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Current Perspectives on Teacher-Questioning in English Language Classrooms

Kh. Atikur Rahman [1]

Abstract: This article explores the forms and functions of teacher-questions in English language classrooms basing on current studies available and gives readers a comprehensive overview of the practice of teacher-questioning in English language classrooms. To do so, available current literature (1983 to 2013) has been consulted. Literature explores that teacher-questions can be grouped into two: one group of questions is for facts, such as recall, closed, display, low-level cognitive, yes/no, and convergent questions; the other for opinions, namely, process, open, referential, high-level cognitive, open-ended, and divergent questions. It has also been found that in almost all classrooms, irrespective of developed and developing countries, teachers have a tendency to use factual, low-level, display questions that hardly challenge students to think (Moore, 1995) and motivate less communicative involvement (Yang, 2006) although open/referential questions are preferred on pedagogical grounds because they are the questions commonly asked in the 'real world' of students (Yang, 2010).
Key words: Questions, English, Classrooms, Teacher, Students

1. Introduction

Questions are considered the 'most common form of interaction' between teachers and students in the classroom (Meng et al, 2012: 2603-2610). Questioning has always been acknowledged as the stock-in-trade of classroom teachers and fundamental to outstanding teaching (Klein, Peterson, & Simington, 1991; Frazee & Rudnitski, 1995; Nunan & Lamb, 1996). It is 'regarded as the core of effective teaching' (Chuanbao, 1997:54 cited in Shi-ying, 2011). In some classrooms 'over half of class time is taken up with question-and-answer exchanges' (Richards & Lockhart, 2000: 185). Stevens (1992) cited in Brualdi (1998) stated that 'approximately eighty percent of a teacher's school day was spent asking questions to students'. Moreover, Leven and Long (1998) report that teachers ask around 300 to 400 questions daily.

2. Defining Teacher-Questions

Teacher-questions, as a kind of input provided by a teacher (Hasan, 2006), form an integral part of classroom interaction (Ho, 2005). According to Ur (1996), questioning in the context of teaching can be defined as what teachers actually say to learners to elicit oral responses. Lynch (1991) characterizes a question as an utterance with a particular illocutionary force, and Quirk et al (1985, cited in Shomoossi, 2004) defines a question as a semantic class used to seek information on a specific subject. In terms of teacher-questions, Tsui (1992) claims that teacher-questions are all types and structures of utterances classified, either syntactically or functionally, as questions asked by teacher before, during, and after instruction in order to elicit responses from the students (Jansem, 2008).

3. Forms of Teacher-Questions

Teacher-questions have been categorized in a number of ways: open and closed questions, display and referential questions, yes/no questions, convergent and divergent questions etc (Gabrielatos, 1997 cited in Meng et al, 2012).

Hargie (1981) classifies teacher-questions into the recall/process questions and the closed/open questions. Tsui (1995) classifies the category of open/closed questions according to the kind of response elicited. The former can have more than one acceptable answer while the latter can accept only one answer. Nunan and Lamb (1996: 84) describe open questions as "those that encourage extended student responses". Ellis (1994: 695) suggests that in open questions the teacher does not have a particular answer in mind and different responses are possible. He also mentions that some questions seem to be open, but in fact they

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[1]*Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology*

are closed (these can be called 'pseudo-questions'). In contrast, a closed question is "one that is framed with only one acceptable answer in mind" (Ellis 1994: 695).

The second category of questions, display/referential questions, relates to the nature of interaction generated (Tsui, 1995). For display questions, teacher already knows the answers. They are asked in order to check if the students know the answers (Thornbury, 1996). Ellis (1994: 700) defines the display question as "one designed to test whether the addressee has knowledge of a particular fact or can use a particular linguistic item correctly". Lightbown and Spada (1999) note that teachers ask display questions not because they are interested in the answer, but because they want to get their learners to display their knowledge of the language. On the contrary, for referential questions, teacher does not know the answers and students answer the questions in order to give the teacher information (Tsui, 1995). Such questions may require interpretations and judgments on the part of the 'answerer' (Shomoossi, 2004).

Nunan and Lamb (1996: 88) define referential questions as "those to which the asker does not know the answer". Ellis (1994: 721) also explains that these are questions which are 'genuinely information-seeking'. Thompson (1997) refers to referential questions as communicative questions because these seek personal information or opinion from the learners and therefore the learners have to communicate with teachers to answer the questions. Lynch (1996) argues that teachers should ask referential questions because (a) learners tend to give longer answers than they do to display questions and (b) learners will be less willing to answer questions if their purpose is always to test knowledge.

Thompson (1997), however, categorizes the first two types of questions based on two dimensions. One relates to 'the content of the question' (p. 101): whether it asks something about facts or opinions, while another relates to 'the purpose of the question' (p. 101): whether teacher already knows the answer or not. It is believed that closed or display questions elicit 'short, mechanical responses' while open or referential questions elicit 'lengthy, often complex responses' (Ho, 2005, p. 298). The next type of questions, the yes/no questions, is categorized by Thompson (1997) according to 'the grammatical form of the question' (p. 100).

Ghazali (1998) in his study talks about low- and high-level thinking questions, convergent, divergent, and literal and inferential questions. Low-level thinking questions invoke lower cognitive processing such as memorizing facts and concrete information, and are useful for students who have no pre-requisite knowledge and who need to experience simple questions before moving on to complex and more abstract thinking (Ornstein, 1995). Literal and convergent questions are also low-level. Literal questions have obvious intent and answers can be lifted directly from the text (Cruickshank et al, 1995; Muijs & Reynolds, 2001). Convergent questions deal with facts, and also with logic and complex data, abstract ideas, analogies, and complex relationships (Ornstein, 1995; Moore, 1995). An example is "Who wrote the novel *The Pearl*?" In contrast, high-level thinking questions go beyond memory and factual information, and involve analysis, synthesis, cause and effect relationships, or problem solving about complex situations (Ornstein, 1995; Arends, 1997). Divergent and inferential questions are high-level. While inferential questions go beyond basic meaning and require learners to apply their prior knowledge in trying to decipher their intent (Frazee & Rudnitski, 1995), divergent questions deal with opinions, hypotheses, and evaluations; are open-ended; encourage broad responses; and have a variety of appropriate answers (Ornstein, 1995; Moore, 1995; Kauchak & Eggen, 1998). "How does John Steinbeck use his characters to discuss the village community in *The Pearl*?" is a divergent question and "What does this paragraph tell us about the doctor's life?" is an inferential question.

Hussin (2006) in her study classifies teacher-questions in three broad categories: academic, non-academic, and pseudo questions. Academic questions are related to the content of the lesson (Good & Brophy, 2003). Non-academic questions are posed for management, rather than expecting answers from students (Frazee & Rudnitski, 1995; Hopkins, 2002; Wragg & Brown, 2001) (A teacher asks "Do you agree?", for example). A pseudo question is when the teacher poses a question to the class but then provides the answer to the question (Harrop & Swinson, 2003). In this study, academic questions have

been assigned levels based on Moore's Mental Operation Questions where questions were assigned to four categories: factual, empirical, productive, and evaluative (Moore, 1995).

Factual and empirical questions were considered low-level while productive and evaluative were considered high-level. A factual question is posed to find the answer to a problem. The expected one answer is drawn directly from the content of instruction/text (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001; Good & Brophy, 2003). A sample is "What is the name of the place?" Questions at the empirical level involve observation, recall of facts, and possible experimentation. Students need to integrate or analyze given information to arrive at a single predictable answer (Wragg & Brown, 2001; Moore, 1995). A sample is: "Which turns well then, the raw egg or the boiled egg?" Productive questions are open-ended with many correct responses, requiring students to link basic related information with their imagination, to think creatively and to produce something unique (Moore, 1995), for example "What sort of problems do you want to discuss with your close friends?" Questions at the evaluative level require students to make judgments about the merit of information based on internal or external criteria set by some objective standard (Kauchak & Eggen, 1998; Orlich et al, 1994). A sample is "Why do you want to spend time with family members?"
Researching the forms and functions of teachers' questions in secondary school classrooms in the United Kingdom, Barnes (1969, 1976, cited in Ellis, 1994) distinguished four types of questions. These were factual questions like what? and when? reasoning questions such as how? and why? open questions not requiring any reasoning, and finally social questions influencing student behavior by control or appealing.

In a cross-disciplinary study of questions and question-asking in oral discourse, Kearsley (1976) further refined Barnes' (1969) categories of teachers' questions into more detailed categories. Kearsley categorized teachers' questions into four types—echoic, epistemic, expressive, and social control— using question functions as the dividing principle.

The other dimension of teacher-questions is based on Celce Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1999) and Biber et al.'s (1999) classification of question forms. They classify questions into four major types: yes/no-questions, wh-questions, tag questions, and alternative questions. The first type, yes/no-questions, is specified further into five subtypes: focused yes/no-questions, uninverted yes/no-questions, contracted negatives in negative yes/no-questions, uncontracted negatives in negative yes/no-questions, and elliptical yes/no-questions. The second type, wh-questions, is also specified further into five subtypes: unmarked wh-questions, uninverted wh-questions, emphatic wh-questions with *ever*, negative wh-questions, and elliptical wh-questions. The third type, tag questions, is specified into two subtypes: unmarked tag questions and unsystematic tag questions. The fourth type, alternative questions, is not specified any further. Biber et al. (1999: 211)'s corpus findings show that questions are "many times more common in conversation than in writing." The high frequency of questions in conversation is natural, considering that the situation is interactive, with a constant give-take among participants. News and academic prose, on the other hand, are non-interactive and naturally make less use of questions.

Furthermore, they found out that "questions are most typically expressed by full independent clauses in the written registers, while nearly half the questions in conversation consist of fragments or tags" (Biber et al., 1999: 211). Fragments frequently occur because of the shared context among the participants. Meanwhile, question tag is frequently used to seek agreement and to keep the conversation going, and the most common type of question tag is negative. Their findings also showed that "yes/no questions are predominant among independent clauses in conversation as they are often used as comment questions". Meanwhile, wh-questions make up a relatively low percentage, which indicates that "questions in conversation used less to seek information than to maintain or reinforce the common ground among the participants" (Biber et al. 1999: 212).

The next dimension is based on Long and Sato's findings (1983). It is related to the function of questioning. There are three subtypes of questioning based on the function, namely comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests. The first subtype, comprehension checks, is defined as "any expressions by a speaker to establish whether that speaker's previous utterance has been

understood by the interlocutor" (Long & Sato, 1983, p. 275). These expressions commonly occur with tag questions. Comprehension checks can also be expressed with "repetitions of all or part of the same speaker's preceding utterance spoken with rising intonation", or "by utterances like *Do you understand?*" (Long & Sato, 1983, p. 275). In other words, they can be simply expressed by "*Do you know what I mean?*"

According to Long and Sato (1983, p. 275), the second subtype, confirmation checks involve exact or semantic, complete or partial repetition of the previous speaker's utterance, are encoded as either yes/no or uninverted (rising intonation) questions (there is a presupposition of a 'yes' answer), and serve either to elicit confirmation that their listener had heard and/or understood that previous speaker's utterance correctly or to dispel that belief. They can practically be expressed with questions such as *Do you mean X?* For example, the teacher first partly repeats the student's words, but then fully repeats them to confirm that what he or she just heard is true.

Long and Sato (1983, p. 276) define the third subtype, clarification requests, as "any expressions by a speaker designed to elicit clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterance." Question forms used to express clarification requests are focused and inverted yes/no-questions, wh-questions, and tag questions. When the interlocutor receives this request, he or she may either repeat what he or she has just said or supply completely new information. The choice of using this request "implies no presupposition on the speaker's part that he or she has heard an understood the interlocutor's previous utterance" (Long & Sato, 1983, p. 276). Clarification requests are not only expressed with questions. They can also be expressed in declarative clauses like "*I don't understand*, and through imperatives like *Try again*" (Long & Sato, 1983, p. 276). In addition, questions such as *What do you mean?* can simply express these requests.

However, it is too simplistic for the above systems to classify teacher-questions into either open or closed. From the analyses of the questions asked by three non-native ESL teachers during reading comprehension in the upper secondary school in Brunei, Ho (2005) discovers numerous instances of questions, particularly those reading comprehension questions, which can neither be considered closed nor open. These questions are mainly used to gauge students' overall vocabulary level, grammar and other general knowledge. Banbrook and Skehan (1989: 146) also note that the display-referential distinction can be influenced by "the students' interpretation of the teacher's intentions" of asking the questions. They argue that "it is by no means easy to categorize questions into display and referential" (1989: 146). They even suggested that attempts at quantifying data into discrete and directly observable categories were hazardous. Categorizing questions may merely be based on the researcher's own assumptions, especially when the researcher is just an observer—regardless of his or her presence in the classroom being observed.

Whatever names are used for their types, teacher-questions can, in general, be grouped into two: one is for facts, such as recall, closed, display, low-level cognitive, yes/no, and convergent questions; the other for opinions, namely, process, open, referential, high-level cognitive, open-ended, and divergent questions.

4. Functions and Purposes of Teacher-Questions

There is ample evidence (see Brown & Wragg, 1993) that teachers' questions play a central role in classroom interaction and that they also have an impact on the kinds of contributions to lessons which learners can make.

In most classrooms, questioning remains the common strategy for eliciting responses from students during the whole class teaching. Effective questioning by the teacher is believed to focus students' attention to understand lesson content, arouse their curiosity, stimulate their imagination, and motivate them to seek out new knowledge. In short, questioning, done skillfully, would elevate students' level of thinking (Muth & Alverman, 1992; Orlich et al, 1994; Ornstein, 1995).

Chaudron (1988:126) mentions that "teachers' questions constitute a primary means of engaging learners' attention, promoting verbal responses, and evaluating learners' progress". In fact, teacher-questions may serve different functions which are listed by such researchers as Brown and Wragg (1993: 4) "to arouse interest and curiosity concerning a topic; to focus attention on a particular issue or concept; to develop an

active approach to learning; to stimulate pupils to ask questions of themselves and others". Referring to language teaching, Nunan and Lamb (1996:80) see questioning as strategies "to check learners' understanding, to elicit information, and to control their classrooms" while for Peacock (2001: 178) it is "to find out what pupils do or do not know and understand; to remind them about work completed in a previous lesson; to challenge, stimulate and develop their thinking". On the other hand, Morgan and Saxton (1991, cited in Brualdi, 1998: 29) discover teachers using questioning "to keep their learners involved during lessons; to express their ideas and thoughts; to enable learners to hear different explanations of the material; to help teachers to evaluate their learners' learning and revise their lessons when necessary".

Questioning is also used in "focusing attention; exercising disciplinary control in the course or instruction; encouraging students' participation; moving the lesson forward" (Fakeye, 2007: 127). In addition, Brown and Wragg (2001) mention other reasons concerning class management. They also identify some other possible functions of questions such as to motivate children, to focus attention on one particular aspect of language, to increase interaction between groups and to present tasks and activities. In other words, it means that teacher questions play an important role in managing classroom routines (Yang, 2006).

5. Effects of Teacher-Questions

In reality, effective questioning does not always happen, even among teachers with considerable experience in teaching. Nunan and Lamb's (1996) research on questioning in language education reveals that over the years, teachers still pose questions in much the same way as always, with most of the questions low-level, despite improvement in teaching materials, curricula, and methods of teaching (see also Ornstein, 1995). Teachers have the tendency to pose a series of specific, factual, low-level questions that hardly challenge students to think of the answers because answers can be readily lifted from the texts (Moore, 1995). This reliance on low-level questions and neglecting other types of questions promotes rote learning and discourages higher-order thinking processes among learners (Perrott, 1990). Thus, display questions are likely to elicit short answers that motivate less communicative involvement (Yang, 2006).

The effort involved in answering referential questions stimulates greater effort and depth of processing on the part of the learner (Thornbury, 1996). Referential questions would be likely, therefore, to promote greater learner productivity (Chaudron, 1988). In addition, referential questions call for assessment or judgment (Brock, 1986). Thus referential questions can stimulate more productive and varied use of English (Cullen, 1998). Because referential questions are open questions, they are more likely to encourage learners to participate actively and to bring their own thoughts and recollections into the conversation (Barnes, 1969, 1976, cited in Ellis 1994). Brock (1986) suggests that the use of referential questions, moreover, can create a flow of information from learners to teachers, thus generating discourse resembling the outside classroom conversations that learners experience.

Similarly, learner response (i.e., output) serves as feedback to help teachers maintain interaction with students and also functions to help learners with self-correction (Gass, 1997). In particular, longer and syntactically more complex learner output elicited by referential questions can enhance the development of syntax and morphology in language learners (Swain, 1995). It would be helpful for teachers to use as many referential questions as possible in order to enhance learners' engagement in communicative language use (Thornbury, 1996).

On the other hand, in pseudo questions, when the teacher provides the answer he poses to the class, he inadvertently denies his students the opportunity to answer the question and share their ideas with the class. Good questions may malfunction into pseudo questions (Harrop & Swinson, 2003). Posing questions in this way may turn students into passive learners, because in reality, there is very minimum interaction here: students are mere spectators and the teacher dominates classroom interaction (Brown, 2001; Ranjit, 2004).

Again, in accepting only one answer for each question like in closed question, the teacher lowers the level of the question (Good & Brophy, 2003). The communication becomes a "closed-circuit" between the teacher and one student, while the rest of the class is not involved (Orlich et al, 1994). When a classmate has already given the answer and the teacher accepts that as the answer, the rest of the class is not challenged to think (Frazee & Rudnitski, 1995). A teacher's tendency to elaborate on a student's answer may have the adverse effect of undermining students' confidence in their ability to answer questions. It also conditions the class to wait for the teacher's response rather than to pay attention to the student answering the question, because the class perceives the teacher's answer to be the better answer (Burden & Byrd, 1994; Orlich et al., 1994). The implications delineated above indicate that teachers may not be aware of their techniques of questioning, and the impact of posing questions has on their students' learning (Good & Brophy, 2003) and how teachers' beliefs influence their practice (Sahin et al., 2002).

Questioning has always been the prerogative of teachers. For students to benefit, there is the need to confront the issue of teachers' dominating classroom interaction through their role as the all-time "questioner" (Arends, 1997; Ayaduray & Jacobs, 1997; Dillon, 1982; Orlich et al., 1994; Ho, 2005; Wajnryb, 1992). Teachers may not be aware that this type of instruction is detrimental for their students' learning when students have no opportunity to express their ideas and opinions, or to ask the teacher to clarify a point because they have never been taught how to ask questions. Therefore, teachers need to be more flexible by allowing students to pose questions to the teacher sometimes, to allow more student-student interaction in the form of discussion, and to let students know that the teacher values the students' thoughts and ideas (Ayuduray & Jacobs, 1997). Classroom interaction needs to be more learner-centred (Wajnryb, 1992) and teachers need to expose their students to the art of asking questions. Only when students are courageous enough to pose questions to their teacher, and to express and share ideas with their classmates will they be able to participate actively and develop their thinking skills (Burden & Byrd, 1994; Orlich et al., 1994).

6. Studies on Teacher-Questioning in English Classrooms

From the early 20th-century to the early 1960s, researches focused on how to promote students' study by teacher-questioning; during the period of later 1960s to early 1970s, the focus was changed into how to ask questions properly inserting texts; since 1970s, studies on teacher's questioning have come into popularity and the focus ranges from classifications (Barnes,1969, 1976, in Ellis, 1999; Long & Sato, 1983), functions of teachers' questions (Kauchak & Eggen,1989; Richards & Lockhart, 2000), principles of questioning (Betts, 1991; Cole & Chan, 1994; Orstein, 1995, cited in Li, 2006) to teacher training on classroom questioning (Long & Crookes, 1987, cited in Ellis, 1999).

Long and Sato's (1983) exploratory investigation of the forms and functions of teachers' questions in ESL elementary level lessons compared the findings with previously established patterns of questioning behavior informal NS-NNS conversation outside classrooms. They compared the types of questions the teacher asked in class with the types of questions native speakers used in communication with NNS in non-classroom contexts. In the study, teachers' display and referential questions were identified and the frequency of both types of questions and the total of questions were counted respectively. They found that the teachers asked 938 questions in total. They also discovered that significantly more display questions (476) than referential questions (128) were asked by the teachers in the six ESL classroom contexts (51% as opposed to 14% of the total of 938). In the 36 NS-NNS conversations, referential questions were predominant. Of the total of 1,322 questions asked, 999 were referential questions in contrast with two display questions (76% contrasting with 0.15% of the total).

Following Long and Sato's research on question types (Long & Sato, 1983), Brock (1986) conducts further research in order to determine if higher frequencies of referential questions have an effect on adult ESL classroom discourse. Based on her research findings, she learns that "learners' responses to referential questions are on average more than twice as long and more than twice as syntactically complex as their responses to display questions" (Brock 1986: 55). The research was conducted with four experienced ESL teachers and 24 non-native speakers. Two of the teachers were trained to integrate referential questions into their classroom instruction, whereas the other two were not. Each of the teachers

gave the same lesson to six of the non-native speakers, and the lessons were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Brock found that the two teachers who had not been trained to use referential questions asked a total of 141 epistemic questions. Of the total, 24 were referential questions and 117 were display questions. In contrast, the teachers after having been trained to use referential questions asked 194 epistemic questions altogether. Of the total, 173 were referential questions and 21 were display. The study showed that those learners who were asked more referential questions produced significantly longer and more syntactically complex responses. The study also revealed that a greater number of referential questions were accompanied by a greater number of confirmation checks and clarification requests by the teacher. She concluded that referential questions may increase how much learners speak in the classroom.

Pica and Long (1986) observed ten teachers in ESL classrooms who used one-way communication to convey information to students. They found that more declaratives and statements were used than questions. Display questions and comprehension checks were more used than referential questions and clarification requests. Thus they drew a conclusion that teacher-centred class was lack of real communicative information whereas Brock (1986) found that referential questions helped students assimilate more meaningful outputs, which would eventually improve their language acquisition.

In a traditional language classroom, factual questions are the most common while open questions are the least common (Myhill et al, 2006). In his study, Wilen (1991) revealed that teachers spend most of their time asking low-level cognitive questions, which concentrate on factual information that can be memorized.

Thornbury (1996) performed an in-service training project to raise trainees' awareness and discovered that the effort involved in asking referential questions not only fostered greater effort and depth of processing in the learners, but also in the teachers. He urged, therefore, that teachers try to present lessons in which every question would be referential.

This situation can be found in Harrop and Swinson's (2003) analysis of recorded teaching of ten infant school teachers, ten junior school teachers, and ten secondary school teachers. It was found that many questions asked by these three groups of teachers were closed questions (44.6%, 41.1% and 48.6% respectively), while open questions were rarely asked (7.1%, 7.4% and 9.8% respectively). Also, in Burns and Myhill's (2004) research study in which episodes of fifteen minutes from 54 lessons were drawn from Year 2 and Year 6 classes, the analyses showed that the most common form of questions asked by the teachers is the factual questions (64%).

Contrary to earlier findings, however, the study conducted by Yang (2006) found that in both classes observed, the teachers asked many more referential questions than display questions. Moreover, the teachers' referential questions elicited longer and syntactically more complex utterances from the learners.
The study of Noor et al (2012) explored the questioning approaches of four teachers from selected urban and rural Malaysian primary schools. The findings revealed that the majority type of questions employed were display questions.

7. Conclusion
Although teacher-questioning is an integral part of classroom interaction (Ho, 2005), it has been identified as a critical and challenging part of teachers' work (Boaler & Brodie, 2004). The act of asking a good question is cognitively demanding, and requires considerable pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman,1987). Good questioning is both a methodology and an art; there are certain rules to follow (Ornstein & Lasley, 2000). Literature mentioned above suggest that open or referential questions are more preferred on pedagogical grounds because they are the questions commonly asked in the 'real world' of students outside the classroom. However, "there is a divergence between what theorists would consider to be good practice and what is actually going on in classrooms" (Banbrook & Skehan, 1989, p. 142 cited in Yang, 2010).

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