

A Study on Teacher's Questioning Practice in an ESL Learning Context in Hong Kong

Yu Pan, Yiting Chen*

Wenzhou Medical University, Wenzhou 325000, Zhejiang Province, China

*Corresponding author: Yiting Chen, panyu@wmu.edu.cn

Copyright: © 2022 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: This empirical study intends to explore the questioning behaviors of an English as a second language (hereinafter referred to as ESL) teacher in Hong Kong by quantitatively looking at the distribution of the two types of questions, namely display questions and referential questions, as well as by qualitatively evaluating the universally accepted functions of the questions and the effectiveness of the modification techniques used to enhance the factual value of the questions. Data-based explorations challenging the traditional views toward questions are critically presented, and new findings are excavated and advocated. Pedagogical implications are considerably raised as they serve as a theoretical framework to be applied and further analyzed in future real-life EFL and ESL settings, so as to realize better assessment for learning.

Keywords: Questioning; ESL; Questioning behaviors; Assessment for learning

Online publication: August 12, 2022

1. Introduction

It has been pointed out that second language learners have considerably few opportunities to use language as a communication tool both, inside and outside the classroom among peers^[1]. This opinion implies and highlights that teachers are considered a significant source for learners in second language communication. Recently, the interest in “teacher talk,” which includes modifications to teachers’ speech, questions, and explanations, reflects the importance of such “talk” in language teaching. Previous studies on ESL teaching have specifically indicated the need for teachers’ questioning; “in second language classrooms, where learners often do not have a great number of tools..., [teachers’] questions provide necessary stepping stones to communication^[2,3].”

Questions facilitate comprehension input in classroom setting^[4]. Wu claims that teachers’ questioning is a vital part of classroom activity and is the only way in which teachers are able to gauge students’ perceptions of knowledge^[5]. Referential questions (RQs) and display questions (DQs) not only generate the nature of classroom interaction^[6], but also determine whether the teacher is asking for information that he or she already knows (display) or does not know (referential) in language classrooms^[7].

Qualitatively, Brock and Barnes contend that RQs, which are not text-based, invite students to draw answers from their own experiences and viewpoints, increase learners’ output, and are more likely to elicit authentic responses than DQs^[8,9], which require short or even one-word answers^[10]. Quantitatively, Martin^[6], Baetens^[11], Chua-Wong, and McLellan^[12] discovered that DQs dominate classroom interaction. Contrary to the recommendations of many researchers on the use of RQs for the sake of the communicative use of target language, research has shown that RQs only play a minor role in typical classroom question and answer (Q&A) activities.

In order to ensure that the questions are comprehensible to students, teachers tend to modify their ways of addressing questions by speaking more slowly and using simpler syntax and basic vocabulary ^[13]. In addition, integrating modification devices such as comprehension check with questioning modification increases students' response and boosts their language use ability. Questioning strategies are explored by a number of scholars, including Matra ^[14], Ndun ^[15], and Sujiarti ^[16].

Using questions to provoke critical thinking skills among students is investigated by Zainudin and two other researchers in 2019 ^[17] with potential research gap in the difficulty of questions to meet students' zone of proximal development (ZPD), indicating a lack of effective investigation on how teachers' questions could be adjusted so that more students will be better directed to formulating their ideas and the insufficient efforts in examining questions linguistically as a means of classroom interaction. Jiang's study is based on the questioning and assessment in China's tertiary institutions and investigates how teachers deploy questions to stimulate students' thinking and allow responses to inform pedagogic decisions ^[18]. The study, however, simply focused more on distinguishing the portion or distribution of question types and reclaimed the functions of a particular type of question in general without studying its assessment merits or particularities in that specific assessment context.

Bearing in mind that the three major types of teachers' questions in China's university classrooms have been identified as referential questions, display questions, and sequential questions ^[19], this study is based on the observations made in a secondary ESL classroom in Hong Kong supported via discourse analysis with systematic knowledge and of various views about teachers' questioning behaviors in exploring the relationship between teachers' questioning behaviors and students' learning through questions. It is worth exploring how questions can help create opportunities for students to receive comprehension input and communication that promotes L2 learning, how the modifications of questions make the input more comprehensible and increase their value ^[20], whether the stereotypes toward different questions will be "questioned" in real-life teaching, and what the new functions can be endowed with.

2. Study

2.1. Research setting and participants

The study was conducted in a Form 2 English classroom in a Band 3 middle school in Hong Kong. The English teacher, Miss Mak, has been teaching in that school for about 5 years. She holds a postgraduate certificate for teachers of English (PGTE certificate) and has always been highly praised for her passion and dedication for teaching by her colleagues and students even before the research was officially commenced. The students' English proficiency was not impressive, and they lacked oral practice. Therefore, Miss Mak taught them a story set in the teaching syllabus using the "top-down" approach and regularly asked questions to involve students in classroom interaction, thus providing the students more opportunities for oral practice. Altogether, six lessons were observed, and relevant conversations demonstrating how the teacher utilized questions for pedagogical purposes other than classroom management were recorded and analyzed. All names mentioned in this paper are fictitious in consideration of ethical principles.

2.2. Data analysis and results

Quantitative investigation was firstly deployed to evaluate the distribution of RQs and DQs. Comparison in terms of the number of words contained in the questions and students' answers will also be discussed. The conversation excerpts that are transcribed verbatim collected in Miss Mak's lessons also record the types of questions.

Excerpt one

T: Do you know what “grab” means in this sentence (**DQ**)? What does “grab” mean? Does anyone know? Jacky, would you please have a try?

S: Catch.

T: Right, good try. So, “grab” here means “catch.” Okay, now, can anyone make a sentence by using the word “grab”? Can you? I will give you one minute to think about it, you can discuss with your partner.

One minute later

T: Okay, time’s up. Mary, can you tell me what you have come up with (**RQ**)? Have you made any sentences?

S: Yes, er, “He grabbed my pen.”

T: Okay, good. (The sentence was written on the blackboard by the teacher.) I think this is a good sentence, can you tell me why (**DQ** and **RQ**)? Okay, do you think this sentence is complete (**DQ**)? Is this sentence complete (**DQ**)?

S: Yes.

T: Yes, because it has three main parts, right? So, what is the subject (**DQ**)?

S: “He.”

T: Right, good. What about the verb and the object (**DQ**)? What is the verb in this sentence (**DQ**)?

S: “Grabbed.”

T: Yes, the verb is “grab.” What is the object (**DQ**)?

S: “Pen.”

T: Good, good. “My pen” is the object, right? It seems you are all experts now. Okay, so, the sentence is complete. What else about this sentence is good (**RQ** and **DQ**)? What else is good about this sentence (**RQ** and **DQ**)?

Note: T: teacher; S: a single student

In this example, the ratio of DQs to RQs is 5 to 2. The DQs in this example include asking for the meaning of the word “grab” and a part of the sentence formed by the student, which call for the recognition or recall of factual information. They are mainly designed and addressed for linguistic concern and are at low cognitive levels. In contrast, the two major RQs proposed by Miss Mak, which were drawn from the above example, catered for testing students’ cognitive development, communicative language use, and recall for evaluation or judgment. In this example, Miss Mak spoke a total of 181 words, whereas the students only responded with 11. Notwithstanding that Miss Mak often modified the students’ answers into more completed ones and repeated their answers to consolidate their understanding and perception of knowledge, she did not provide them enough opportunities to contribute to practice and interaction. As a result, this situation may limit students’ language output.

The quality of students’ pushed language output ^[21] suggests the cruciality of questioning strategies. One important factor that influences the effectiveness of teachers’ questioning is whether the questions are comprehensible for students to generate language output ^[13]. The example shows how Miss Mak modified her questions to benefit the students.

Excerpt two

T: Um...how was Jessica’s flying lesson (spoken slowly with pauses)? *<long pause>* How was Jessica’s flying lesson *<short pause>* she had from Miss Strega? Can anyone answer that?

Ss: [Silence]

(Continued on next page)

(Continued from previous page)

- T: Anybody? <short pause> Do you know the answer, Danny (speaking to Danny)? Okay? How was Jessica's flying lesson (in a low voice and at a slow pace, while anticipating student's response)? <long pause> What do you think? <short pause>
- S: It was terrible.
- T: Yeah, it was terrible, right? Do you agree with Danny?
- Ss: Yes.
- T: Good! So, everybody, how was Jessica's flying lesson? <short pause>
- Ss: It was terrible.
- T: Great. Now, can we move on to the next question?
- S: Okay

Note: T: teacher; S: a single student; Ss: students

In excerpt two, Miss Mak demonstrated that giving students sufficient “wait time” is an important strategy to modify questions with no forthcoming response. Although this factor has been proven important in L1 classrooms ^[22], additional wait time allows L2 students to construct their responses, and it may fit better with their cultural norms while interacting ^[6], especially among Chinese SLA learners. Therefore, this example demonstrates that pauses and wait time are crucial for stimulating students' language production, and that, if delivered correctly, the two factors will also boost students' confidence and motivation in learning.

Excerpt three

- T: Okay, class. What did Miss Strega say about Jessica's flying skills?
- Ss: [Silence]
- T: Did Miss Strega praise Jessica? Did she say, “Well done, Jessica!”?
- Ss: No.
- T: Right, can Jessica fly well?
- Ss: No.
- T: That's right. Do you think Jessica's flying skills are good or not good?
- Ss: Not good.
- T: Good.

Note: T: teacher; Ss: students

Simplifications on grammatical difficulty, which is a strategy known syntactic simplification when asking questions, has been shown to assist students' comprehension ^[23] and is demonstrated in excerpt three. In this example, Miss Mak's initial question is an embedded question. The reported speech structure in her initiating question was too difficult for the students to understand. Hence, in order to make the question easier and more comprehensible, she then changed the question from a WH question to a Y/N question. She then kept using Y/N questions to minimize the linguistic demand made on the students and to guide them to express the exact words “not good.” Such a result shows that grammatical adjustments can make questions cognitively simpler and more accessible in terms of meaning, and syntactic modification helps students to understand questions better and increase their language production ^[6].

Excerpt four

- T: Okay, class. Which one of the four animals do you think is Jessica's mascot?
Ss: [Silence]
T: Ok, let me put it in this way. So, here are four animals, they are said to be the mascot... <long pause>, (1) the lucky animals of young witches <short pause>, understand?
Ss: Yes.
T: Good, so which one do you think is Jessica's?
S: Cat.
T: Good try, but there are two kinds of cats here, which specific one is Jessica's? <short pause> (2) Which one of these two cats is Jessica's? (3) The black one or the white one?
Ss: White.
T: Correct. The white one. Good.

Note: T: teacher; S: a single student; Ss: students

The third modification strategy that was used by Miss Mak in questioning is rephrasing questions by making lexical modification and providing clues. In this example, Miss Mak mainly used lexical modifications and provision of clues to rephrase the questions so as to better evoke students' responses. This simple form of paraphrasing, which is also considered as a pseudo-wait time, makes the information in the questions more comprehensible to students and provides an opportunity for students to ponder about the question. In that way, they will be able to respond to the questions and obtain the opportunity to practice.

3. Discussion

Van Lier has questioned the value of drawing a distinction between the functions of display and referential questions ^[24]. A teacher's questions may serve different functions with different purposes when looked at from different perspectives in different circumstances. Determining the functions of a teacher's questions by purely looking at the types of questions is not enough. The intentions or purposes behind the questions can, to larger extent, powerfully interpret the questions' functions.

Excerpt five

- T: Today, we are going to read a story called "Witch-in-Training." Do you know what a witch is?
Ss: Um... a witch is a...
T: Pardon? What is a witch? Can anyone answer my question? I'm sure you all have heard about a witch before, right?
Ss: Yes, a woman.
T: Yes, good, a woman. Is she a common woman? Or does she have certain abilities that other women do not have?
Ss: She can fly.
T: Good. What else?
Ss: She can fly with a whisk.
T: Yes, a whisk.

Note: T: teacher; Ss: students

Apparently, Miss Mak has raised some DQs, which are traditionally seen as only allowing students to demonstrate some previously learned knowledge without having any communicative merits. The teacher clearly knew the answers to the questions, yet the students seemed to be prompted into expressing how much they knew about the word "witch." However, in the circumstance of this example, the questions were

raised to introduce the reading topic rather than to test students' knowledge. Miss Mak's purpose of using these questions was not to stimulate complex and lengthy linguistic output from students, but rather elicit direct and precise answers, which may help them better understand the content and the topic of the story. Hence, the DQs in this case are used to test students' general understanding about a "witch" rather than gauging their previous knowledge, and they did provide students the opportunity to communicate with the teacher in order to polish their answers to be more precise and accurate. The functions of DQs in this example ostensibly differ from and even contrast with the presumed functions mentioned in the literature review section. Therefore, considering the intention behind a question may lead to the cognition of the underlying and authentic functions of certain type of questions.

Secondly, it is also interesting to challenge the stereotypical assumption that questions initiated by teachers in classroom interaction can only fall into two main categories. De facto, there are questions that are neither purely display nor referential because their functions in certain circumstance cannot be simply ranked into either RQ or DQ as shown in excerpt six.

Excerpt six

- T: Er, if you were the young witch, what advantages you may have (1)? Like what good things you may have in your life?
- S: I can fly.
- T: I see, but why is that good? Why is it good for you to fly (2)?
- S: I can get up from bed later.
- T: I see, you mean you don't need to get up so early for school, right?
- S: Yes.
- T: Good, any others (3)? Any?
- S: No.
- T: No more?
- S: Yes, no more. (The student should have responded "no." His "yes" response was due to first language interference.)
- T: Okay. Let's move on. What can you see in the pictures on page 70 to 71. Er, Wendy, what can you see in that big picture?
- S: Witches.
- T: Yes. What do you think they are feeling (4)?
- S: Exciting.
- T: Excited? You mean excited, right?
- S: Yes.

Note: T: teacher; S: a single student

In this example, Miss Mak raised four RQs, containing 77 words in total; however, comparing with the students' responses, there were only 16 words in total. Moreover, the student responded to her question with only one word, which is no more than the number of words in the response to certain RQs. This suggests that in Hong Kong context, RQs may not necessarily result in increased student output or better-quality classroom interaction. Some factors like students' attitude towards questioning and answering behaviors in classroom, their feelings about a certain topic in the question, and their fear of being negatively evaluated by the teacher in front of their peers may also impede their language output in Q&A activities.

4. Pedagogical implications

Students in Hong Kong classrooms seem to be reluctant to answer questions voluntarily or enthusiastically.

Therefore, twofold suggestions are proposed. First of all, teachers should invite individual students, especially the shy ones, at least occasionally to answer questions. Secondly, according to Krashen ^[25], classroom activities that require information change, which is superior to the teacher-fronted situation, are crucial to increasing the generation of conversational production and target language output. This means that the use of new interactive patterns such as pair work or group work, where students are given the opportunity to engage in exploratory talk or negotiation of meaning, should be encouraged to reduce students' fear of answering questions, since the answers are not provided by individuals ^[26].

Modification strategies such as longer "wait time," "syntactic simplification," and "rephrasing questions," which involve lexical modification and provision of clues, allow students to comprehend the questions more easily, and in turn encourage them to be more involved and motivated in learning. For classroom implication, the appropriate use of input modification makes Q&A interaction more genuine and arouses students' motivation sufficiently.

With the significant pedagogical implications, the new findings that classroom questions cannot be simply categorized into fixed types, and that a single, fixed interpretation is insufficient to describe and label the type and quality of questions are noteworthy. Teachers should also consider the issue of questioning from the institutional discourse approach, which sees questioning itself as dynamic, varied, and open to many interpretations ^[27]. Additionally, teachers need to realize that in classrooms, it may not be helpful to rely solely on voluntary responses to general questions; students' attitude and affective preference to certain questions and the topics raised in these questions should be taken into consideration as well, in order to shape teachers' questioning behaviors to be more learner-centered and feeling-oriented.

5. Conclusion

In this research, the key problems and discussion of teachers' questioning are situated in an ESL learning context of a middle school classroom in Hong Kong, with a focus on the qualitative and quantitative nature of teachers' behaviors and the future study direction of teachers' questioning practice in EFL settings. By utilizing discourse analysis in language classrooms, questions were envisaged as an important component in assessment conversations and were featured with "diagnose weaknesses," "built interests to learn," "cultivate student responsibility," "elicit a wealth of learner information," "facilitate the closure of the gap," "cultivate independent learning," and "learning needs were better catered for" ^[28]. Recent studies conducted in Chinese educational contexts in relation to teachers' questioning are more focused on the strategies of improving the effectiveness of questioning in primary and secondary school teaching lessons ^[19].

Future studies are expected to analyze how questions are used in ESL classrooms for realizing assessment for learning ^[29]. One benefit that this study hopes to bring is to bridge the distance between the research on classroom communication and the actual practice of questioning in an ESL educational context, so that teachers' assessment literacy for better teaching and learning can be anticipated and formulated with guidance upon the theoretical framework and pedagogical implications that this study has established.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Farooq M, 1993, Teaching Oral Communication in College Classes. Research Bulletin of Aichi Women's Junior College. General Education and Interdisciplinary Research, 26: 83–92.
- [2] Brown H, 1994, Teaching by Principles, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs.
- [3] Nunan D, 1991, Language Teaching Methodology, Prentice Hall International, Hertfordshire.

- [4] Pica TR, Young R, Doughty C, 1987, The Impact of Interaction on Comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(4): 737–758.
- [5] Wu KY, 1993, Classroom Interaction and Teacher Questions Revisited. *RELC Journal*, 24(2): 49–68.
- [6] Morgan N, Saxton J, 1991, *Teaching, Questioning and Learning*, Routledge, London.
- [7] Chaudron C, 1988, *Second Language Class: Research on Teaching and Learning*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- [8] Brock CA, 1986, The Effects of Referential Questions on ESL Classroom Discourse. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20: 47–59.
- [9] Barnes D, 1975, *Language, the Learner and the School*, Hazell Watson and Viney, Aylesbury.
- [10] Gass SM, Madden CG, (eds) 1985, *Input and Second Language Acquisition Theory*, Newbury House Publishers, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 337–393.
- [11] Baetens BH, 1996, Reconciling Content Acquisition and Language Acquisition in Bilingual Classrooms. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 17: 2–4.
- [12] Chua-Wong SHP, McLellan J, 1996, Proceedings of CfBT Conference on English Across the Curriculum, August 2–3, 1996: A Study of Negotiation for Meaning in Language and Content Classrooms in Brunei Darussalam, University of Waikato Research Publications Search, Waikato.
- [13] Tsui AB, 1995, *Introducing Classroom Interaction*, Penguin English, London.
- [14] Matra SD, 2014, Teacher Questioning in Classroom Interaction. *A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching and Literature*, 14 (1): 1–128.
- [15] Ndun LN, 2015, *Teacher Question in the Junior High School Classroom*, thesis, Sanata Dharma University of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. https://repository.usd.ac.id/388/2/126332042_full.pdf
- [16] Sujiarti RK, Mahmud M, 2016, English Teacher’s Questioning Strategies in EFL Classroom at SMAN Bontomarannu. *ELT Worldwide*, 3(1): 107–121.
- [17] Zainudin A, Vianty M, Inderawati R, 2019, The Practice and Challenges of Implementing Critical Thinking Skills in EFL Teachers’ Questioning Behavior. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 8(1): 51–58.
- [18] Jiang Y, 2014, Exploring Teacher Questioning as a Formative Assessment Strategy. *RELC Journal*, 45(3): 287–304.
- [19] Shi YF, Tong MW, Long TT, 2021, Investigating Relationships Among Blended Synchronous Learning Environments, Students’ Motivation, and Cognitive Engagement: A Mixed Methods Study. *Computers and Education*, 168: 104193.
- [20] Lynch T, 1996, *Communication in the Classroom*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- [21] Swain M, 1985, Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in Its Development. *Input and Second Language Acquisition*, in *Input in Second Language Acquisition*, Newbury House, Rowley, MA, 235–253.
- [22] Rowe MB, 1974, Pausing Phenomena: Influence on the Quality of Instruction. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 3: 203–224.
- [23] Kelch K, 1985, Modified Input as an Aid to Comprehension. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 7(1): 81–90.
- [24] Van Lier L, 1988, *The Classroom and the Language Learner*, Longman, London.
- [25] Krashen S, 1980, The Input Hypothesis, in *Current Issues in Bilingual Education*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, 144–158.

- [26] Long MH, Porter PA, 1985, Group Work, Interlanguage Talk and Second Language Acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(2): 207–228.
- [27] Seedhouse P, 1996, Classroom Interaction: Possibilities and Impossibilities. *ELT Journal*, 50(1): 17–24.
- [28] Jiang Y, 2020, Teacher Classroom Questioning Practice and Assessment Literacy: Case Studies of Four English Language Teachers in Chinese Universities. *Frontiers in Education*, 5(23): 1–17.
- [29] Leong WS, Ismail H, Costa JS, et al., 2018, Assessment for Learning Research in East Asian Countries. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 59: 270–277.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.