Teachers Use of Questioning in the ESL Classroom: Questioning as a Teaching Strategy

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Abstract

The employment of questioning as an instructional tool has always been considered part of the teaching tradition, and has a long history. The focus on teacher questioning recently has been due to the opportunities that teacher questioning can provide for students to become actively engaged while also developing thinking skills. This paper describes an ongoing study of three teachers' classroom questioning behavior in an ESL proficiency course in a public university in Malaysia. The study aims to investigate the types of questions teachers ask in class and the responses elicited from students. The study is conducted on a small scale and is in-depth in nature, using three instruments for triangulation to help to validate the findings. Data is collected using a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview protocol to determine teacher rationale for teacher questions used in the classroom, and video-taped classroom interactions between teacher and students. This paper presents the preliminary findings of the study based on data collected from the video recordings of the class sessions. This paper also recommends strategies to promote teacher questioning and student learning based on the preliminary findings.

Keywords: Classroom questioning, English as a Second Language (ESL), teaching tool, pedagogy

1.0   Introduction

According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, all students nationwide will be equipped with Higher Order Thinking (HOT) skills, to be imparted through classroom teaching and co-curricular activities. There are growing concerns among educators, employers, and public officials about the number of students entering the workforce lacking in critical thinking skills. This has resulted in a closer look at the way classes are conducted, including those in higher education.

Teacher questioning in ESL classrooms cover varying functions and aspects such as disciplinary ("Can you please be quiet?"), clarification ("Do you mean to say..?"), rhetorical ("That wasn't so difficult, was it?), and questions related to language learning itself. While the main objective of questioning in the ESL classroom is to produce language competence in students, other concerns, especially that of developing students' critical thinking, are just as valid. Teacher's use of questioning in the ESL classrooms provides excellent opportunities. During the questioning students are asked to express opinions and guided into giving supporting reasons and justifications for their opinions. Nevertheless, Long and Sato (1983) found that teachers asked a significantly larger number of display questions, that is questions for which teachers already know the answers. Paul and Elder (2001) state that thinking is primarily driven by questions; hence the right types of questions by teachers will produce the right type of 'thinking'. Low order questioning should be followed by higher order questioning to lead students into elaboration of ideas, justification of claims, illustration of opinions, and the like.

Classroom discourse, specifically teachers' feedback and response to student answers also has an impact on students' cognitive processes (Chin, 2006). In other words, the teachers' follow up questions or feedback based on the initial student response is important since it can serve as ascaffolding for student learning.

2.0   Classroom Questioning

Classroom questioning and its employment as an instructional tool, has been considered part of the teaching tradition for some time and has had a long history (Sanders, 1966, Nunan & Lamb, 1996). The volume of research on questioning as a teaching strategy is also reflective of how widely it is used (Gall, 1984).

Researchers have developed a general system for classifying questions for purposes of analysis but they are simply referred to as fact or lower order questions, and higher cognitive or higher order questions. Lower order questions require students to recall information previously learned and do not require students to do very much thinking. Higher order questions, however, require analysis and independent thinking in their responses (Gall, 1984) and is synonymous with critical thinking. The most common and much used method of questioning to promote learning in the classroom is low order teacher-questioning (Hickman, 2000) typically associated with the didactic method. Teachers spend most of their time in class asking low-level cognitive questions (Wilen, 1991); in its simplest form, questioning is used as a means for checking understanding and for recall of what has been taught. It does not involve active learning or active student participation and is teacher-centered. Questions are mostly low-level comprehension type questions with clear-cut answers. Educators have also used Bloom's Taxonomy to categorize questioning and thinking into six levels leading to increasingly complex intellectual skills. Long and Sato (1983) classified teacher questions in the ESL classrooms which included 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 were epistemic. Furthermore, the most commonly used type questions were display questions, while the most commonly used under echoic questions, are confirmation checks. Long and Sato (1983）refer to the display questions as knowledge-checking questions. Display questions are those which the teacher as questioner knows the answer beforehand. Those to which the teacher does not know the answer to are categorized as referential questions; they require thinking, interpretation, and analysis on the part of the person responding to the questions. Display type of questions should not necessarily be viewed as of lower quality. Many subject areas, in fact, require students to grasp and remember the basics before negotiating more abstract and complex issues (Dean, 1986).

Teachers and educators generally recognize the value of low-level questions and their place in the learning process. Display questions form the central resources of language teachers to produce language (Lee, 2006). Nevertheless, knowledge that is memorized does not necessarily represent a high level of understanding (Sanders, 1966). Several studies have indicated the positive impact of teachers' open-ended questions on language achievements (Rivera et al. 2005; Wasilk et al. 2006; Whitehurst et al. 1994)**.**

The concept that teacher questions in general help in student learning seem to be supported a study (Buck 1997) which found that random oral questioning during lectures and discussions not only promoted consistent preparation and active participation but also resulted in higher course achievement among undergraduate students compared to control subjects. Long and Sato (1983) and Brock (1986) investigated the role of questions in the ESL classroom and found that referential questions have the capability to encourage learner oral production. The level of questioning should be raised systematically and teachers have to plan accordingly to ensure appropriate use of questions (Dean, 1986). The important point is to move beyond recall or recitation of learningd.

Theoretical Background

Bandura proposes behaviors that are socially learned through observation and reinforcement. A students' cognition, the environment, and behavior play important roles in the students learning of new knowledge and skills. In the classroom, both teachers and students thus collectively form the learning environment which students learn through observation, imitation, and role modeling, among others. According to Vygotsky (1978) learning does not occur in isolation but through interaction and dialogue with another person. In the context of the classroom, for instance, when a student is provided with the appropriate assistance by another who is more knowledgeable or capable, the student is better able to

achieve the task. Teacher questioning can be used effectively in scaffolding for students learning. When teachers ask appropriate questions, the teacher is capable of guiding students thinking through the responses elicited. One of the most important aspects of the ESL classroom is the teacher student interaction since this not only produces language, it affects student engagement and achievement (Kerry, 2002).

Statement of problem

A study on the employability of Malaysian university graduates found that English communication skills have significant effects on employability (Morshidi S, Rosni B, Lim H.E, Mohamed N.K. 2004). Universiti Malaysia Pahang offers a proficiency class for students who did not meet the minimum English requirement for entrance into public universities. These are students who failed to get a minimum score of Band 3 in MUET (Malaysian University Entrance Test). A common complaint of the teachers is that students are passive and there is very little interaction in the class despite teacher questioning. Hence, a study of teacher questioning at the university is crucial at this time due to the problem of the current poor student performance in in an English proficiency course at the university. The objectives of the study are therefore to:

- investigate the type of teachers' classroom question the ESL classroom
- determine teacher rationale for employing questions
- investigate students responses toward teacher questioning

Examining teacher questioning would give an insight into the types of questions teachers generally use in class to encourage interaction and better oral production. The study will hopefully improve teacher questioning and student speaking English proficiency.

3.0 Methodology

3.1. The Setting and Participants

Three teachers (Teacher A, B and C) were selected for the study based on random sampling. The teachers comprised one male and two females; all three teach at the same public university in Malaysia. Teacher A is male with 6 years teaching experience; Teacher B, has 2 years of teaching experience, while Teacher C, has 20 years of teaching experience. All three teach the same course, a basic ESL proficiency course. There were a total of 79 students (58% male, 42% female) participating in the study; all are students from various Engineering and Computer Science faculties. Students of Teachers A, B and C were undergraduates who had scored Band 3 or below in MUE), an area actually categorized as having low proficiency ESLstudents. The ESL course is compulsory for students who scored Band 3 or below in MUET. Students have to obtain a 'Pass' grade to be able to further their studies at the university.

This is a mixed method study; it is conducted on a small scale and is in-depth in nature, using the three instruments for triangulation which would help to validate the findings. The data sources were a student questionnaire, a semi-structured interview of teachers and video-taped sessions of teaching and learning during the ESL classroom sessions. The interview questions elicited each teacher's rational and belief of their instructional strategies involving display and referential questions, factors affecting their decisions on what type of questions to use, and her experiences with the students' responses to questions. Transcripts of the class sessions lessons were analyzed, with particular attention paid to interactions that involved questions. Transcripts of the teacher interviews were also analysed.

3.2 Data Analysis

Two different types of analysis were conducted for the transcriptions of teacher questioning and students' responses, (i) a top-down manner of analysis of teachers' questions where a predetermined coding scheme is used to quantify the open and closed-ended questions; (ii) a bottom-up approach for analysis of students' responses where patterns in students' responses were noted and identified.

Since this is an on-going study and for purposes of this paper, only particular aspects of teacher questioning behavior and students responses to the different categories of questioning through video taping of the class sessions are analysed and reported.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 indicates the total number of questions asked by the three teachers in the ESL classrooms in a two-hour class session.

Table 1. The total number of Display Questions and Referential Questions

Teacher	No of Questions
A	228
B	77
C	344
Total	649

Table 2 shows the percentages of Display and Referential Questions asked in a two-hour class session for the three teachers involved in the study.

Table 2. Percentages of Display and Referential questions

Teacher	Display	Referential	Total
A	54.8	8.4	63.2
B	22.0	15.6	37.6
C	50.3	3.5	53.7

The percentage of display questions for all three teachers is significantly higher than that of the referential questions. It was interesting to note that the rest of the questions came under other categories such as comprehension checks ("all right?", "Do you understand?") and confirmation ("Student: I no well"; Teacher: You mean you are not well?").

Transcription from the video recorded class sessions were closely studied and two excerpts of group interactions were randomly selected from the data obtained. These were analyzed for the duration of interaction (in minutes) which resulted from the teacher questions. These were then added up and a mean calculated for each type of question under Display Questions and Referential Questions.

Question Type	Number of Questions	Interaction mean
Display	23	0.43
Referential	4	2.24

It was found that when the two means were compared, Referential Questions resulted in longer interaction with a mean of 2.24 minutes compared to display questions with a mean of 0.43 minutes. Teachers also had a tendency to use follow up questions or probing questions to scaffold and assist students in their responses when asking referential questions.

Teacher interviews

All teachers stated that their questions were spontaneous and were not planned before hand. They teachers generally knew what are Display and Referential questions and the benefits to asking Referential questions but were unaware that their percentage of display questions were significantly higher than referential questions. Although all were aware of the benefits of wait time none of the teachers gave any significant wait time after each question. Teacher C, especially had a high tendency to self answer the questions he posed. All teachers agreed that sudents' weakness in English was a strong determinant of their teaching and questioning behaviour.

Conclusion

The study focused on teacher questioning, the interactions that resulted from questioning and also teacher behaviour and rationale for questioning. Several conclusions can be derived from the results of the study so far:

- A major function of teachers use of questions other than then those investigated were comprehension check ("Understand? "All right?") and confirmation ("Student: I no feel well; Teacher: You mean you don't feel well?).
- The behaviour of teachers for questioning was shaped by the fact that students were from the low proficiency level and teachers felt that they had to constantly ensure that students were following and understood what was being taught.
- It was observed that the questions mostly asked were focused on content and students' background knowledge. Responses elicited specific, predetermined answers and required very little thinking or analysis.
- Teachers failed to use the opportunity for encouraging participation and guiding students with turn-taking with refrential questions. This type of interaction should be encouragesdas it is not only linked to language achievement but also soft skills; the main input was only from the teachers themselves.
- While teachers were aware of the significance of referential questions they failed to perceive its importance in relation to oral production and language aquisition.

Based on the conclusions several recommendations can be made particularly in the area of improvement of teacher questions and questioning techniques for those teaching basic proficiency English language course.

- Teachers should be taught how to design and plan questions before lessons to encourage student participation and elicitation and to guide a pattern of interaction in the classroom.
- Questioning should include the use of the different types of questions to elicit different types of student responses with emphasis on referential questions to lead to increased oral production.
- Create a warm and safe environment in the clasroom so students will volunteer responses.
- Better use of non verbal behaviour such as nodding, good eye contact, smiling and use of gestures that encourage students response.
- Concerted efforts by teachers to extend wait time after questioning to improve students response.
- In service courses or workshops for teachers should be conducted to improve questioning skills.

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