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On the Study of Teacher's Question Types and Students' Answers in Primary School English Teaching

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Teachers' questions have been regarded as an important component in foreign language teaching context. The present paper aims to present a brief investigation into teachers' question types and students' answers in primary school English teaching, and tries to draw some implications for primary school English teachers. The video was transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. According to what is surveyed in the study, some questioning strategies were put forward for primary English teaching in the future.

1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), interaction has long been important in language learning.[1] Researches have shown that classroom interaction plays a crucial role in improving students' English proficiency.[8] In EFL classroom, the teacher-student interaction is thought to be done mainly by both teachers' asking questions and students' answering them. Richard & Lockhart regards that questioning not only can stimulate and maintain students' interest, encourage students to think and focus on the content of the lesson but also enable a teacher to clarify what a student has said, to elicit a particular structure or vocabulary items, to check students' understanding and to encourage students' participation in a lesson.[15] As the importance of English teaching is gradually valued by the whole society, English teaching as a compulsory course, is making itself into primary schools. China Ministry of Education issued "primary school English curriculum standards", which clearly points out that "the overall goal of English course in the elementary education stage is to cultivate students' comprehensive language using ability."[11] A considerable attention in recent years, however, has been focused on college classroom interaction. However, studies on English classroom interaction in primary schools are rare.[6] One of the more commonly studied interaction patterns found in the classroom is that of IRE model, which includes three sequences: Initiation-Response-Evaluation.[17] In order to enrich the related research and provide some suggestions on classroom interaction, especially on teacher questioning and students' answering, the researcher tries to make a study on classroom questioning in a primary school in China. The aims of the framework are to reveal the features of

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teachers' questions in "student-centered" classroom context in Kairui Primary School (KRPS) and the students' answers. Some pedagogical suggestions are expected subsequently so as to promote effectiveness of EFL teaching. The questions addressed in the research are as follows:

(1) What are the question types adopted by English teachers in EFL classrooms in KRPS?

(2) What are the ways questions are answered adopted by students in EFL classrooms in KRPS?

(3) How can teachers improve their questioning strategy in EFL classrooms?

2. Literature Review

The crucial role that questions play in the educational process has been stated by a number of educators. Almost all the research conducted had focused primarily on describing teacher questioning behaviors until the 1950s. Around 1970, a new spurt of activity of teacher questioning began. The focus of the research moved onto identifying specific questioning types, levels and skills that have an impact on student growth.

Question types are defined by different scholars from different perspectives.[1,2,9,12,13,15] Those scholars make a distinction between display questions and referential questions. Barnes reports on a study of teachers' questions in secondary school subject classrooms. He classifies questions into four types: (1) factual questions ('what'); (2) reasoning questions ('how' and 'why'); (3) open questions that do not need any reasoning; (4) social questions (questions that influence students' behavior by means of control and appeal. He found a predominance of factual as opposed to reasoning questions and open questions were extremely rare, while closed questions were very common. For the purposes of examining the role of questions in the classroom, three kinds of questions are distinguished here—procedural, convergent, and divergent.[15] The researchers provide a taxonomy which centers on the distinction between echoic questions and epistemic questions. The former asks for the repetition of an utterance or confirmation that it has been properly understood, with the aim of acquiring information.[9] The latter type includes referential questions (RQ) and display questions (DQ), which Long and Sato discuss in some detail. Referential questions are genuinely information seeking, while display questions 'test' the learner by eliciting already known information. In their study, they found that 79% of the questions which requested information from the students were display questions. Pica and Long also found similar results in their study that both experienced and inexperienced ESL teachers asked far more display questions.[13] According to Hakansson & Lindberg cited in Rod

Ellis (1994) the question types can be classified in terms of question form: nexus questions(also called Yes/No question), alternative questions(the responder is provided with an alternative to select from), and x-questions (also called *wh*-questions).[3]

Recently, several researchers have conducted researches on classroom questioning, especially teacher questioning in China. Wu's study showed referential and open questions are less effective than display and closed questions in eliciting responses from students.[18] This study indicated that the students' attitude and teacher's questioning strategies played more important roles than question types to reach students' replies. In student-centered language classrooms, proportionally more referential questions (73%-82%) are asked than display questions.[19] However, Hu et al., found that there are more display questions (68%) than referential questions in EFL classrooms.[5]

A display question is "not a real question (i.e. which does not seek information unknown to the teacher) but which serves to elicit language practice" while the referential question "asks for information which is not known to the teacher".[16] Not all uses of display questions are ineffective. Effective pedagogical discourse will make use of display questions when the teacher is reminding the student of concepts related to grammar or rhetoric or when the teacher is doing consciousness-raising activities with the learner.[7] Some researches focused on investigating the effects of referential questions on the ESL classroom discourse. Brock conducted a study examining the effects of referential questions on the discourse in the adult ESL classroom, in which 4 teachers and 24 advanced ESL students were selected as the research subjects.[2] According to this study, the teachers who had been trained in composing referential questions were able to increase the number of referential questions used in classroom discourse, while those who did not receive such training asked predominantly display questions. The study demonstrates that referential questions could increase students' language production and then facilitate language acquisition. Nunan also finds that the use of referential questions by the teacher results in more complex language produced by students' interaction is more like natural discourse.[12] McCormick claims teacher questions operate as semiotic tools for achieving goal-directed instructional actions within the context of teacher-students classroom interaction.[10] As a result, students' L2 acquisition is facilitated.

Teachers use questions as a device for eliciting the information they wanted to transmit. The previous research on questioning in second language teaching reveals that two question types that have drawn much attention are display questions and referential questions. The follow-

ing questions are the examples of display questions: *How many students are going to the museum this afternoon? Who is the leading role in this article?* The following questions are the examples of referential questions: *Why do you think this man is the murderer from this passage? What do you think the best technique in this story? Why?*

3. The Study

3.1 Research Methods

As the present study aims to understand the teacher's questioning behaviors and their influences on students' answer in EFL classroom, two kinds of methods will be adopted: video-recording and interviews. The present study was based on the transcripts of classroom video recording. The data were sorted according to the need of the present study, that is, they were sorted into the following two categories: the questions and the answers. In order to increase reliability of the present study, interviews with the teachers will be carried out after the class is videoed. The main contents of interviews with teachers will include frequency of questioning, types of questioning, questioning strategies, etc.

3.1.1 Research Subjects

The subjects for present study include one English teacher from Zhangdian Kairui Primary School and 50 students (Grade 5) from Zhangdian Park Primary School, Zibo, Shandong Province. All the students have learnt English course for two years after they entered the school. The students are required to preview the text the day before the class is videoed. The teacher majors in English and got her Teacher Certificate in 2003. The teaching material used in the class is published by Shandong Science and Technology Publishing House.

3.1.2 Research Procedures

The present study is based on the transcripts of classroom video recording. It proceeded in the following four stages: Firstly, a 40-minute videoed-class was provided to the writer. Secondly, transcription was transcribed manually first by two English juniors and then given the writer for careful proof-reading. Thirdly, the writer distinguished the utterances into the related categories of teacher questioning model and the way questions were answered, aiming at calculating the frequency and percentage of each questioning pattern and how the students answered the questions in the class. Fourthly, interview was conducted in order to get in-depth and comprehensible description of classroom behaviors in EFL classrooms.

3.1.3 Data Collection

Data collection was made through May 2016. The research was conducted after the class had been videoed. Originally, the class was videoed with the purpose of teaching research for the application of new English textbooks in Zibo City. The videoed class was given to the researcher for research use with the English teacher's permission. On the average, it took each student transcriber 25 hours to complete the transcription. To warrant the accuracy, two transcriptions in word format were given to the researcher for comparison and analysis. Total numbers of question types and answers types was calculated based on the numbers on every transcription pages. Repetitive questions are regarded as one single question. Prompt feedback was provided by the English teacher after the transcription. As for the interview, in order to ensure the participant give reliable answers, the researcher explained to the English teacher that the data collected would be for research use only. The interview was done in the classroom which lasted for 40 minutes. The English teacher was interviewed in Chinese. Some clarification was given to the English teacher whenever she had any doubts about the questions during the interview. Most questions are concerned about the reason why one type of question or another is raised by the English teacher. The whole process was recorded.

3.2 Results and Discussion

It is necessary to introduce the results and discussion in this study to help clarify how it has shaped the way the classroom questioning patterns and the way questions are answered. The teaching proceeds as follows: warming-up, presentation, practice, production and homework.

3.2.1 Findings of Question types

The types of questions in the study are based on the classification of Long &Sato and Hakansson & Lindberg.[3,9] For the primary school students, the purpose of questioning is gathering and recalling information[14]. Therefore, the question patterns in the study are divided into display question, yes/no question and alternative question. The number and percentage of display question, yes/no question and alternative question are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Number and percentage of display question, yes/ no question, and alternative question

Types of question	Total number of Questions (n.)	Display questions		Qu yes/no questions		Alternative questions	
		n.	%	n.	%	n.	%
Number& percentage	141	88	62.4	51	36.1	2	1.4

As is shown in the table, there are totally 141 questions raised by the English teacher in 40-minute English teaching. On average, 3.5 questions is proposed in every minute. The results are comparable to those obtained in Long & Sato which a total of 938 questions in six elementary level ESL lessons. That is, 156 questions are raised in every ESL lesson. The teacher asks 148 questions, among which 94(63.5%) questions are display questions, 52 (35.1%) questions are yes/no questions and 2 (1.4%) questions are alternative questions. Ellis, R (1994) argues that the reason for the prevalence of questioning is undoubtedly the control which it gives the teacher over the discourse. It can be identified clearly that most display questions are students' practice on sentence pattern *What club would you like to join?*. No typical referential questions were found in the teacher's classroom discourse. The distinction between display question and referential question is not always clear-cut. In the warming-up section, the teacher is trying to interact with the students about the sports they like:

T: Now, boys and girls, please look! There are so many sports pictures. And there are so many happy faces. In these sports, I like swimming. What do you like? What sports do you like? I like swimming! What sports do you like?

S: I like swimming, too!

T: OK, now we can swim together, yes?

S: no answer.

In this excerpt, the teacher's question is referential in one sense as it concerns the area of the student's private life she has no knowledge of, but in another sense it can be considered display, as it is clearly designed to elicit a special grammatical structure and was evaluated accordingly. The same expert can be found in the beginning section of class presentation:

T: (What club would Guo Yang like to join? What club would Peter like to join? And the last one, how about Denny? (DQs)) You please! Guo Yang would like to join…

S: Table Tennis Club! (volunteer: 2)

T: Yes. Next one, Peter would like to join…..

S: Basketball Club! (volunteer:3)

T: last one, Danny would like to join…..

S: Football Club! (volunteer: 4)

T: Yes or no? (yes/no question: 2)

S: Yes! (in chorus: 4)

Three consecutive display questions are asked by the teacher and answered with the teacher's elicitation by adopting the structure "Somebody would like to join…" It can be seen clearly that the teacher is focusing on a grammatical structure. In the middle of class presentation, the teacher bolsters the grammatical structure training:

T: And how does Guo Yang answer? (DQ) Let's listen! (Video) Who can answer?(DQ) I'd like to join…You please!

S: I'd like to join the Table Tennis Club! (volunteer)

T: Good try!

S: I'd like to join the Table Tennis Club!

T: OK, now, follow him!

S: I'd like to join the Table Tennis Club!

Through the above teacher-students communication, the answers given by individual student are from the textbook instead of from their own thoughts. Based on the interview with the English teacher, this type of question is genuinely display question, which is intended to "test" the learner by eliciting already known information. These results are in accordance with the interview evidence in that the English teacher claims that their learning focus centers around the grammatical structures "*What would you like to join?*" and "*I'd like to join…*" in the whole teaching process. We can see the students produce the structures repeatedly in the pair-work and group-work. Yes/No question takes up a great proportion 52 (35.1%) in the warming-up and concluding section, for example, in the warming-up section, the teacher asks the students:

T: OK, today we will study English together, OK? (yes/no question)

T: And let's enjoy English happily, OK? (yes/no question)

T: Good! Do you like games? Do you like game? (yes/no question)

T: Now, watch the big screen. Let's play a game, OK? (yes/no question)

These yes/no questions could get the whole class attention in a short time. At the same time, the teacher intends to let the students have some rudimentary ideas about the topic they are going to discuss at class. The teacher leads all of the students to the class presentation section, practice and production.

(After the practice and production section, the teacher continues to add new knowledge to the topic they have covered in the preceding section.)

T: Now, boys and girls, do you want to know some foreign sports clubs? (yes/no question)

S: (no answer)

T: Let's enjoy! Basketball club, Soccer Club, Karate Club, Cycling Club, Climbing Club, Table Tennis Club, Swimming Club, Hockey Club, Gymnastics Club. So many foreign sports clubs, Do you like these clubs? (yes/no question)

S: Yes! (in choru)

T: Would you like to join these sports clubs? (yes/no question)

S: Yes! (in chorus)

T: OK! Now let's join the sports clubs and do some sports. I think you will be happy and healthy every day, OK? (yes/no question)

S: OK! (in chorus)

In a nutshell, questions serve as a device for initiating interaction between the teacher and the students. Besides the above-mentioned results, yes/no question occurs more frequently in the beginning and concluding part. However, display question appears to penetrate through the whole class.

3.2.2 Findings of the Way Questions Are Answered

There are totally 141 corresponding answers related with the 141 questions. Five different ways questions are answered are listed in the table: in chorus, volunteer, no answer, self-answer and appoint.

Table 2. The way questions are answered

Types of answers	Total number of answers	In chorus		Volunteer		No answer		self-answer		Appoint	
		n.	%	n.	%	n.	%	n.	%	n.	%
Number & percentage	141	67	47.5	43	30.4	22	15.6	4	2.83	5	3.54

Several characteristics can be summarized in the table 2. Firstly, as it indicates, the way questions are answered ranges greatly from 67 answers "in chorus" (45.3%) to 5 "appoint" answers (3.3%). The way "in chorus" occupies the first place, which seems to suggest the students are positively integrated in the classroom learning context constructed by the English teacher. The students' active participation can be perceived in the frequency of hands-raising. According to the video, almost every time after the questions are put forward, most students put up their hands trying to answer the questions. The way "volunteer" ranks the second, accounting for 43 (29.1%), which is followed by the "no answer" accounting for 29 (19.6%). The way "self-answer" only represents a minor proportion, 2.7%. Based on the observation, the way "appoint" occurs 5 times in the context where the appointed student answers a question during the repetition of a grammatical structure. Taking *in chorus* in the warming-up as an example:

T: OK, today we will study English together, OK? (yes/no question)

S: OK! (in chorus)

T: And let's enjoy English happily, OK? (yes/no question)

S: OK! (in chorus)

T: Good! Do you like games? Do you like game? (yes/no question)

S: Yes! (in chorus)

T: Now, watch the big screen. Let's play a game, OK? (yes/no question)

S: OK! (in chorus)

T: Now, say the words quickly! Are you ready? (yes/no question)

S: OK! (in chorus)

In this excerpt, the teacher poses a succession of yes/no questions, which aims to arouse the students' enthusiasm for English learning, to be more specifically, for the topic they will cover in the following interaction. It can be explicitly shown that those yes/no questions are responded unanimously by saying "Ok" or "Yes".

Secondly, typical way of response "volunteer" can be identified in the class presentation part. The teacher puts forward some questions related with the listening materials to test students' perception and comprehension, which is displayed as follows:

T: Now, look! How does Jenny ask Guo Yang? (DQ) Let's listen! (video) How does Jenny ask Guo Yang? (DQ) Try, please!

S: What club would you like to join? (volunteer)

T: Good try, thank you! Anyone, what club…? (DQ)Try please!

S: What club would you like to join? (volunteer)

T: And how does Guo Yang answer? (DQ) Let's listen! (Video) Who can answer? (DQ) I'd like to join…You please!

S: I'd like to join the Table Tennis Club! (volunteer)

From the responses, we can see most students produced the structure without any problems. The "volunteer" way of response show they are quite confident in answering the questions no matter it is a display or a yes/no question. The total sum of "in chorus" and "volunteer" makes up 110 (74.4%), revealing that all the students are completely engaged in the classroom activities. The results practically reconcile with the interview evidence. During the interview, the English teacher acknowledged, "The students are quite familiar with and interested in the topic *sports* so they behave actively at classes. The class atmosphere will be a bit boring if the teaching content is insipid".

It seems, at first blush, the type *no answer* takes up 29 (19.6%), giving us the impression that the corresponding 29 questions are not responded and the teacher might feel somewhat frustrated. After careful review, however, we can observe questions are repeated sometimes or the English teacher switches the questioning patterns. For example:

T: In these sports, I like swimming. What do you like?

What sports do you like? I like swimming! What sports do you like? (DQs; no answer)

   S: I like swimming, too! (volunteer)

   T: We can swim together!

In this excerpt, the question "*What sports do you like?*" appears three times, but only one response is given. It seems that the other two questions fail to be responded one by one. One issue for concern is that the display question per se serves more than just getting a single answer from the students. It can also be inferred from the interview that the English teacher tries to stimulate their thinking by repeating the questions and reinforce their perception of this grammatical structure.

3.2.3 Interview Evidence

The English teacher provided timely and detailed interpretation regarding the teaching design, different question types, frequency of questioning, effect of different types of questions and the strategies used in question-raising, etc.. As to preparing questions, the teacher admitted, "I usually plan several questions while preparing classes. But I hardly take referential question into my teaching plan because you will feel embarrassed when the students cannot answer the question you raise". The teacher responded to the high frequency of display question as "Most questions I asked are *wh*-questions, which help enhance the students' understanding towards the text itself. In the class extension part, I will design some questions which can facilitate their divergent thinking." As to the repetition of display question, the teacher replied, "First, the repetition of display question in the beginning of presentation part could help students better perceive the core grammatical structure we will focus on at class; Secondly, sometimes I am not clear whether they got what I said, so I asked questions again and again". As to yes/no question, the teacher answered, "I want to make sure whether the other students are listening to the class carefully. It is the way I can get their attention". As to the way questions are answered, the teacher said, "The way *in chorus* could activate classroom atmosphere; the reason why the students volunteered to answer is that they are quite interested in the topic which is familiar to them. However, they will lose interests in the expositive writing and reading comprehension". "I scarcely raise questions in Chinese at classes unless it is really hard for the students to understand", said the teacher, as to language used in question-raising".

4. Pedagogical Implications and Some Suggestions

The present study demonstrated the number and frequency of different question types and different students' answers in a 40-minute English class in a primary school. Instructional objectives, by and large, were reached at different levels such as knowledge objectives, skill objective and affective objective. To some extent, the high frequency of question-answer is a reflection of a successful English class. The students were completely immersed in the English environment constructed by the teacher, engaging in pair-work, group work and playing different roles in classroom activities. Their enthusiasms for English learning were inspired and maintained thorough the teaching process. Taking the results of the study into consideration, we can get many implications. However, besides the satisfactory results we got from the class, there is still a little space for future improvement. From the perspective of teacher training, questioning strategy and wait-time, the author gives the following sentiments:

Firstly, the teacher should get some training introducing the distinction among different question patterns, especially, between display and referential question. Brock found that "learners' response to referential questions were on average more than twice as long and more than twice as syntactically complex as their response to display questions"[2]. It is particularly important in those contexts in which the classroom provides learners their only opportunity to produce the target language. In one sense, learners' response to referential questions is not a mere repetition of knowledge in the textbook, but a flexible application in the real and natural settings.

Secondly, the teacher should presuppose several referential questions cautiously. An elaborately-designed teaching plan is crucial to a successful classroom communication. Richard D. Kellough pointed out key cognitive questions should be planned, thoughtfully worded, and written into your lesson plan[14]. Thoughtful teachers even plan questions targeted to readiness level, interest, or learning profile of a student.

Thirdly, after questioning, the teachers should provide students with adequate time to think. The pause after asking a question is called wait time (or think time). In the study, the whole class runs very fast. From the video, almost all the questions are responded within 2 seconds. One of the considerations is that the questions are within the students' reach. That is, they are relatively easy for the students to answer. The teacher should give students more wait-time, such as 3-5 seconds, instead of correcting students' errors directly. It is particularly important when referential questions are put forward. Some questions that are a little beyond their current level could drive them to think critically and divergently, which is beneficial to language learning.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the number and frequency of teacher's questioning and students' answers in a primary school English class. It can be clearly observed that both the teacher and the students actively participated in the classroom activities. The teacher created a natural and relaxed atmosphere for the students which could reduce student's psychological pressure and encourage them to produce target language. As is expected, from the students' answers, we can see they use the grammatical structure correctly. For some reasons, there are some limitations in this study and the writer will list them below; and then give some advice for future study. The subjects are from one class in Grade 5 and it cannot stand for all the primary school students. Both the time of the experiment and the number of subjects are limited. So the future studies could design experiments with more subjects and in longer time. The study only discussed the question patterns and students' answer. For the future studies, other related issues such as teacher's feedback, wait-time, and distribution place of questions and frequency of questioning strategy should be considered.

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