To Question or not to Question, That is the Question

QUESTIONNER OU NE PAS QUESTIONNER, C'EST LA QUESTION

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Abstract: The importance of classroom interaction in language learning is self-evident. Among the various kinds of interactions, teacher questioning and student answering is an important aspect. This paper, on the basis of background knowledge of classroom questioning and the empirical study, first discuss the results of the experiment and the reasons, then put forward some useful techniques and principles in classroom questioning. At last the author got the conclusion: Effective use of questioning is a critical asset in every good teacher's toolbox. A good teacher uses questions at the right level and follows good questioning techniques.
Key words: questioning, technique, EFL class

Résumé: L'importance de l'interaction de classe dans l'apprentissage de la langue est évidente. Parmi les diverses sortes d'interations, l'enseignant questionnant et l'apprenant répondant est un aspect important. Cet essai, sur la base des connaissances contextuelles de la question en classe et l'étude empirique, discute d'abord les résultats de l'expérimentation et les raisons, puis propose des techniques et principes utiles de la question en classe. Enfin, l'auteur tire la conclusion : l'utilisation effective de la question est un capital critique pour chaque bon enseignant. Un bon professeur utilise les questions au niveau approprié et suit de bonnes techniques de la question.
Mots-Clés: question, technique, classe ALE(Anglais Langue Etrangère)

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Postman (1979:140), "All our knowledge results from questions". Questions serve as a fundamental tool of teaching and lie at the very heart of developing critical thinking abilities in students. But a lot of teachers think that asking students questions waste too much time in class and they want to teach students as much knowledge as possible. Even though some teachers do ask some questions, they tend to ask referential questions, which makes them feel confident and safe. It is a dilemma: to question or not to question, that is really the question. In fact, as a diagnostic tool, classroom questions allow the teacher to glimpse into the minds of students to find out not only what they know or don't know but also how they think about a topic (Kauchak & Eggen, 1989:104). Research indicates that questioning is second only to lecturing in popularity as a teaching method and that classroom teachers should spend 35-50% of their instructional time conducting questioning sessions. If we try to structure our lessons using problem solving as a teaching method, then questions are central. Not only is much of the instruction organized by questions, we even state the problems to be solved as questions.

Due to the importance of teacher questioning in class, we can say safely that to question is better than not to question, that is the answer to the question. In this paper, the author will conduct research into questioning in class.

2. BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE OF CLASSROOM QUESTIONING

2.1 The Function of Classroom Questioning

Questioning is one of the most often used teaching techniques. According to Callahan & Clarke (1988), the use of question is one of the most important of all teaching techniques. We use questioning during a class to stimulate thinking, assess student progress, check on teacher clarity, motivate students, maintain classroom control, provide repetition, emphasize key points, extend thinking skills, gain feedback on teaching/learning, provide revision strategies, create links between ideas, enhance curiosity, provide

challenges, and many more things.

Classroom questioning is an extensively researched topic. The high incidence of questioning as a teaching strategy, and its consequent potential for influencing student learning, have led many investigators to examine relationships between questioning methods and student achievement and behavior.

2.2 Classification of Classroom Questioning

A review of classroom questioning studies reveals that the two questioning types that have received the most research attention are display and referential questions. A display question is not a real question but serves to elicit language practice while the referential question asks for information which is not known to the teacher.

Another kind of classification, which is similar to display/referential questions, is open and closed questions. "An open question carries with it no expectations on the part of the questioner concerning the responses of the person addressed". (Peacock, 1990: 128), while "a closed question, on the other hand, presupposes a particular kind of response from the person addressed. Your answer is likely to be regarded as clearly right or clearly wrong and often teachers will persist in their questioning until they achieve the response they are seeking."(Peacock, 1990:129)

The third kind of classification which is also similar to display and referential questions, is convergent and divergent questions. "Convergent questions are those that require one correct answer. Convergent questions are useful for establishing facts or ascertaining answers to problems that have one correct answer, while divergent questions are just the opposite, in that many different answers are appropriate"(Jacobsen, et al 1999: 153-154).

The majority of researchers have conducted more simple comparisons; they have looked at the relative effects on student outcomes produced by what they call higher and lower cognitive questions. Lower cognitive questions are those which ask the student merely to recall verbatim or in his/her own words material previously read or taught by the teacher. Higher cognitive questions are those which ask the students to mentally manipulate bits of information previously learned to create an answer or to support an answer with logically reasoned evidence.

Although we have so many kinds of questions, we won't experiment them one by one. We only take display/referential questions and higher/low cognitive questions as the representatives to examine the ratio of questions used by the teacher in class and the effects of the questions.

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY

3.1 Subjects

The subjects of the study are the EFL students and teachers from a university in Northeast China. The students are freshmen and sophomores of different departments. 10 EFL teachers are involved in the study. Five of them (group A) teach English majors and the others (group B) teach non-English majors.

3.2 Experimental Method

Altogether 30 intensive reading classes (1350 minutes) are audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The lessons are not especially prepared for the research. The author personally attends each class and makes field notes.

3.3 Findings and Discussions

From table 1 we can see in general EFL teachers ask more display questions than referential questions. Only two teachers (A1 and A5) ask more referential questions than display questions. One teacher (B4) asks no referential questions at all. Table 2 shows that EFL teachers ask more lower cognitive questions than higher cognitive questions.

There are 4 reasons for this. First, English is a foreign language for both the students and teachers. As we all know, foreign language learning is different from first language acquisition. The given knowledge is vital to the success or failure of foreign language learning. EFL teachers have to use the given knowledge to make the new information comprehensible, that is, to exploit what the learners already known. Therefore, a lot of EFL teachers' questions will have to focus on the linguistic points, such as the meaning and usage of the words and expressions, the understanding and translation of sentences from English to Chinese and Chinese to English, the comprehension of the text and so on. Most of these questions are display questions and lower cognitive questions.

The second reason is the limited time of the EFL classes. Usually the teachers of English majors are required to finish one unit within 2 periods (180 minutes), and non-English major teachers within 1 period (90 minutes). The referential questions and higher cognitive questions raised by EFL teachers usually involve more than one student and often lead to classroom discussions, which will cost more time. Therefore, in order to finish the lessons as scheduled, EFL teachers have to be very careful in giving students referential questions and higher cognitive questions.

Another reason is the backwash effect of the national examinations such as CET-4, CET-6, TEM-4

and TEM-8. According to the research, the examinations have so great an influence on teaching that teachers have to "teach to tests". This is especially the case in group B. One teacher (B4) did not pay any

attention to the text and only focused on the new words and expressions, which may tell us why he asked no referential questions at all.

Table 1. The ratio of display and referential questions used by EFL teachers

item Teacher	Display Questions	Ratio (%)	Referential Questions	Ratio (%)	Total
A1	4	26.67	11	73.33	15
A2	38	58.33	22	36.67	60
A3	31	91.18	3	8.82	34
A4	64	95.52	3	4.48	67
A5	25	45.45	30	54.55	55
B1	14	82.35	3	17.65	17
B2	27	75.00	9	25.00	36
B3	11	91.67	1	8.33	12
B4	31	100.00	0	0.00	31
B5	20	86.96	3	13.04	23
Total	265	75.71	85	24.29	350

Table 2. The ratio of the lower and higher cognitive questions used by EFL teachers

item Teacher	Lower-level Questions	Ratio (%)	Higher-level Questions	Ratio (%)	Total
A1	9	60.00	6	40.00	15
A2	48	80.00	12	20.00	60
A3	26	76.47	8	23.53	34
A4	65	97.01	2	2.99	67
A5	45	81.82	10	18.18	55
B1	15	88.24	2	11.76	17
B2	32	88.89	4	11.11	36
B3	9	75.00	3	25.00	12
B4	29	93.55	2	6.45	31
B5	16	69.57	7	30.43	23
Total	294	84.00	56	16.00	350

The last but not the least reason is the EFL teachers' personal academic level. If the EFL teacher is knowledgeable enough and s/he can provide the students with updated information and theoretical explanation, s/he has the potential ability to ask more referential questions and higher cognitive questions.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The way a student is expected to respond to questioning is determined by the levels at which the questions are worded: recall, comprehension, analysis, or evaluation. But the success or failure of the students in answering the question is more often determined by the teacher's questioning techniques. The following are a number of simple guidelines to asking questions that can improve most teachers' questioning skills:

4.1 Techniques of Questioning

4.1.1 Be sure the question is clear in your own mind. Think through what you want from the student before you ask the question.

4.1.2 Frame (state) the question without calling on a specific student. When you call on a student before the question is asked, every other student is free to ignore the question.

4.1.3 After framing the question, pause while everybody has a chance to think of an answer, then (AND ONLY THEN) call a student to respond. That is called wait time. There should be at least 2 to 4 seconds after any question before any student is called on to answer it.

4.1.4 Ask only one question at a time. Multiple part questions are confusing and are likely to result in student misunderstanding. Avoid what Kim and Kellough (1987) call "shotgun" questioning. That is where the teacher asks a series of related questions or restates the same question over and over without getting (sometimes without allowing) an answer.

4.1.5 Use recall questions first to be sure the students have the knowledge. Then proceed to comprehension and analysis questions. Follow those up with evaluation questions.

4.2 Principles of Questioning

Although it is essential that teachers ask questions that bring out the educational goals they are seeking, there is more to good questioning technique than simply asking the proper question. The following principles were developed by Richard L. Loughlin and others and provide an excellent set of guidelines for the teacher who wishes to develop good questioning techniques.

4.2.1 Distribute questions so that all, including non-volunteers, are involved.

4.2.2 Ask both simple and exacting questions, so that the poorer students may participate and the brighter students may be extended.

4.2.3 Stimulate critical thinking by asking: "To what extent?" "How?" "Under what circumstances?" "Why?" "Compare (or contrast)..."

4.2.4 Encourage students to comment on the answers of classmates.

4.2.5 Never interrupt a student who is attempting to answer nor tolerate ridicule of an honest effort.

4.2.6 Questioning will be most effective when questions are planned

5. CONCLUSION

Questioning is a means of getting feedback to evaluate student progress and well an important way to increase student learning. Just as importantly, it is a way to force students to think during class. Too often we treat our students like sponges--devices to soak up content--without expecting them to think.

Effective use of questioning is a critical asset in every good teacher's toolbox. But just as a good mechanic selects the right tool for the job and then uses it correctly, a good teacher uses questions at the right level and follows good questioning techniques.

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