Investigating Teachers’ Questioning in Second Language Acquisition Based on SETT Framework

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Abstract. This paper focuses on teachers’ use of questioning with regard to the enhancement of students’ learning opportunities in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The source of analysis comes from a classroom in China adopting curriculum of English as a Second Language (ESL), and the research is mainly based on the SETT (Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk) framework. Through a case study on extracts taken from the classroom with different learning modes and contexts, understanding can be deepened about how varied questions are used to facilitate learning opportunities and improve learning outcomes by achieving certain pedagogical goals and activating different interactional features in the classroom, promoting second language acquisition more effectively. In short, this investigation aims at viewing questioning in an L2 (second-language) classroom with theoretical support in order to provide a reference for more studies on educational practice and second language learning.

Keywords: Questioning, Teacher Discourse, ESL Classroom in China, SLA.

1. Introduction
Since over a century ago, the use of questioning has been one of the most commonly seen teaching practices in the classroom, taking up a large proportion of teaching activities [1]. In this article, the focus is given on this technique in terms of its effect on promoting learning opportunities and the outcomes of L2 learners. The analysis is based on a classroom study in China that adopts the ESL curriculum, lasting for around 10 hours in total with the same Chinese teacher and Chinese students learning English as a second language. The learners are all in Grade 8, aging 13-14, and their English proficiency ranks among the top 10% of their peers in schools. The research aim is to understand the effects of teacher questioning in the process of second language acquisition so that more references can be provided to future study in the teaching of ESL content and the improvement of learning opportunities.

2. Literature Review
Previous studies were focusing on a range of areas concerning the use of questioning and its effect on L2 study. Three aspects of the research, covering the use of questioning and the learning performance in the L2 classroom, are reviewed.
2.1. Teachers’ Questioning
With the importance and various effects created by questioning, the study of this topic has drawn the attention of many scholars. From Bloom’s Taxonomy, it is stated that students’ levels of cognitions are consecutive, and one level must be achieved before the next level can be attained [2]. A later study from Anderson [3] leads to a new version known as Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (RBT), classifying the levels as “Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating and Creating”, each focusing on different levels of cognitive thinking, with different skills and knowledge involved. Long [4] divided these questions into two categories, namely display questions and deferential questions, which respectively represent the questions that teachers know the answers to, as well as the questions that teachers do not know the answers to. Faruji [5] proposes four types as Factual, Empirical, Productive, and Evaluative, based on Bloom’s Taxonomy. Wilen [6] introduces the types of questions that are derived from the cognitive domain and the affective domain. The cognitive domain includes three levels: The Factual level yields factual recall questions; the Conceptual Level, with convergent questions and divergent questions, stimulates students in organizing and reasoning information, and generating unique and imaginative ideas; the most complex level, the Evaluative level, produces questions that need students to take positions, judge validity, or evaluate opinions.

As for recent research over the functions of questions used, Al-Zahrani [7] analyzes the topic in two dimensions – the question that can promote classroom interaction and the other one that cannot. Nappi [8] researches on the relationship between questioning skills and engaging students in metacognition. Sundari [9] analyzes the use of questions in the context of classroom interaction in EFL settings of a foreign country. These studies of questioning all help to form a better understanding of the kinds and functions of the question’s teachers use in a classroom setting.

2.2. Classroom Interaction in SLA
As Ellis [10] argues, SLA is a complex process, involving many interrelated factors. Classroom interaction, being one element, has been studied from different angles. Allwright [11] proposes that classroom interaction comprises the analysis in three directions, namely turn-taking analysis, topic analysis, and task analysis. By coding the utterance that takes place in the interaction, researchers can reveal the information about language use between teachers and learners. Long [12], however, offers critiques upon the analysis about system of interaction. The categories examined in the system are not verified and without a sound basis of language learning theory, providing insufficient validity and relevance. Ellis [10] presents the understanding of SLA with reference to the difference between teacher talk and foreigner talk, as well as the comparison of the classroom and natural language environments. Further, the effects of input and interaction on the SLA route are viewed with several explanations. Formulaic speech is one way to aid SLA, which utilizes invariant expressions to foster language use of learners, and is symbolized as “canned speech” according to Hatch [13]. Vertical structures can facilitate learning with learners borrowing teacher’s previous utterances to form a new expression. The frequency of specific language forms also influences the acquisition of target language, which, however, still requires more research in terms of the precise account. Comprehensible input, according to Krashen [14] and Long [4], is a vital determinant in the process of SLA in that interactional adjustments and negotiated modification of conversation can facilitate SLA of a learner. Though there were some oppositions against this proposal [15] [16] [10], Ellis holds the view that this factor serves important purposes. Still, the relationship between input and intake affects the route, which involves the consideration of the internal mechanisms of a learner. Previous studies of input and interaction in SLA provide discussions on the topic of L2 learning. Further research can be conducted to investigate various elements that contribute to SLA.

2.3. Theoretical Framework-SETT Framework
From social constructivist views, second language acquisition in a classroom occurs with the joint efforts of engagement between teachers and learners [17] [18] [19]. In terms of classroom interaction, Walsh [20] proposed the SETT framework, which sets out to reflect upon practices conducted in the classrooms
with regard to pedagogical goals and interactional features under four different classroom modes. Managerial Mode is highly related to teachers’ discourse on classroom management. It allows more contributions from learners during the interaction, with an outstanding occurrence of IRF pattern [21], and the goals in such a mode are related to the study of teaching materials. The Skills and Systems Mode focuses mainly on learning language forms as objectives, thus featuring more behaviors, such as scaffolding, teacher turns, and form-focused feedback. Classroom Context Mode aims at promoting the oral expression of learners, achieved through maximized engagement of learners coupled with more referential questions that stimulate individual ideas. Given that the quality of teacher talk outweighs the quantity in terms of importance [22], the SETT framework provides a more useful tool for teachers, with which classroom activities can be observed in a retrospective manner, and delineated with goals to be achieved and features to appreciate. Though teacher talk comprises varied forms, it can facilitate the comprehension of teacher’s questioning in the L2 classroom and is therefore adopted as the main source of the theoretical framework for this thesis.

3. Research Method

In this section, Conversation Analysis is conducted upon extracts taken from different stages of the classroom. The analysis mainly focuses on the questions used by the teacher in terms of the effects on the improvement of learning opportunities and outcomes of learners. The study is primarily based on the SETT framework, with reference to theories about the comprehensible input in SLA as well as Zone of Proximal Development, to investigate how questions contribute to acquisition of new language forms, improvement of language skills, or more chances for learners to practice the second language.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis of Questioning in Skills and Systems Mode

In the first clip (See Appendix A), the students were asked to fill in the blanks with the chosen words from a word box. The first question from the teacher in Line 04 received an unexpected reply from a student who said “I don’t know”, so the teacher answered with a teacher echo, “You don’t know?” The use of question here worked as a confirmation check, to make sure whether she was really unaware of the answer or she was not paying attention. Then the teacher immediately followed with a reply, “Okay, let’s see,” so as not to discourage the learner and to lead her to do the task together. The learner would, in this way, know that it was okay not knowing the answer and that the teacher would guide her when necessary so that the learning opportunity could be increased with more encouragement.

After the reply, the two questions in Line 07 and Line 10 aimed to activate learner’s previous knowledge about a part of speech, which was accessible for them since they had learned such skills before judging the subject-verb-object structure of a sentence. As Bruner [18] argues about ZPD, the two scaffolding questions worked by bridging what a learner had already known with what a learner should be able to know. The learner immediately gave the answer that was required—“Noun”. The teacher replied by giving an echo “noun” and an evaluation “good”. The echo and evaluation posed positive effects on the learner because the learner’s understanding of sentence structure was checked and strengthened, and the learner was encouraged to further think about the answer to the next step.

After the first step, the teacher continued with another scaffolding question, as in Line 13-14. Such a question led the learner to focus on the meaning of the sentence itself, which could push her to think about the logical connection between the needed answer and the meaning “to move faster”. Also, the teacher did not let other learners to give answers for her, but required that she think about the answer by herself. Learner’s opportunity was boosted because the learner was given some time to use the second language as a tool to understand contextual relations. Finally, the learner got the answer by herself “energy”. The teacher again gave a teacher echo of the correct answer to remind all the learners, as well as an evaluation of “good”, which offered recognition of the learner’s contributions.

In Clip 1, the teacher provided more opportunities for learners with the use of different questions instead of giving direct repair by telling the correct answer right at the beginning, after hearing “I don’t
know.” Since it is likely that simple “exposure” to the answer is not enough for a learner to acquire more knowledge of the target language [10], the teacher transferred the knowledge into comprehensible form by questioning, which enabled the learner to make use of linguistic context (to use a noun after a verb) and extralinguistic context (the prerequisite of moving quickly) and to get the correct answer “energy”. By asking questions, the teacher enhanced learner’s confidence in acquiring L2, practiced the learner’s skills of analyzing part of speech, and gave student time to reach ZPD with scaffolding. The benefits are more than just a correct answer.

4.2. Analysis of Questioning in Materials Mode
In Clip 2 (See Appendix B), the learners’ task was not merely related to language forms, but to use the second language to understand more about the teaching materials. When the teacher asked a learner to find the topic sentence of the paragraph, the learner would need to use what he had known about the meaning and position of the topic sentence to give an answer, so the learner had more opportunities to practice the skill by himself instead of just getting the right sentence from the teacher. However, when the learner said it was the first sentence, the teacher did not just stop here; instead, he used an inviting question in Line 10. This needed the learner to get familiar with the materials by reading out loud. Also, other learners had the chance to listen to the sentence again and see if they could spot inappropriate pronunciation. The skills of pronunciation and listening were practiced at the same time.

In the second task, the learner faced more difficulties because he would need to consider the contextual clues in the materials. The teacher raised display questions first (Line 13-14; See Appendix B), which elicited the learner to understand what he needed to do about the task. Seeing that the student struggled for a while, the teacher then provided scaffolding instruction, which was to help him link the connection between the topic sentence and the main idea. The instruction worked because the time spent in finding the answer was much less than before. By answering “react”, the learner gained more understandings about the main idea, and the skills of finding key words was fostered, thus creating more opportunities for future comprehension of the language. After that, the teacher then used teacher echo and scaffolding questions to help the student get the correct form.

In this clip, learners have more learning opportunities because they were elicited to find the ideas themselves and activate their critical thinking. When faced with a more challenging task, the teacher used display questions to lower the level of difficulty, so the learner would still be willing to participate in the task.

4.3. Analysis of Questioning in Classroom Context Mode
In Clip 3 (See Appendix C), learners were in a different mode where they were trying to use the second language to give their evaluation and ideas, which concerned the classroom context. The learners from the materials had just learned that fear might cause physical ability to go up, but calmness and the ability to focus would worsen, and that doctors, who needed concentration in operation, were not suitable for working with fear. However, then a learner raised a critical question that a doctor might also need fear because of the energy it could stimulate. When the learner was expressing, the teacher used questions of “yes?” “okay?” to provide clarification requests with minimal repair. The teacher tried to ensure more opportunities for the learner to use the second language to express her ideas.

Getting the idea, the teacher then converted it into a task-based set of questions that all the learners needed to think about in the classroom. Here it was not just about exploring the materials, but also about their own evaluation of the situation and the relation between the job and the given context. The questions in Line 19-20 (See Appendix E) aimed to draw more responses from the learners. When a learner was giving answers unrelated to the topic, the teacher still gave minimal interference before the learner finished speaking. The teacher echo and positive evaluation shown in Line 31 (See Appendix E) worked as encouragement for the learner, but the afterward feedback functioned as scaffolding for all the learners to focus on the possible direction toward answering this question.

After this turn, the question used here stimulated peer communication and pair work, which can be seen rather commonly in language learning classrooms [23]. The learners were all actively thinking about
the situation, which proved increased learning opportunities. Finding that the learners were going astray again in the thinking process, the teacher raised a display question in Line 50 (See Appendix E) so as to give them more support for the answer. This question was not just about eliciting an answer of “yes” or “no”, but rather about giving support for them to reach the ZPD with the correct area of acquired knowledge. After that, the teacher echoed with and gave feedback to one important answer, “encourage” because this was one step forward towards the understanding of this topic. Then, to further lead the learners, the teacher raised display questions (Line 66-75; See Appendix F&G). These questions here were scaffolding questions that could help students link the general question with situations they were familiar with, and by answering correctly, they would understand that in order to answer the original question, they would need to find other emotions as counterparts. The final question in Line 86-87 (See Appendix H) worked as an instruction for students to continue thinking, opening up opportunities for more discussion in the future.

In this case, the teacher was concerned with generating classroom context mode, so minimal repair was given to students, and referential questions were generated more often in order to encourage their ideas and thinking. To view from Wilen’s classification, questions were designed in evaluative and divergent forms, which required complex levels of cognitive activities of learners [6]. The learning opportunities were increased because learners were given more chances to express themselves and improve oral fluency.

4.4. Summary
The analysis of the data above can be summarized in the following table based on Walsh’s SETT Framework [20]:

| Clip | Mode               | Interactional Features                                                                 | Pedagogical Goals Involved                                                                 | Learning Outcome and Opportunities                                                                 |
|------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1    | Skills & Systems   | The use of scaffolding; Teacher echo; IRE pattern.                                       | To produce correct forms; To practice in sub-skills.                                      | Got the correct answer to questions; Practiced skills of analysing sentence structure; Were encouraged to give response in target language. |
| 2    | Materials          | Confirmation check; IRE pattern; Display questions; The use of scaffolding; Teacher echo; Clarification requests; | To elicit responses in relation to the material; To manipulate the target language; To practice in sub-skills. | Identified the topic sentence of a paragraph; Practiced the skill of finding topic sentence; Practiced the skill of target language pronunciation; Found the key words by summarizing the given text. |
| 3    | Classroom Context  | IRF pattern; The use of scaffolding; Display questions; Extended learner turns; Referential questions; Content feedback. | To elicit responses in relation to the material; To enable learners to express themselves clearly; To establish a context; To promote oral fluency | Got the chance to express ideas using target language; Increased interest in target language; Formed individual critical thinking about given topic; Practiced oral language use. |

From different class modes, questions used for varied purposes showed different interactional features. The learning opportunities were advanced from the observation of the learning outcomes, where learners acquired new language forms, practiced language skills, and utilized the target language to engage in actual discussion.
5. Conclusion

In terms of questioning, it is important to evaluate and consider students’ learning. From this case study, the aim is to investigate whether questioning has been used with the appropriate outcome from learners. Three extracts from the classroom under different learning modes are taken for detailed conversation analysis, through which the functions of each question are discussed in a related context based on the SETT framework and relevant SLA theories. Research findings are that teacher mostly achieved the pedagogical goals by raising questions in appropriate situations. SETT can serve as a powerful framework of reflection and self-assessment over previous practices of questioning and provide guidelines for improvement. This analysis is conducted on a small fraction of the classroom study with limited data presented, and the investigation relies, to a large extent, on one theoretical framework, which may require further research with more comprehensive inclusion of analyzing structures.

To conclude, this research focuses on the use of questioning under an ESL course in China. Detailed analysis has been given on questioning as a specific section of classroom interaction, which provides insights into how interaction actually functions in SLA. Still, it has served as a step forward for the application of SETT evaluation in second language learning for junior learners of other languages, which can provide a reference for the future study on SLA and other educational settings.

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Appendixes

The clips upon which observation and related analysis are conducted are as follows.

Appendix A. Clip 1

01 TEA: The first one? Gloria. What is your answer.
02 ST1: (1.5) I don’t know.
03 TEA: You don’t know? Okay, let’s see. =
04 TEA: Then nuh. The fear gave them? =Well, You gave::
05 TEA: somebody? something. -
06 TEA: So first of “all we can see that we should-
07 TEA: maybe we should put a=-
08 ST1: =noun.
09 TEA: n noun here, good. ((point at the student))=
10 TEA: =a noun. Then, =well, =if we h^ave th^is thing?
11 TEA: we can move quickly. Th^en it’s um?
12 ST2: =Ener-
13 TEA: =SHH. ((point at student 1)) What ^is it, Gloria?
14 ST1: (1.0) energy
15 TEA: Ya. It’s (0.5) energy. okay? It’s energy. good.

Appendix B. Clip 2

01 TEA: ((Need learners to find topic sentence and key word of the paragraph))
02 03 TEA: Okay. Then, the third paragraph. Let’s see.
04 TEA: The third paragraph. Then:: I’m going to ask,
05 TEA: um:: let me see? (0.2) um Dongxuan.
06 TEA: The third paragraph? (2.0) What is the topic
07 TEA: sentence he’re.
08 09 The first one.
10 TEA: (0.8) Then please read it out?
11 ST2: (1.2) Our bodies react in a number- in a number of
12 ST2: different w’ays. when we are in a dangerous situation.
13 TEA: Yes g’ood. Then, here. What can we put in the blank. =
14 TEA: our bod^ies- it is talk’ing about our bodies what=
15 TEA: when we face d’anger.
16 ST2: (3.2) (thinking about the answer!)
17 TEA: You keep- you need to find w’ords from the f’irst sentence.
18 ST1: =react. =
19 TEA: =re’act? React is a verb. (0.5) So we should change
20 TEA: it into::?
21 ST2: =Reaction.
22 TEA: Reaction. Okay. good. Reactions. when we face danger.
23 TEA: This is about the third paragraph. Okay?
Appendix C. Clip 3

01 TEA: Yes, Gloria? ((turn to student 1))
02 ST1: Um, you know, some operations, (0.5) uh, (0.5) takes
03 ST1: a lot of time right? Eight hours = and (0.2) if a
04 ST1: doctor is not enough um- ((clear throat)) if someone
05 ST1: is fear the foo-the physical ability will go up?
06 TEA: Yes?
07 ST1: And uh an operation is eight hours (0.3) and if a doctor
08 ST1: is not (0.2) afraid, or has fear.
09 TEA: Okay,
10 ST1: Uh, how can she or he. (0.5)
11 TEA: Have more energy.
12 ST1: Yeah?
13 TEA: Okay? Gloria got a good point. ((turn to all students))
14 TEA: I want you te think about it? (0.5) right? =
15 TEA: So you see, how well for example, during operation,
16 TEA: a doctor may need to have a lot of energy. (0.5) So,
17 TEA: If the doctor is not afraid? Then, according to the
18 TEA: author have. Well, we, (0.2) the doctor may not have
19 TEA: so much energy. Then how can the doctor go on with the operation.
20 TEA: (0.2) go on with the operation.
21 ST2: (0.5) When you just (eat more content)
22 STS: ((discussing with each other))
23 TEA: Gloria made some good question, right?
24 ST2: I want you to think about it? (0.5) right?=
25 TEA: =Bus um ==
26 TEA: =Tintin? Yes? [What is your point?
27 ST2: [um when you are doing the operation. And
28 ST2: you can't sings, but dis sing are like simple skill to
29 ST2: doctor, like if you are too nervais, you are having
30 ST2: oh shay, and uh you may cut some important organs. =
31 TEA: =Lab. You may cut some important organs. Yes.- But,
32 TEA: But, Gloria is talking about it in another way.
33 TEA: Is talking about the energy.

Appendix D. Clip 4

20 TEA: (0.2) go on with the operation.
21 ST2: (0.5) When you just (eat more content)
22 STS: ((discussing with each other))
23 TEA: Gloria made some good question, right?
24 ST2: I want you to think about it? (0.5) right?=
25 TEA: =Bus um ==
26 TEA: =Tintin? Yes? [What is your point?
27 ST2: [um when you are doing the operation. And
28 ST2: you can't sings, but dis sing are like simple skill to
29 ST2: doctor, like if you are too nervais, you are having
30 ST2: oh shay, and uh you may cut some important organs. =
31 TEA: =Lab. You may cut some important organs. Yes.- But,
32 TEA: But, Gloria is talking about it in another way.
33 TEA: Is talking about the energy.

Appendix E. Clip 5

48 TEA: Huh? I want you to think about another question. -
49 TEA: That may?; help you answer this question.
50 TEA: Can we get energy from fear?
51 STS: No, ((answer at different speed, some shaking head))
52 ST3: You can get it from food. =
53 TEA: =When? When? can we have more energy.
54 ST1: [spirit.
55 TEA: According to your own experience. (1.0)
56 ST4: (1.0) [sleep.
57 ST5: [great.

Appendix F. Clip 6

58 ST6: (0.2) food. -
59 TEA: Wh'en will you (0.2) have more energy. (1.0)
60 ST7: Encourage you-
61 TEA: If you have encouragement, maybe? that can be one way?=
62 ST2: [have some coffee-
63 TEA: Well, think about this, think about this. I want you
64 TEA: think about this situation-
65 STS: ([all started talking])
66 TEA: When the athletes (0.2) in an Olympic Games, in an
67 TEA: Olympic Game. (0.2) are all competing. Are they all
Appendix G. Clip 7
68 TEA: afraid?
69 STS: No. ((answering in different speed))
70 TEA: If they are not afraid, how are they:
71 TEA: during the competition? -
72 ST1: excited.
73 TEA: They are excited. So, (0.2) well in this way, maybe-
74 TEA: power can also- energy can also come from another
75 TEA: feeling called?
76 ST5: (1.0) Excited.
77 TEA: \[excitement.\]
78 ST1: 
79 TEA: Yes. Excitement. Well, actually? Gloria gave a good
80 TEA: example. Gave a good question. Well, (0.8) but, um,
81 TEA: actually? In reality? We do not become stronger
82 TEA: only when we are afraid. We can become stronger in
83 TEA: a lot of ways. (0.2) And, (0.2) Being afraid is just
84 TEA: one of the situation. (1.0) So, Yeah.
85 ST5: ((nodded))
86 TEA: This is one question. I want you to keep thinking about
87 TEA: it okay?