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Full Length Research Paper

The Effect of EFL Teachers' Questioning Behavior on the Amount of Learners' Classroom Interaction during Pre-reading Discussion Task

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The primary aim of learning a language is to use it in communication and teacher-learner interaction is a key to reach that goal. Eight reading classes at intermediate level were audio-taped. The study explored recurring patterns of questioning behavior and their interactive effects were observed through nonparticipant observation. The findings of this study indicated that Display and Closed questions were used by the teachers more frequently than Referential and Open questions. Also, it was concluded that Referential and Open questions could create more interaction.

Keywords: Referential/ Display and Open/Closed questions, classroom interaction, pre-reading discussion task

INTRODUCTION

The growth of interest in the analysis of teacher language has been stimulated by the rejection of language teaching methods as the key determinant of successful learning. The notion of methods came under criticism in the 1980s and mainstream language teaching no longer regarded methods as the key factor in accounting for success or failure of language teaching (Seedhouse, 1999). By referring to several studies, Ellis (1990) points out although these studies revealed the effectiveness of some methods; they were not able to demonstrate that one method was more successful than another. Thus, researchers began to focus on classroom interaction as the major variable affecting SLA. They have tried to pay "attention to the processes of classroom interaction by

collecting language data from the classroom itself" (Ellis, 1990: 66).

Thus, within the field of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) research, classroom-based research has emerged as an important kind of research which attempts to investigate the nature of classroom language and classroom interaction. This kind of research is motivated by an attempt to look at the classroom as a setting for classroom language learning in terms of the language input provided by the teacher's talk (Chaudron, 1988). Teacher talk study has originated from classroom research which tries to investigate what happens inside the classroom (Allwright and Bailey, 1991). Its aim is to identify the processes that facilitate or debilitate L2 classroom learning.

Recently, there has been much research on teacher talk (e.g. Long and Sato, 1983). Issues such as the amount and type of teacher talk, speech modifications

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made by teachers, instructions and explanations, error correction and questions have been more or less the center of attention. An important aspect of classroom interaction which has received a great deal of attention, is teachers' questions which may serve various functions including focusing attention, exercising disciplinary, controlling the instruction, motivating learners and encouraging them to participate in classroom interaction (Shomoosi, 2004).

Teacher's questioning

All over the world, classroom interaction is usually dominated by question and answer, with teachers asking most of the questions. Questions provide the practice and feedback essential for the development. They alert students to the information in a lesson. They can be used to review previously learned material to establish a knowledge base for the new material to be learned. The Longman Dictionary of English language provides the following definition for a question: a command or interrogative expression used to elicit information or a response, or to test knowledge. Question is a tool used in the direct interaction between the teacher and learners. Questioning is one of the most common techniques used by teachers (Richards and Lockhart, 2000; Walsh, 2006) and serves as the principal way in which teachers control the classroom interaction. Johnson (1995) points out "typically teachers retain this control through question-answer mode of interaction". In Ur's view (2000, in Tuan and Nhu, 2010), the teacher questioning serves purposes such as letting learners present their ideas, testing their understanding knowledge or skills, engaging them actively in participating in learning, stimulating their thinking and getting them to review and practice previously learnt materials. According to Tuan and Nhu (2010) it is important to the teachers to be familiar with the impact of questions on communicating and learning in the classroom, and find ways to improve the use of questions by themselves and their students.

Types of questions

According to Chaudron (1988), most of the studies on teachers' questions have investigated the ways in which questions facilitate target language productions or correct learners' responses. Language teachers have often used questions which produce only short responses from students. Several studies (Long and Sato, 1983; Brock, 1986, cited in Tuan and Nhu, 2010) have focused on the types of questions such as display/referential questions to find out which one produce 'communicative' responses, arguing that referential questions are more likely to produce 'natural' responses than display

questions. According to Brown (2001), display questions refer to questions for which the teacher knows the answers and demand a single or short response. By contrast, referential questions demand more thought and generate longer responses.

It has often been observed that teachers tend to ask more display questions than referential questions (Long and Sato, 1983, cited in Tuan and Nhu, 2010; Anani, 2008). The explanation for this is the role the teachers play. If the teachers just pass on information rather than encourage students to participate in classroom activities, they tend to ask display question. Long and Sato (1983) conclude that is because the teachers emphasize much more on the form and accuracy of the language, instead of the meaning of language and communication. Long and Sato (1983) and Bock (1986) believe that referential questions may create a more near-normal speech (Flor and Juan, 2006). With the purpose for communicating rather than testing learners' knowledge, referential question has greater potential to generate social discourse and it is used when the teacher's aim is to enhance students' speaking skills and to create a social-like atmosphere in the classroom. Besides, students' answers to referential questions are more meaningful, longer and subjective in most circumstances (Long and Sato, 1983; Brock 1986, and Tsui 1995, cited in Tuan and Nhu, 2010).

Later studies (Banbrook and Skehan, 1990; Seedhouse, 1996, cited in Walsh, 2006) question the value of the distinction between display and referential questions and focused on the purpose of the teacher in questioning. The purpose of all questions is to elicit responses and the display/referential distinction is a useful one which teachers should be aware of (Cullen, 1998).

Another classification is a distinction between yes/no questions (closed questions) which are easier to understand, encouraging learners to find out the facts or to present their knowledge and produce learners' very narrow short- sentence responses and wh-questions (open questions) which provides learners with more space to talk. They provide learners with more opportunities of interactions at advanced level of thinking and encourage learners to participate actively in their learning for producing more language output. It is assumed that referential and open questions are more effective in evoking extended learner speech; then, teachers should use them to foster learners' talk (Flor and Juan, 2006).

Musumeci (1996) points out that classroom discourse differ from 'normal' communication in terms of the number of questions used and their function: to encourage involvement rather than elicit new information. In that study, Musumeci reveals that the length and complexity of learner utterances are determined more by whether a question is closed or open than whether it is a

referential or display one.

The purpose of teacher questioning determines types of teacher questions in the classroom. According to a teacher's pedagogic goal, different question types are more or less appropriate and the use of appropriate questions requires an understanding of the function of a question in relation to what is being taught (Walsh, 2006).

The Importance of Reading and Pre-reading Task

Most researchers (Flor and Juan, 2006) would agree that reading is one of the most important skills for educational and professional success. In highlighting the importance of reading comprehension, Langer (1981: 147) stated that "reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and pleasurable activity, but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language."

Reading reinforces the learner's other language skills. Carrel and Floyd (1989) confirm that those who read more, have larger vocabularies, do better on test of grammar and write better. Chastian (1988:218) while accepting the significance of reading for meaning claimed that all activities serve to facilitate communication fluency in each of the other language skills.

Studies of pre-reading activities (Tudor 1989; Celce-Murcia, 1991, cited in Alemi and Ebadi, 2010) have demonstrated the facilitative effects of activating reader's prior knowledge as relevant to understanding of the new text. According to them, pre-reading activities do not only prepare readers for the concepts that follow but also makes the reading task easier and connecting the new concept more meaningful to prior knowledge. Pre-reading activities are, thus, intended to activate appropriate knowledge structures or provide knowledge that the reader lacks. Tudor (1989, cited in Alemi and Ebadi, 2010) calls pre-reading activities as 'enabling activities' because they provide a reader with necessary background to organize activity and to comprehend the material. These experiences involve understanding the purpose(s) for reading and building a knowledge base necessary for dealing with the content and the structure of the material. They say that pre-reading activities elicit prior knowledge, build background, and focus attention.

A reader's background knowledge with respect to text topic and genre is recognized as a significant factor in text comprehension. As a result, textbooks and pedagogical practice now routinely include pre-reading activities with authentic texts or other reading selections. Interestingly, a benefit of such activities is the focus or purpose for reading that they can provide. Pre-reading discussion can focus on a critical argument or controversy surrounding interpretation of a text. More simply, discussion tasks can elicit students' personal views or previous readings on a topic or their

expectations with respect to text content or point of view (Knutson, 1998). Thus, due to the interactive nature of pre-reading discussion task, this study was focused on the role of the various features of EFL teacher talk during implementing this task to find out how Iranian language teachers could enhance learners' contributions in classroom interaction.

METHOD

Research question and hypothesis

The major purpose of this study was to examine teacher/learner interactions in the classroom to find out what was going on there, and to examine which factors could increase or motivate meaningful teacher/learner interactions. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

Is there any difference between the distribution of teachers' display/referential and close/open questions in different classes?

What's the impact of teachers' question type on creating more interaction in EFL classroom?

The following two hypotheses were shaped in the beginning:

Hypothesis 1

There is no difference between the distribution of teachers' use of display/ referential and closed/open questions.

Hypothesis 2

Referential questions create more interaction in the classroom than display questions do.

Referential questions are those questions for which the answer is not already known by the teacher. Such questions may require interpretations and judgments on the part of the "answerer".

Display questions refer to those questions for which the questioner knows the answer beforehand; such questions are usually asked for comprehension checks, confirmation check, or clarification requests.

Closed questions (yes/no questions) are those generally easier to understand and to answer.

Open questions (Wh-questions) are those that put higher demands on the respondents' language skills and leave them more space for their answers (Flor and Juan, 2006).

Interaction is used in a general sense in this study, referring to any sort of interaction, student-student or teacher-student discussions, group discussions, and any

type of classroom participation (Long and Sato, 1983, in Shomoosi, 2004).

Participants

Four EFL teachers in two language centers in Sari were treated as subjects, who taught intermediate levels in these language centers. The teachers were all Iranian-Persian native speakers- aged from 26 to 30. These teachers were selected base on two issues, first they were all MA students majoring ELT, and second they had at least four years of foreign language teaching experience in various language institutes In the following parts, subjects are represented as T1, T2, T3, and T4:

T1 is a male teacher with over 4 years teaching experience. T2 is a female teacher, like T1, who also has more than 4 years teaching experience. T3 is also a male teacher who is 26; his teaching experience is about 6 years. T4 is a young female with 5 years teaching experience.

Task

Reading sections in Richards, Hull, and Proctor's (2005) *Interchange Third Edition* is divided into three tasks: pre-reading discussion, reading, and post reading comprehension questions. Pre- reading discussion task was selected in this study as the most interactive generating task. Pedagogic goals of the pre-reading discussion tasks are to activate the relevant schemata for the subject /concepts in the reading passage, to promote discussion, to tap learners' opinion and personal knowledge. Thus, this task aims to integrate both reading and speaking skills.

Instrumentation

To meet the purpose of the study, the following instruments were used:

- Classroom observation
- Lessons' Audio-recordings
- Lessons' transcriptions

The required textbook was *Interchange, Third Edition, Book 3*. Each unit consisted of different sections: Snapshot, Conversation, Grammar, Word power and Reading. However, the focus of this study was on reading sections specially pre-reading discussion task.

Procedure

Four teachers of EFL were invited to take part in this study. Their reading classes were observed as carefully

as possible during a two-month period. The researcher carried out the observation personally, sitting in the classes from beginning to the end of each session, taking notes of teachers' questions, and listening to the discussions of the students to find any noticeable patterns. The researcher conducted two 40-minute audio-recordings of their lessons. The whole process of teaching readings was tape-recorded to reflect what actually happens in classroom. A total of approximately 5 hours' recordings were transcribed. After the class, a detailed transcription of the recording was prepared and analyzed statistically with reference to earlier studies, first, to find and reveal noticeable generalizations and patterns in teachers' questioning behavior and EFL classroom interaction and second, to verify the hypotheses.

RESULTS

As discussed earlier, the role of teacher's question in facilitating language learning in classroom is very important. Therefore, in this section, in addressing the first research question, *Is there any difference between the distribution of teachers' display/referential and closed/open questions in different classes?* Statistical analysis was used. In order to find a distribution balance for teacher's Display and Referential questions, their corresponding numbers in each session were added up. Table 1 provides the results concerning the types of teachers' questions, display/referential and closed/open questions, and their percentage in the whole process of the reading instruction. It was found that out of a total of 327 questions, 213 were Display (65%), 114 Referential questions (35%), 193 were Closed (59%), and 134 Open (41%).

Table1 reveals that there was a tendency for the teacher to use more display (65%) and closed questions (59%) than referential (35%) and open questions (41%). Statistically speaking, the number of DQs used by EFL teachers was significantly higher than the number of RQs they asked. In other words, the distribution of the two question types was absolutely different; then, the first hypothesis was rejected.

As for the second hypothesis, four groups of questions were randomly selected from among the obtained data for statistical analysis. The total of utterances each question resulted in classroom interaction was measured (in sentence); then, they were added up; and a mean was calculated for each type: RQ-mean= 2.75, DQ-mean= 0.80, OQ-mean= 1.08, CQ-mean= 1.0 sentence). Independent t –test was used to compare the means of RQ/DQ and OQ/CQ. Results showed that the amount of learners' speech responding to referential questions was significantly ($P < 0.05$) greater than display questions.

However, no significant difference was found between

Table 1 Frequency of display/referential and open/closed questions and the percentage in the total sum

Teachers	Display Q		Referential Q		Closed Q		Open Q	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
T1	56	74	20	26	46	61	30	39
T2	68	69	30	31	66	67	32	33
T3	37	46	43	54	31	39	49	61
T4	52	71	21	29	50	68	23	32
Total	213	65	114	35	193	59	134	41

Table 2 The amount of interaction caused by four question types

Question Type	Number	Interaction Mean	SD	p-value
RQ	20	2.75	1.21	0.008
DQ	15	1.73	0.80	
OQ	13	1.08	0.28	0.73
CQ	5	1.0	0.00	

open and closed questions.

Referential question from the study data were found to cause more learner speech than display questions. It is reasonable to accept that learners tend to speak and participate more when the expected answer is longer. While display questions are usually asked for comprehension checks, confirmation checks or clarification requests (Long and Sato, 1983; Brock, 1986, in Johnson and Johnson, 1998), Referential questions are usually used for information gaps. Therefore, motivation and interest cause the interaction to be more lifelike.

Referential Question

Why don't you like such movies?
 Why? I love dancing
 What is it?
 How many movies are produced in Iran every year?
 I love them, isn't it good to stick to their own tradition and style?
 Do you believe in ghost? Do you have any idea?
 What do you mean you saw a ghost?
 What are the conditions?
 Why do you always prefer to eat breakfast?
 Why breakfast is important?
 Why eating dinner is not good?
 Do you have any information about the writer?
 Why is market research important, what is your idea, Mina?
 Imagine you are a market researcher, what do you do?
 What about being a spy?....spy?
 Why don't you believe in soul?
 What did you see?
 Have you seen any eye catching news....in newspapers?

What kind of traditions do you know?
 Which one do you like best and why?

Display Questions

What happened in the film, what happened?
 Did you read the third paragraph, which one is older, Hollywood or Bollywood?
 What are their stories about?
 Why did the people go there?
 How was his experience?
 What does it mean' an apple a day keeps the doctor away?
 Do you think there is a relationship between these 2 sentences?
 What is the main difference between breakfast and dinner according to this paragraph?
 How did you understand it from this passage?
 What does the text say about Mexico?
 What did you come up with the first paragraph?
 Where was she?
 What is the fifth paragraph about?
 What is the meaning of 'market research'?
 Why wasn't it successful in America?

Open Questions

What is Bollywood?
 What do you mean?
 Which one is older?
 Which one has the largest movie industry?
 What does currently mean?
 How do the filmgoers think of the Bollywood?
 What are they?

Where did it happen?
 What happened to the miners?
 What was in the picture?
 What do you usually eat for breakfast?
 An unexpected best seller' what does it mean?

Closed Questions

Aren't they good?
 Are you sure that they exist?
 Does our body need something sweet in the beginning of the day?
 Is there any reason for that?
 Could you guess the meaning of 'extraordinary'?

DISCUSSION

The findings are in line with Long and Sato's (1983), Brock's (1985) and Anani's (2008) studies in which they found teachers use more display than referential questions in the classroom which offered very few opportunities for the learner to practice genuine communicative uses of the target language. Brock (1986) found that higher frequencies of referential questions asked by teachers would have some effects on classroom discourse: students' responses to display questions would be shorter and syntactically less complex than their responses to referential questions; confirmation checks and clarification requests by the teacher would occur more frequently following referential questions than following display questions, and this would lead to more negotiation of meaning which is crucial to the target language acquisition.

Anani (2008) found that a teacher uses significantly more referential than display questions in a task-based class. The high-frequency use of display questions suggests the lack of two-way flow of information in classrooms. Teachers exert a tightly control over students by initiating display and closed questions, therefore, students have few opportunities to initiate, to communicate with teachers or other students. According to the result we have observed in this study, the technique of teachers' question does not contribute to students' active involvement.

The results show that, in the classes under investigation, there was a preference for display and closed questions over referential and open questions. So, in this respect, the subject teachers shared the similarities and common tendency in teaching. Most of the questions they use were display and closed questions which led to short stretch of talk on the part of the learners. Most of the time, they used questions to check the learners' understanding about the text, not to stimulate thinking or to provide more space for learners'

interaction. The teachers' questions could not help the learners to produce longer language production. In this study most of the teachers' questions focused on the learners' understanding about the text asking about words, phrases, sentences and expressions, and neglected to let learners practice language through using them.

CONCLUSION

The study focused on what is going on in the classroom by focusing on teachers' questioning behavior in Iranian EFL context. Classroom processes are extremely complex and it would be naive to think that an observer can gain a full understanding of what is going on in the classroom by observing and analyzing a number of lessons. Through observation, it was found that display and closed questions outnumbered referential and open ones. It was observed that referential questions made more classroom interaction.

In her output hypothesis, Swain (1985) emphasizes the role of output in successful L2 learning and argues that learners can improve their language level through pushing them to produce spoken and written output or through using the language exposed to them in meaningful ways. Producing one's own message may force the learners to pay attention to the means of expression in order to convey their. Teacher/learner interaction is based on questions and answers, and the teacher's questions play crucial role in the classroom. Thus, questions push learners to produce the target language and this output leads to better learning, then questions can be an important tool in the language classrooms, especially in those EFL contexts where the classroom provides the only opportunity to produce the target language.

In this study, it was found that teacher's questioning behavior affects EFL classroom interaction. The display and closed questions were more frequently used which created less interaction in the class; however, it was concluded that the application of more Referential questions by the teachers produced very useful and interesting classroom interactions. Therefore, it is recommended that EFL teachers in Iran should use more of referential questions in the classroom as a means of improving classroom involvement of learners and promoting classroom interaction. As (Chaudron, 1988: 52) states that "if teachers spend much time in drill-like questioning, learners may have less opportunity to evaluate input or produce creative language".

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