

CLASSROOM INTERACTION AND TEACHER QUESTIONS REVISITED

ABSTRACT

Contrary to what one expects from the literature, this study shows that referential questions does not necessarily elicit longer or syntactically more complex answers from ESL students in Hong Kong. If teachers of English want to help their students produce more spoken output, they need to consider questioning strategies, and also students' attitudes towards questioning and answering behaviour in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

It is now generally agreed that questioning is an important method of teaching. Aschner (1961), for example, calls the teacher "a professional question maker" and suggests that question asking is "one of the basic ways by which the teacher stimulates student thinking and learning" (quoted in Gall 1970:707). Gall regards the belief that questions play a significant role in teaching as "a truism" (1970:707).

Given their importance to education, it is not surprising that questions "have been the focus of research attention in both content classrooms and language classrooms for many years" (Nunan 1990:187). In the content classroom, cognitive levels of questions have been studied in relation to student achievement (Winne 1979; Redfield & Rousseau 1981). In the language classroom, questions have tended to be examined as a means of eliciting more or less linguistic output and involving students in interaction. (See review of the literature below.)

While these studies have shed much light on the relationships between teacher questions and student performance, they have not

exhausted the subject. Indeed, in his review of teacher questions in the language classroom, Nunan (1989:30) claims that research into the relative effects of display and referential questions is still in its initial stages. He further points out that previous studies have not taken into account a few factors that may have an effect on student responses - factors like "the topic area, the learner's background knowledge, and contextual and interpersonal variables" (1989:31).

It was against this context that the present study was conceived. Its purpose is twofold. First, it aims to investigate the relationships among these four variables in the ESL classroom in Hong Kong: (1) question types, (2) questioning strategies, (3) student attitudes, and (4) patterns of interaction. Second, it attempts to explain how this classroom-based research can inform and guide classroom practices.

The sections that follow consist of six main parts. Section 2 defines some key terms used in this paper. It is followed, in Section 3, by a review of three related studies on teacher questions in the language classroom. Section 4 describes the sample of data on which this study

is based, and gives the procedures used in collecting them. The next two sections then examine the relationships among question types, questioning strategies, student attitudes and patterns of interaction. The last section offers some suggestions on the use of teacher questions in the ESL classroom in Hong Kong. Analysis and findings in this paper are illustrated by classroom transcripts.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Before reviewing the literature on teacher questions, some terms need to be defined.

Question

For the purpose of this paper, the term "question" is used as a functional or speech act label, and refers to an utterance that seeks information. A question is characteristically expressed in the interrogative form, but "question" and "interrogative" are not synonymous terms. For example, "Would you speak louder?" is syntactically an interrogative, but functionally a request. For this reason, it is not regarded as a question in this study. As another example, consider, "Tell me why." Grammatically, this is an imperative, but its illocutionary force is to seek information. As such, it is classified as a question in this study.

In English, questions can be expressed through these linguistic means:

- (1) Interrogative sentences:
e.g. "Who belongs to Group 1?"
- (2) Imperative sentences:
e.g. "Tell me why."

- (3) Declarative sentences:
e.g.

A: "That means your brother is 11 years younger than you." (uttered with falling intonation)
B: "Yes."

Referential question

This is Long and Sato's (1983) term, and refers to a question to which the teacher does not already know the answer. For example: "Have you finished?"

Display question

This is also Long and Sato's (1983) term, and refers to a question to which the teacher already knows the answer. In asking a display question, the teacher does not seek an answer to resolve some doubts. Rather, his/her purpose is to make the students display some previous-learned knowledge. For example: "What do we call this kind of person?"

Closed question

This is a question which expects a small number of responses as its acceptable answers. For example, "Can everybody see that?" is answerable by "yes" or "no".

Open question

This is a question to which a number of different answers would be acceptable. For example: "Why do you think four is a very good number?"

ESL classroom

This refers to a classroom where English is taught as a second language. For the purpose of this paper, English is regarded as a second language in Hong Kong.

RELATED STUDIES

A number of studies have been conducted on the use of teacher questions in the second language classroom. Three will be reviewed here. In the first study, Long and Sato (1983) examined the forms and functions of ESL teachers' questions by comparing them with questions found in real-life discourse. They concluded that (1) ESL teachers ask more display questions than referential questions; and (2) ESL teachers ask more display questions than native speakers in informal conversation with non-native speakers outside the classroom.

In the second study, White and Lightbown (1984) counted the number of questions in four ESL classes, and found that (1) teachers they observed asked almost all the questions; and (2) students were rarely given enough time to formulate their answer before the teachers rephrased their questions or asked another student to answer.

In the third study, Brock (1986) investigated the effects of referential questions on ESL classroom discourse. Working in simulated classroom situations, Brock carried out experimental studies with four experienced ESL teachers, two of whom were trained to include referential questions in their teaching. It was found that these questions elicited longer and grammatically more complex responses from students than display questions. This conclusion was also reached by Nunan (1987) in his analysis of five communicative language lessons.

To summarize, research findings in the literature reveal that: (1) teachers in general ask most of the questions; (2) most teacher questions are display questions; and (3) display questions elicit shorter and

syntactically less complex answers from students.

As there is some consensus on these issues, one may ask: "Why this study?" There are two reasons for it. First, most studies on teacher questions have so far been carried out in classrooms in the West. Relatively little research has been conducted in the language classroom in Hong Kong, where cultural values are different and where the unfavourable teaching context (e.g. large class size) is a practical constraint on what teachers may be able to achieve. Second, as pointed out in Section 1 above, previous studies have tended to neglect factors like student attitudes and interpersonal variables on questioning and answering behaviour in the classroom. It is hoped that the present study will shed some light on these issues.

THE STUDY

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

What are the patterns of display vs. referential questions?

What are the patterns of open vs. closed questions?

What questioning strategies do teachers use?

What kinds of response are elicited by different types of teacher questions?

What types of question and questioning strategy are most effective in eliciting responses from students?

What are the patterns of classroom interaction?

Subjects and Data Collection Procedures

The data which this study draws on come from a videotape and

an audiotape of four English language lessons recorded of four teachers who taught in two secondary schools.

The four teachers are native speakers of Cantonese and have all received teacher-training in either a College of Education or a local university. All have taught English for at least five years. Teacher A is male whereas Teachers B, C, and D are female.

The two schools, S1 and S2, are Anglo-Chinese schools, and are quite representative of (1) the academically good schools and (2) the average standard schools in Hong Kong respectively.

The classes whose lessons were recorded range from F.1 to F.4. Details about the school and the level, type, and duration of classes selected from each teacher are given in Table 1.

At the time of recording, the four teachers were attending a teacher refresher course for teachers of English in a government institution in Education. The lessons they taught were part of their action research. The students they had were not their regular students.

The lessons by Teachers A, B, and C were videotaped by a laboratory technician using a video camera. The one by Teacher D was audiotaped. In none of these lessons was this researcher present as an observer.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The videotapes and audiotape were transcribed by this researcher, who then analysed the transcripts with reference to the research questions stated above.⁴

What are the Patterns of Display vs. Referential Questions?

In terms of display vs. referential questions, the four teachers in the sample, quite contrary to what the literature may lead one to expect, do not ask significantly more display questions than referential questions. Indeed, the reverse is true for Teachers A, B, and D, as shown in Table 2.

What are the Patterns of Open vs. Closed Questions?

With reference to the use of open vs. closed questions, the patterns found in the data conform with the generalization made in the literature. All four teachers asked more closed questions than open questions. In particular, over 85% of all the questions asked by Teachers B and C are closed questions, as indicated in Table 3.

What Questioning Strategies Do Teachers Use?

Questioning strategies refer to strategies teachers use to elicit verbal responses from students. The following categories are found in the data:

- (1) Rephrasing: A question is expressed in another way. For example:

[TB/F3]

T: Then can anybody tell me the advantages of being an air stewardess? The advantages.

Ss: [3.8 seconds]

T: How can they benefit from being an air stewardess?

- (2) Simplification: This may be regarded as a kind of rephrasing by means of which a question is simplified so that students can cope with

it. For example:

[TD/F4]

T: Er, if you were the only child in your family, then what other advantages you may have? What points, what other good points you may have?

This is an instance of linguistic simplification which pertains lexical substitution, i.e. "good points" is used instead of "advantages."

- (3) Repetition: A question is repeated in the hope that a verbal response will be elicited. For example:

[TB/F3]

T: Have you been to the airport before?

Ss: ϕ

T: [points to a girl] Have you been to an airport before?

- (4) Decomposition: An initial question is decomposed into two or more parts so that an answer may be obtained. For example:

[TD/F4]

1 T: Who are they?

2 S: ϕ

3 T: Your::? How many sisters?

4 S: No sister.

5 T: No sister. How many brothers?

6 S: Three brothers.

In this example, the teacher's initial question is decomposed into two questions (turns 3 and 5).

- (5) Probing: A question is followed up by one or more other questions so that the teacher can solicit more responses from a student. For example:

[TD/F4]

T: Do you think it's a good number?

S: Yes.

T: Yes? Why do you think it's good to have two brothers and one sister?

While strategies (1), (2), (3) and (4) are typically used when an initial question fails to elicit any verbal replies, strategy (5) is employed to encourage students to expand upon their answers. Table 4 indicates the number of times these strategies are used by each of the four teachers.

What Kinds of Responses are Elicited by Different Types of Teacher Question?

In this paper, responses solicited by teacher questions are classified into two categories: (1) restricted and (2) elaborate. A restricted response consists of a word or a simple sentence, for example, "Yes" and "They can increase their knowledge". In contrast, an elaborate response contains two or more sentences which are linked by various cohesive or coherent devices. An example is: "In China, my mother is a teacher, my father is a teacher. Oh, she go finish by bicycle, er, got to"

The overwhelming number of responses generated by teacher questions in the sample are restricted answers, irrespective of whether the questions that elicited them are display, referential, open, or closed. Here are some examples:

Display, closed

[TC/F1]

T: Can you touch the ceiling?

Ss: No.

Display, open

[TA/F2]

T: You have to know people's
what? People's? Yes?
S: Name.

Referential, closed

[TB/F3]

T: Have you been to an airport
before?
S: No.

Referential, open

[TD/F4]

T: Where do you see it?
S: On television.

Not all teacher questions succeeded in generating responses. In each of the four lessons analysed, a significant number of display and referential questions failed to solicit any verbal responses from students. The exact numbers are shown in Table 5.

It can be seen that, compared with display questions, referential questions tend to be less effective as a means of eliciting responses.

The number of open and closed questions that are unanswered in the four lessons is presented in Table 6.

Note that closed questions are more effective than open questions in eliciting verbal responses from students.

What are the Patterns of Classroom Interaction?

The findings of this study confirm the dominance of the IRF (initiation, response, follow-up) pattern of teacher-student discourse. This three-part structure of classroom conversations is illustrated below:

[TC/F1]

T: [points to a student] Can
you? I
S: Yes. R
T: Yes, good. F

In this exchange, the teacher asks a display question in the first utterance. It elicits an answer from the student in the second utterance, which is then evaluated positively by the teacher. Here is another example:

[TA/F2]

T: Do you think that your
interview is good? I
S: No. R
T: No. F

In this exchange, the teacher's referential question elicits a negative reply from the student. The teacher's follow-up move acknowledges that this response has been heard.

A scrutiny of the exchanges in the four lessons reveals that in all of them, initiative lies largely with the teacher (cf. Sinclair and Brazil 1982, quoted in Tibbetts 1991:151). Consider:

[TC/F1]

1 T: Can you touch the ceiling?
2 Ss: No.
3 T: [points to a student] Can
you?
4 S: No, I can't.
5 T: [points to a student]
What about you?
6 S: No, I can't.
7 T: [points to another
student]
8 S: (...)
9a T: OK. All of you can't
touch the ceiling, right?
9b Now, er, it seems that you
enjoy doing exercise. And
for my school, it is going
to have a sports day next
month.

In this example, the teacher asks questions (turns 1, 3, 4) and

nominates students to answer them (turns 3, 5, 7). She chooses the topic for discussion (turn 1), closes it (turn 9a), and introduces another topic for conversation (turn 9b). In short, she is in complete control of turn-takings and the direction of classroom discourse. The students have no influence over its development.

The submissive role of the students is also evident from the fact that in the four recorded lessons, no students take the initiative to seek clarification or check confirmation from the teachers. In addition, there is not a single learner question.⁴ There is no doubt that power distribution is unequal in all four lessons.

DISCUSSION

Three issues arising from the findings given above will now be discussed.

Types of Teacher Question and Interaction

Contrary to the conclusions reached by Brock (1986) and Nunan (1987) (see Section 3), referential questions do not result in longer and more complex language by students in the present study. Indeed, they tend to be less effective than display questions in eliciting student responses (see Section 5.3). The following is a typical example of what happens when the teacher asks referential questions:

- [TD/F4]
 T: So do you like them all?
 S: Er, yes.
 T: Yes. Tell me why.
 S: Er, they are, er, they help me, er, they help me very much.
 T: How do they help you?
 S: Er, ... they
 Ss: [laughter]

- S: They teacher my er homework.
 T: Yes. When you don't understand how to do your homework, they help you. Did they do you home-, do the homework of you?
 S: Of course not.

Two features are apparent here: (1) the student's responses are restricted (see definition in Section 5.3), and (2) the teacher output is longer than that of the student.

The longest answer solicited by a referential question occurs in the lesson by Teacher D:

- [TD/F4]
 T: Why do you think it's too many?
 S: Because my brother is very little. He was born when I was 11 years old. I think my brother is very noisy.

This is the only elaborate response (Section 5.3) found in the data, and it consists of only three sentences.

In his study, Nunan (1987) suggests that other features besides "an increase in the length and complexity of student turns" also appear when teachers ask referential questions. These features are (1) content-based topic nominations by learners, (2) student-student interactions, and (3) the negotiation of meaning by students and teacher, with a concomitant increase in the number of clarification requests and comprehension checks. In his study, "there is even an instance of a student disagreeing with the teacher."

None of these features, some of which were already discussed in the previous section, are found in the present study. Consider the following example, where the teacher shifts from referential

questions (turns 1, 3b) to display questions (turns 5b, 7b):

[TD/F4]

- 1 T: Er, if you were the only child in you family, then what other advantages you may have? What points, what other good points you may have?
- 2 S: It's quieter for my study.
- 3a T: Yes? It's quieter for you to study.
- 3b Yes? Any other? Any?
- 4 S: No more.
- 5a T: OK. Fine. Now, another picture.
- 5b What can you see from this picture? ... Yes? Now, what can you see from this picture? Er, [name of a student]
- 6 S: A child and a man.
- 7a T: Yes. There are a child and a man.
- 7b Can you tell what their relationship is?
- 8 S: Father and son.

Both types of questions generate similar patterns of interaction. The tripartite IRF structure appears, and student responses are restricted.

This discussion suggests that in the Hong Kong context, referential questions may not necessarily result in more student output or better-quality classroom interaction. Other factors, e.g. students' attitudes towards questioning and answering behaviour in the classroom, and the questioning strategies used by the teacher, need to be considered, too.

STUDENT ATTITUDES AND INTERACTION

Student attitudes play a significant role in shaping the patterns of classroom interaction. In a paper entitled "Sociocultural factors counteract the

instructional efforts of teaching through English in Hong Kong," Wong (1984) suggests some "rules" governing the use of English in Hong Kong secondary schools. Those that are relevant to the present study are as follows:

- (1) You should not demonstrate verbal success in English in front of your peers.
- (2) You should hesitate and show difficulty in arriving at an answer.
- (3) You should not answer the teacher voluntarily or enthusiastically in English.
- (4) You should not speak in fluent English.

Taken together, these "rules" suggest two patterns of classroom interaction, both of which appear in the data.

First, students are reluctant to volunteer to answer questions in class. In the data, general solicits almost invariably fail to elicit any verbal responses. For example:

[TB/F3]

- T: Girls, have you ever thought of being an air stewardess? [a pause of 5 seconds] You, have you? Yes, the girl sitting in the third row. Yes, you.
- S: No.

Here, the teacher's first question is followed by a 5-second wait-time, which White & Lightbown (1984:239) regard as reasonable. However, it does not succeed in getting any student to speak up, so the teacher has to nominate. This nomination works, as a question demands an answer in an adjacency pair theory. Other examples from the data reveal that students in

general have a habit of waiting to be called upon before answering. Of all the questions asked in the four lessons, only one is answered by a student without nomination (in lesson TA/F2).

Second, when students are called upon to respond, they may prefer to hesitate and give short answers where possible so that they do not give their peers the impression that they are showing off. This partly explains why even though a large number of referential and open questions are asked in the four lessons, only one elicits an elaborate answer (see Section 6.1).

QUESTIONING STRATEGIES AND INTERACTION

If teachers are concerned with the quantity of student output (and this concern is justified as students need the chance to produce "pushed output," see Swain 1985), it is not enough to focus on the types of teacher question only. Questioning strategies must be considered as well.

An ineffective strategy is to ask a series of questions before a student is given the chance to speak. If this strategy is used, only the last question is likely to elicit any answer. The other questions are often ignored. For example, in the next excerpt, Teacher A's first two questions are not answered in subsequent student turns:

[TA/F2]

T: What did you do in your interview? What questions did you ask in your interview? What did you do before asking questions? What did you do before asking questions? [points to a student] Yes, you look very smart today.

Indeed, in this particular example, the series of questions confuse the students rather than help them to recall what they did.

Two effective questioning strategies are identified in the data. The first one is probing, which involves encouraging students to elaborate on their answers (see Section 5.2). Compare:

[TB/F3]

T: Girls, have you ever thought of being an air stewardess? ... You, have you? Yes, the girl sitting in the third row. Yes, you.

S: No.

T: No, you haven't thought of that. OK? Now, maybe it's too young for you to make your decision for your future career. OK? Therefore you can't make up your mind yet.

[TD/F4]

T: Then, what is the numb-, the ideal number of children?

S: Er, ..

Ss: [laughter]

S: Just one child is enough.

T: Yes. You think one child is enough. Why?

S: No more fighting.

Ss: [laughter]

T: No more fighting. Then, er, what other advantages do you think you may have, if you were the only child in the family? [a few utterances left out here]

S: It's quieter for my study.

In the first excerpt, Teacher B accepts the student's reply which she herself then elaborates on. As a result, she produces 54 words whereas the student says only one. By contrast, Teacher D in the second excerpt follows up her initial question with two related questions. This enables the student to have more chances to speak. As another example, compare:

[TA/F2]

- 1 T: Do you think that your
interview is good?
- 2 S: No.
- 3 T: No. [+fall]

[TD/F4]

- 1 T: How many brothers and
sisters do you have?
- 2 S: Er, I have one brother and
one er sister.
- 3 T: Yes? [+rise]
- 4 S: And, er, one little, one
younger brother.

In the first excerpt, the teacher's 'No' (turn 2), said with falling intonation, closes the exchange. In contrast, the teacher's follow-up move in the second excerpt (turn 3), uttered with rising intonation, indicates that she wants the student to continue to speak. This is followed by a student turn, which keeps the conversation going. Had Teacher A in the first excerpt pronounced his "No" with rising intonation (and used appropriate gestures), he could perhaps have elicited more information from the student.

Another effective questioning strategy identified in the data is decomposition. This involves breaking down an initial question into several parts so that a response may be obtained. The following example, given in Section 5.2 above, indicates how the strategy can help students to respond to questions they find difficult to answer:

[TD/F4]

- T: Who are they?
- S: ϕ
- T: Your::? How many sisters?
- S: No sister.
- T: No sister. How many
brothers?
- S: Three brothers.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The small sample of teachers, students, and schools involved in this study means that generalisations should not be made too hastily. However, a few implications for English teachers and teacher educators are worth discussing.

First, both display and referential questions have important functions to perform in language teaching and learning, and will thus always have a place in the ESL classroom. However, the use of different types of teacher question does not guarantee that the quantity or quality of classroom interaction will be improved. Attention must also be paid to questioning strategies, which this study suggests should be better used of to elicit oral responses from students and develop their grammatical competence. In this connection, Swain (1985) contends that for grammatical competence to develop, it is insufficient for learners to receive comprehensible input only. They must also be encouraged to produce output so that their hypotheses about their second language (L2) can be tested. She suggests that when learners produce output, they will pay attention to grammar or the means of expression. Sufficient output, then, will help learners improve their grammatical knowledge of L2. The question is: How can output be elicited from learners? This study suggests that one way is through questioning. The analysis presented above demonstrates that referential questions do not necessarily lead to more output from learners, but appropriate questioning strategies, e.g. probing, do. The implication of this is that these questioning strategies should be fully exploited in the classroom to help students develop their grammatical

competence. Teachers also need to know that in some classrooms, it may not be too helpful to expect a voluntary answer to a general solicitation. Students, especially the shy ones, may need to be nominated, at least occasionally.

Second, if appropriate questioning strategies can bring about desirable educational goals, it implies that teaching training courses should make teachers aware of these strategies and their value. In addition, workshops should be conducted to provide teachers with practice in using these effectively. More importantly, teachers should be guided to view questioning strategies in their proper perspective: as a means to help students develop and improve their L2.

Third, students in general seem to be reluctant to answer questions voluntarily or enthusiastically. This implies that the traditional question-answer-feedback teaching model should be supplemented by (but not replaced with) an alternative pattern of discourse. One possibility is the use of pair work and group work, where students are given chances to engage in exploratory talk and negotiation of meaning. The advantages of group work are given in Long & Porter (1985).

To conclude, this study demonstrates that student attitudes play a very significant role in shaping classroom interaction. One reason why some students in Hong Kong are reluctant to answer questions in the classroom is that they are afraid of being evaluated negatively by the teacher in front of their peers. To improve this situation, teachers need to know what follow-up moves are most conducive to second language learning, and what most harmful.

This can be the subject for another piece of classroom-based research.

NOTES

¹ These are equivalent to grades 7-10 in the American system.

² For the transcription conventions used, see the Appendix.

³ This example is taken from Nunan 1990:197.

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Appendix I

Notes on Transcription

- 1 The teacher and class are given as follows, for example:
TA/F3: Teacher A, Form 3
- 2 Pauses: A pause is indicated by ...
- 3 Contextual information: This is given in square brackets, for example: [laughter].
- 4 No response: This is indicated by ϕ .
- 5 Intonation: Where necessary and appropriate, falling and rising intonation are indicated by [+fall] and [+rise] respectively.
- 6 Syllable length: Lengthening of sounds is marked by colons, for example: these::
- 7 Inaudible items: These are indicated by dots and parentheses, for example: (...). The number of dots inside the parentheses indicate the number of words(s) that is inaudible:

(.)	inaudible item, probably one word only
(..)	inaudible item of phrase length
(...)	inaudible item beyond phrase length

Appendix IITable 1

Teacher	School	Level	Type of lesson	Duration
TA	S1	F.2	General English	35 mins.
TB	S1	F.3	Reading comprehension	15 mins.
TC	S1	F.1.	General English	15 mins.
TD	S2	F.4	Reading comprehension	10 mins.

TA = Teacher A; TB = Teacher B; TC = Teacher C; TD = Teacher D

S1 = School 1; S2 = School 2

Table 2 Number and percentage of display and referential questions asked by the 4 teachers

	Display questions		Referential questions	
	n	%	n	%
TA	37	40.7	54	59.4
TB	11	39.3	17	60.7
TC	21	56.8	16	43.2
TD	16	23.2	53	76.8

Table 3 Number and percentage of open and closed questions asked by the 4 teachers

	Display questions		Closed questions	
	n	%	n	%
TA	39	42.9	52	57.2
TB	4	14.3	24	85.7
TC	5	13.5	32	86.5
TD	31	44.9	38	55.1

Table 4 Frequency of the questioning strategies used by the 4 teachers

	Rephrasing	Simplification	Repetition	Decomposition	Probing
TA	14	2	13	1	1
TB	1	3	11	2	1
TC	1	3	0	0	1
TD	1	3	8	3	22

Table 5 Number and percentage of display and referential questions that do not elicit any verbal responses from students

	Display questions		Referential questions	
	n	%	n	%
TA	24	64.9	45	83.3
TB	9	81.8	13	76.5
TC	2	9.5	11	68.8
TD	4	25.0	22	41.5

Table 6 Number and percentage of open and closed questions that do not elicit any verbal responses from students

	Open questions		Closed questions	
	n	%	n	%
TA	30	76.9	39	75.2
TB	4	100.0	18	75.0
TC	5	100.0	8	25.0
TD	12	38.7	14	36.8