excessively used, do not have any communicative value. In second language teaching classrooms, asking display questions deprives the learners of the opportunities. As a result, students do not have any role in the production process. Instead, it is most likely that they repeat the information that is already available.

Findings of several studies (e.g., Yang, 2010) demonstrate that display questions are commonly asked while referential questions are rarely asked. Moreover, for the former type of questions, the responses elicited are brief, with little elaboration, but the responses elicited by the latter type of questions are usually longer and syntactically more complex.

Different studies have been carried out (e.g., Shomoossi, 2004) to explore the types of teachers questions in the EFL context in Iran. However, there is no research in this context, to the researchers’ knowledge, to investigate both teachers’ and the learners’ responses in the classroom. This study is based on the above-mentioned limitations and the major purpose is to find out the type(s) of questions a language school teacher asked in five sessions of teaching English to intermediate EFL learners. Moreover, the study aims at seeking teacher’s opinions regarding these types of questions.

2. Methodology

The present study is a case study in which the use of questions by an EFL teacher with little or no experience of teaching English in five consecutive sessions is explored.

2.1. The participants

The participants in this study were an EFL teacher and 15 pre-intermediate EFL students. The teacher was an M.A. student of Language Teaching who was not aware of the research subject. Moreover, he had just begun teaching EFL.
The students were composed of 15 (7 males and 8 females) students who were aged 17-21. At this level, the students were exposed to the language for 4.5 hours a week. The book used for the instruction was Top Notch 1-1 A.

2.2. The data

The data for the present study was the transcripts of five audio-taped English lessons. All lessons were taught by the same teacher. The whole class teacher-student interactions were transcribed. Each class time ran 90 minutes while the total transcribed time in the whole class teaching portion of the lessons is 38 minutes 30 minutes, 19 minutes 22 minutes and 54 minutes, respectively. The data was transcribed with the help of the teacher. Apart from the data of the transcriptions, the EFL teacher was interviewed and the results were interpreted.

2.3. Data analysis

2.3.1. Teacher questions

In order to sort out the questions asked by the teacher, Yang’s (2010) procedure was adopted in that, not only those questions beginning with interrogatives, but the utterances ended with rising intonation were regarded to be questions. Through the analyses of the lesson transcripts, the number of different types of teacher questions in each sentence of the teachers’ utterances was coded, as suggested by Thompson (1997). This included 1) yes/no questions, 2) open and closed questions, and 3) display and referential questions, which were later counted. In order to count the number of different categories of questions easily, the open or referential questions were categorized into the same group and closed or display questions were also grouped together.

2.3.2. Teacher’s interview

An interview was employed in the study. The questions were adopted from a questionnaire developed by Özcan (2010) and adapted to suit the present study. The interview consists of 9 open-ended questions investigating teacher’s opinions about question types and their effects on EFL students’ participation and language learning.

3. Results and findings

3.1. Analysis of different types of questions the teacher asked

The total number of questions asked in five executive sessions was 160. It is evident that the majority of the questions were devoted to display and close questions and rarely referential and open questions to which the teacher himself did not know the answers were used (See Table 1). The kind of input for interaction was: question → answer. Generally, questions of this type are closed and do not instigate any discussion.

The types of questions asked were mostly yes/no and closed/display questions with the total number of 83 and 61, respectively out of 160 questions. No matter what the types of questions were, the students’ responses to the questions were mainly short (see Table 2 in the appendix). This was against the researchers’ expectation since the students were pre-intermediate and learners at this stage are supposed to produce longer stretches of discourse. Moreover, based on the related literature (e.g. Brock, 1986; Yang, 2010) it was expected that referential questions instigate longer stretches of discourse.

| Type of questions asked | Session 1 | Session 2 | Session 3 | Session 4 | Session 5 |
|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Yes no questions        | 18 (58.06%) | 14 (63.64%) | 12 (46.16 %) | 6 (17.14%) | 33 (71.74%) |
The teacher’s yes/no questions were mainly used to get feedback from the students and to make sure whether they have understood what had been taught. These included questions like “Did you get it?” “Do you understand?” “OK?” This last kind of question was used when the teacher explained something, for example, a grammatical point or gave an explanation about something. It seemed that when the teacher asked such questions he expected to receive affirmative answers from all students. Teachers used a number of general questions that did not directly address any of the students present in the classroom. The answer to such questions as “Anybody knows what galaxy is?” was either silence, which meant the students did not know the answer or did not get the point, or a choral affirmative response. Closed/Display questions were also used to check learners’ comprehension of a grammatical point or a vocabulary item. For example, “Ask me about age.” or “What kinds of movies do you like?” The wait time allocated to the students to answer such questions seemed to be very short. Open/referential questions were rarely asked. These types of questions included those like “What do you think about Paul?” “What sort of person he is?” These types of questions required small stretches of discourse and the learners were not required to produce more than a sentence to answer them. Most of the open/referential questions were used before reading the texts or after it. It seems that these questions were used as advance organizers. They were also used as warm-up questions. These were questions like “Anybody has ever been abroad?”, “Do you believe in superstition?” Some open/referential questions were also raised by the teacher which did not result in the students’ participation. The following conversation is an example of these types of questions.

Teacher: Suppose that you are going to backpack. Where would you go and what would you do? What would you take with yourself?
Student: (No answer).
Teacher: Would you choose remote areas in the country?
One of the students: No I would go to the North of Iran.
It seems that the students had no background information about backpacking, although they had a picture in front of them which showed two men with their backpack. The teacher kept on asking the same question and paraphrasing it. The reason for limited students’ participation perhaps was the students’ lack of background knowledge regarding backpacking. It also seems that using questions that were loaded with cultural differences decreased students’ participation in the class activities. Furthermore, it is likely that the ineffective questioning technique was another reason for learners’ silence or reluctance to participate. Although the number of referential questions in this study were few, those referential questions resulted in more participation. These questions were those which were related to the students’ own lives and that sought their opinions.

It was also observed that as for closed/display questions, the wait time to get answers from the students to answer the open/referential questions was not enough. When the teacher received no answer from the students, in a short time, he either paraphrased the question or chose to answer the question himself.

There were also questions asked by the teacher which were not clear to the student like “How many children should a family have?” Since the students did not know what the question meant and what the purpose of the questions was, they preferred to remain silent.

What was noticeable in the teacher’s asking question was that his questions were sometimes addressed to the whole class and at other times to individual students. It interesting to note that the questions directed to the whole class were often display ones but those directed to an individual student were referential.

3.2. Analysis of the teacher’s interview

The interview consisted of three parts. Since it was assumed that the teacher may not be familiar with the concepts and terms “display questions” and “referential questions”, the terms were explained to the teacher using some examples.

3.2.1. The questions that the teacher answered

The questions used in the interview consisted of three sections:

Part A: Teachers’ questioning behaviour in general: Questions 1-3
Part B: Display questions: Questions 4-6
Part C: Referential questions: Questions 7-9

Question 1: How much class time do you think you spend on question-and-answer exchanges in the classroom? The answer was about 50 percent. This shows that for him, question-and-answer exchanges were important. In addition, the teacher believed that by questions-and-answers in which students exchange their information, a lot of learning takes place or at least, their learning is facilitated. Moreover, as the teacher reported, questions-and-answers provide students with a kind of brainstorming.

Question 2: What are language teachers’ purposes when asking students questions? He noted that questions can help teachers “make sure whether or not students have understood the lessons well”. He also added, “for beginner and intermediate classes, questions can be considered as valuable tools for instruction”. It was interesting that the teacher noted that “apart from the educational role of the questions, questions can be used for classroom management and discipline.

Question 3: How do you think questioning affects students’ language development? The teacher noted that questioning enhances learning since questions result in grammar and also vocabulary development. Moreover, he stated that “answering questions pushes students to produce language and this causes language development”.
Question 4: Out of 50 questions that you ask in the classroom, how many of them do you think are display questions?

As he had already mentioned, the teacher stated that the number of display questions is related to students’ level of proficiency. He also stated that out of 50 questions, he devotes approximately half to display questions; however, the real practice of the teacher in the classroom demonstrated that the number of display questions was more than what he guessed. In fact, the percentage of the display questions was far more than what was expected to be.

Question 5: How do you think display questions affect students’ language development?

The teacher responded that display questions may not by themselves lead to acquisition but may raise students’ awareness and boost their confidence. He added that although these questions may not result in students’ critical thinking, they may pave the way for their participation and this may lead to acquisition. It seemed that the teacher highly valued pedagogical questions as pedagogical tools in the EFL classroom.

Question 6: How do you think display questions affect students’ oral production and participation?

He explained that no matter what type of question he asks, he expects his students to make use of the questions to negotiate with the classmates as well as the teacher. He also added that “I always ask my students to have some sort of pair work activities; however, when they do this, they do not take their conversation serious. When I ask them questions, they are all ears and do their best to provide the needed answer”. Such a statement shows that the teacher is not experienced enough to set different tasks for the classroom to engage them in different activities without his involvement.

Question 7: How do you think referential questions affect students’ language development?

The teacher had the opinion that asking students referential questions allows language learners to express themselves, their opinions and ideas. This results, as he believed, in creating genuine conversations. Meanwhile, using referential questions may help students answer them by using their own personal/real opinions and in this way, they can use language communicatively. However, as he explained, his students in the present class do not make use of the opportunities created by such questions in order to ‘converse’ in the classroom.

Question 8: How do you think referential questions improve students’ oral participation and production?

The teacher answered that “referential questions are much more valuable than display questions in improving learners’ oral production since they let students produce their own ideas. This may help them internalize language better.

Question 9: For which level(s) are referential questions more appropriate and beneficial, beginners or advanced learners? Why?

The teacher claimed that referential questions are more beneficial and appropriate for higher levels of proficiency since students are more proficient in their L2 and their vocabulary repertoire is wider, too. He noted that if he asked beginner students referential questions, they would prefer to keep silent or switch to their mother tongue instead of trying to speak in the L2.

4. Conclusion

The study focused on an EFL teacher’s questioning behavior in an EFL classroom— the kind of questions he asked, the purpose of asking such questions and the kind of answers and participation they provoked. Through an interview, it was found out that coded/display and yes/no questions outnumbered open/referential questions. Moreover, the responses of all types of questions were generally made up of single words or simple phrases.

There are lots of reasons for the teacher’s use of display questions. Among all the reasons, students’ proficiency seems to be the most influencing factor. Moreover, it was revealed that inexperienced teachers tend to ask more closed/d display questions. It was also likely that since the teacher in the study does not have a satisfactory mastery of
the second language, he prefers to ask close questions since he either cannot produce suitable questions or is not able to provide full answers to the questions if learners redirected the questions to him. Although the proficiency level of students may justify the use of display questions (Shomoossi, 2004), referential questions even in the close form are necessary to involve students in real communication (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). They result in more purposeful communication (Ellis, 1990) and facilitate students’ second language development (Yang, 2010). Despite the strong support for referential questions in the literature, in line with Shamoosi’s (2004), it was also found out that “not all referential questions could create enough interaction” (p. 24). While encouraging teachers to make use of inferential questions may be beneficial for the learners’ language development, one cannot conclude that referential questions are useful for language learning at any stage of learning.

Another issue gleaned from the study is teachers’ wait-time. In this study, the teacher did not give the learners enough opportunity to respond to the questions. According to Tuan and Nhu (2010), a suitable pause should last 3-4 seconds.

One of the important implications of the present study is that in order to let the EFL learners produce syntactically longer responses to the questions and get them involved in an interaction, teachers should give them enough background regarding the issue he is asking questions about. It may be the case that even when people are interacting in their native language and do not have enough time they would be reluctant to talk.

All in all, based on the findings, it can be suggested that teachers, especially inexperienced ones, should gain more awareness regarding their questioning techniques. Moreover, as Menegal (2008) suggests, the plan of the lesson should give more space to students, providing them with more opportunities to answer those types of questions that “extend their thinking and which encourage them to increase their contributions” (p. 108). This may need teachers’ experience as well as their awareness of different techniques in order to employ both display and referential questions in the appropriate context.

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