TYPES OF QUESTIONS USED IN EFL CLASSROOMS: A REFLECTIVE STUDY ON A TURKISH EFL TEACHER'S PRACTICES[1]

Elçin ÖLMEZER ÖZTÜRK[2]

Abstract

Following a reflection-in-action approach, this study reports on the reflective practices of an EFL teacher regarding the types of questions she uses while interacting with the students in classroom atmosphere. The participant, also the researcher, was an instructor in the English preparatory program of a state university. The data were collected through four hours of audio-recording in the spring semester of 2014-2015 academic year. In the data analysis process, the data obtained from these recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the questions were identified and classified based on the framework of Richards and Lockhart (1996) as procedural, convergent and divergent. The classification was cross-checked with a colleague holding a PhD in English language teaching to ensure the reliability of the findings. The results revealed that most of the questions the teacher used during these four hours were convergent, seeking yes/no or short answers. She used such questions so extensively that the lessons get too loaded with them and became teacher-fronted ones. It was also found that although the teacher sometimes used procedural questions to attract the attention of her students and prepare them for the content of the course, she mostly asked them just for the sake of asking and they served as conversational routines and gap-fillers during her interaction with the students. It was also clear in these sessions that the teacher could not provide effective transitions between these questions types during the interaction. Based on these findings, the study highlights how important and significant reflective practices are in developing one's skills as a teacher.

Key words: *Question types, language teachers, EFL classrooms, reflective practice.*

---

[1] This study was presented at CUELT Conference held on April 28-29 2016 at Çukurova University, Turkey.
[2] Instructor, Afyon Kocatepe University, e-mail: elcinolmezer@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Classroom interaction is a crucial factor which has an influence on second language acquisition (Ellis, 1990). Classroom interaction is mostly between the teacher and the learners or among the learners. As teachers are regarded as authoritarian figures in classes in many contexts and cultures, more burden is on the shoulders of teachers to keep the classroom interaction dynamic. One thing that is utilized for classroom interaction by teachers is questioning. Walsh (2011) utters that "questioning occupies much of a language teacher's time" (p.52). Similarly, Tsui (2001) claims that the language used by the teacher, especially teacher questioning, accounts for most of the classroom interaction. For this reason, questions are indispensable part of the classroom, and are utilized by teachers very often.

Teachers ask questions due to various reasons. Three reasons have been put forward by Doff (1988; cited in Thompson, 1997), according to whom, teachers ask questions to see whether learners have understood or not, to make practice of a target unit and to learn more about what learners think, feel or know. Nunan (2007) suggests that teachers make use of questions "to elicit information, to check understanding and to control behavior" (p.80). In addition to these functions of teacher questioning, Richards and Lockhart (1996) point out that, questions are used by teachers very frequently because

"They stimulate and maintain students' interest.
They encourage students to think and focus on the content of the lesson.
They enable a teacher to clarify what a student has said.
They enable a teacher to elicit particular structures or vocabulary items.
They enable teachers to check students' understanding.
They encourage student participation in a lesson" (p.185).

Along with the different functions of questioning, few scholars (e.g. Barnes, 1969; Long and Sato, 1983; Nunan, 1989; Richards & Lockhart, 1990) come up with various classifications of teacher questions. Barnes (1969) categorizes teacher questions under four main groups. First group includes questions which are about factual matters, and they mostly start with "what". Second group contains reasoning questions which generally begin with "how" and "why". Third one includes open questions that do not require any reasoning or interference, and the last group is social questions that are asked for communication purposes by the teacher. Barnes (1969) also divides the questions in the second group as open questions which can be answered in different ways and closed questions which are limited in answer. Another classification belongs to Long and Sato (1983) who divides questions as display and referential questions. In display questions, the teacher already knows the answer but for the purposes of elicitation or practice of target units, teacher asks questions to the learners.

On the contrary, in referential questions, the teacher does not know the answer, so the answer may differ from on learner to the other. According to Maley (2003), display questions may be helpful for the beginner learners to comprehend the new language better. However, referential questions may draw the attention of the learners more, because they require more learner involvement and the meaning is given priority rather than form (Maley, 2003). According to Richards and Lockhart (1990), there are mainly three sorts of questions that are procedural, convergent and divergent questions. Procedural questions are related to the procedures in the classroom setting, and they have nothing to do with the content of the lesson. "Can you see what I have written on

the board?", "How much time do you need to finish this task?" are the examples included in this group. However, convergent and divergent questions are closely related to the content of the lesson. Convergent questions mostly require short answers or yes/no, and learners are not occupied with higher mental functions. There is a central phenomenon to be focused, and the teacher generally uses it to encourage students to take part in the lesson. Examples of convergent questions contain "How many of you read books?", "Do you read books every day?"

On the other hand, divergent questions are asked to learners to encourage them and involve them in higher mental functions. Learners are expected to give their own responses instead of similar responses as in convergent questions. "How have computers had an economic impact on society? How would business today function without computers?" are the examples of divergent questions (p.187). Gabrielatos (1997) also classifies questions under four groups which are yes/no, open-ended, convergent and divergent questions. Students are expected to say yes or no as an answer to yes/no questions. However, open-ended questions require learners to give longer answers and they can be answered in various ways. In convergent questions, the teacher has certain pre-determined answers and the learners can give limited answers to these questions. On the other hand, when divergent questions are asked to the learners, they can give different answers and state their opinions, feelings and beliefs. In this type of questions, learners' answers are not controlled by the teacher.

It can be seen from the literature that there is not a single classification used for teacher questions, and there are many overlapping items between the kinds of the questions suggested by the mentioned researchers. With these groupings, a few research studies were carried out on teacher questions. Long and Sato (1983) state that ESL teachers utilize display questions more than referential ones in language classrooms. Pica and Long (1986) also found that display questions are more frequently used by the L2 teachers when compared to referential questions. Another study was carried out by Shomoossi (2004). The participants were five non-native speaking English instructors and teaching in Tehran. The findings demonstrated that the participant teachers used display questions more than referential questions, and some of the referential questions did not foster classroom interaction as expected. Farahian & Rezaee (2012) conducted a study with a teacher and 15 pre-intermediate EFL students in Iran. The results yielded that the teacher made use of more display and yes/no questions than open and referential questions. The results showed that the teacher utilized display and yes/no questions more due to his low proficiency level and lack of experience. In Turkish context, Hamiloglu and Temiz (2012) conducted a study in a private school and primary state school. According to the results gotten from two different classes from these two schools, convergent questions were most frequently used ones. Yes/No questions were the most frequently preferred type among convergent questions.

As the studies above suggest, research on questioning skills of teachers puts forward significant results on their classroom practices. In addition to this, as Richards and Lockhart (1996) maintain, such reflective studies have remarkable roles on teachers' professional development since they create awareness so that teachers can learn about their own questioning skills and implementations. Thus, they highlight the importance of similar studies in different contexts. Based on this, following a reflective approach, this study investigates the questioning skills of an English EFL teacher in her own context. The following research question has been addressed in this study:

1. What kinds of questions does the teacher ask during classroom interaction?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Following a reflective approach, this study employs a classroom research design with a qualitative data collection method. Allwright and Bailey (1991) state that classroom research emphasizes the actual classroom data, and Creswell (2011, p.206) utters that "in qualitative inquiry, the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon". Thus, the purpose here is to learn what is going on in the real classroom atmosphere and to obtain information about a central phenomenon which is teacher questioning in this study.

Setting and Participants

This study was carried out at a preparatory program of a state university in Turkey. In this program, the students have 25 hours of English per week, and it is taught integratively by instructors. There are 20- 25 pupils in each class, and they have to follow a coursebook. The learners have to take the proficiency exam at the end of the academic year, and if students can get 60 or above from this exam, they obtain the right to continue their departments in the following academic year. Students are from different departments, and their ages are between 17 to 24. There are also 28 instructors working in this program. 14 of them are female, and 14 of them are male. Their ages are different, and their years of experience also differ from 1 to 20 years. They are mainly the graduates of English Language Teaching, Linguistics and Literature departments.

The participant, and at the same time the researcher, of this study works as an instructor in the preparatory program mentioned above. She teaches pre-intermediate level and there are 21 students in her class. The participant teacher has been teaching English in this department for 8 years, and is having her PhD in ELT for the time being. She is teaching 25 hours of English to the same class per week.

Data Collection Process

This study makes use of audio-recordings as the data collection method to gather information about the practices of the participant teacher and her class. The data that included 4 hours of audio-recording were gathered in the spring semester of 2014-2015 academic year. The consent forms were signed by the learners in her class.

Data Analysis

The audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim after the data collection process. The transcribed data were checked to prevent the occurrence of any misleading parts. Then the questions in the transcribed data were identified and classified based on the framework of Richards and Lockhart (1996). They classify the questions teacher ask in classroom atmosphere as procedural, convergent and divergent.

"Procedural questions: These questions have to do with classroom procedures and routines, and classroom management, as opposed to the content of learning.

Convergent questions: They encourage similar student responses or responses which focus on a central theme. They do not usually require students to engage in higher-level thinking but often focus on the recall or previously presented information.
Divergent questions: These questions are the opposite of convergent questions. They encourage diverse student responses which are not short answers and which require students to engage in higher-level thinking" (pp. 186-187)

After the identification of the questions, they were classified based on the framework above with a colleague having a PhD in English language teaching to ensure the reliability of the findings. Finally, the number of questions for each type was calculated and presented with their frequencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of Teacher Questions

The results derived from the classification and calculation of the question types I asked were presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Types and number of questions asked by the researcher

Question Type	Frequency
Convergent	74
Procedural	18
Divergent	3
Total	95

The analysis of 4 hours of audio-recording showed that I asked 95 questions in total during my classes. They included 74 convergent, 18 procedural and 3 divergent questions.

I would like to start with the procedural questions I asked during these four hours. The results of the transcription and the analysis showed that I mainly used procedural questions to draw the attention of students to the focus of the lesson, to encourage the students who hadn't involved in the interaction and to ask questions just for the sake of asking. The following extracts present some instances of my procedural questions:

Extract 1:
Teachers: Are you ready for past perfect? (procedural)
Students: (No answer)
Teacher: Ok? Shall I start? (procedural)

Extract 2:
Teacher: Ok. Who wants to complete this sentence (writing on the board). When I came to the house, I noticed that somebody ………
Students: no answer

Teacher: No answer? Only two people, is that all? Is it difficult? (consecutive procedural questions)

As the extracts above reveal, I saw that procedural questions I used during my classes mostly included "OK?, Right?, What else?", did not have any real questioning purposes and I asked these questions as gap-fillers through which I tried to attract the attention of students and fill the gaps during the interaction. I also realized the fact that while asking procedural questions, I did not expect any answers from my students and I even did not wait for them to answer the questions. I mean, although I asked a question to learn about whether they had any unclear points in their minds, I did not wait for their answers. Richards and Lockhart (1996) suggest that procedural questions serve to perform classroom routines. Besides this function, the results showed that I used procedural questions as conversational routines during my interaction with students.

The most interesting result for me in this study was the number of convergent questions I used during these four hours. The results showed that about 78% of my questions were convergent. Although several studies in the literature (David, 2007; Shomoossi, 2004; Hamiloğlu & Temiz, 2012) put forward that teachers tend to use more convergent questions during classroom interaction, I was not expecting that number. In general, the data showed that I used convergent questions to ask for a description, to check reading comprehension, to revise vocabulary items and to revise grammatical points. The extracts below provide clear examples for the convergent questions I asked during my classes.

Extract 3:

Teacher: What's the man doing in the picture? (convergent)
Students: (silence)
Teacher: (immediately asking another) We understand that there is a ……? (convergent)
Students: Problem
Teacher: What is the problem? (convergent)
Students: Dog
Teacher: What is the dog doing? (convergent)
Students: Running
Teacher: Ok.

Extract 4:

Teacher: Ok. Which preposition do we use with belong? (convergent)
Students: Silence
Teacher: Eeee. Come on. Say it.
Students: This is belong to a woman.
Teacher: What is the mistake here? (convergent)
*   Why is "belong to" a mistake here? (convergent)*
*   When do I use "am-is-are"? (convergent)*
*   Why can't I use "am-is-are here"? (convergent)*

Extract 5:

The teacher is trying to make a short revision.
Teacher: When do we use conditional type 2?
Students: imagine, not real…
Teacher: What don't we use with if?

> *Will or would?*
> *Which one?*
Students: will
Teacher: (without listening to the answer) and how can we differentiate the short form ('d) of "would" and "had"?

As these extracts illustrate, I used similar consecutive convergent questions a lot during the classes. According to Richards and Lockhart (1996), teachers may ask a rapid sequence of convergent questions to help students develop certain skills and to encourage whole class participation. To serve this purpose, I used such questions to encourage my students to participate and help them understand the texts I was covering or the grammatical structure of the target unit better rather than simply presenting the topics. However, the results showed me that I used too many questions and too consecutively that the lessons were loaded with my questions, they were too guiding which made them unable to concentrate. Students did not also have any opportunities to ask questions themselves and they sometimes felt puzzled and could not give any answers to my questions. Besides, I found out that I had fixed answers in my mind, expected my students to utter these sentences, otherwise I asked the same questions repeatedly, which in the end did not lead to any real interactions with my students. This negative situation created by overusing convergent questions is in line with Dashwood (2005) who maintains that convergent questions may lead to typical teacher-centered lessons in which the expected form of interaction is teachers' knowledge transmission, and such interaction may put students into a passive receiver position in the class. For this reason, I became aware of the fact that although convergent questions are beneficial in facilitating the comprehension and promoting interaction, using too many of them may result in less interaction among teachers and students in class.

The results also revealed that I asked only 3 divergent questions during 4 class hours, which also surprised me a lot regarding my questioning skills. According to Richards and Lockhart (1996, p. 187), divergent questions "encourage students to provide their own information and engage in higher-level thinking." However, the number of such opportunities, as stated in the following extracts, is really scarce in my classroom atmosphere.

Extract 6:

(Teaching past perfect tense)
Teacher: Ok, you got home yesterday. Imagine that there was a problem. What had happened to the house? Make a guess? (divergent)
(After ten or fifteen seconds)
Teacher: Think about a thief. In your house before you got there. How do you say it in past perfect? (convergent)

Extract 7:

Teacher: Look at this example. "When I got up, it had snowed." Be careful about the second part. The problem is do you confuse it with present perfect? Why, why not? (divergent)

(Five seconds later)

Teacher: It has snowed vs It had snowed? When do we use the first sentence, let's tell me. (convergent)

In the light of these examples above, there are several points I need to discuss regarding the divergent questions I ask during my classes. First of all, it is clear that the number of such questions is quite limited in my classes, which leads to the lack of interaction through which my students can engage in higher levels of thinking and express their ideas. Secondly, even if I ask such questions and create opportunities for my students to participate, my wait time is quite short and I immediately turn my questions into convergent ones which require my students give short answers most of the time. In other words, I create very few opportunities so that my students can express their ideas and again I terminate these opportunities myself with other types of questions. Based on this, it seems clear that I cannot benefit from question types and transitions between them effectively. Although Mikio (1989) points out that teachers may sometimes tend to change the question types from divergent to convergent when they feel that students have difficulty in understanding and answering the divergent questions, I think the case in my questioning is not just a tendency but an inability to provide effective transition. According to Long and Sato (1983), the answer is already known to teacher and he/she tries to elicit or display particular structures in display (convergent) questions whereas referential (divergent) questions require long complicated answers and elaboration of opinions. They also state that the effectiveness of these types is determined by many factors, one of which is the teacher's questioning skills. For this reason, it can be concluded that the scarcity of divergent questions in my classes and my inability to provide effective transitions between the question types I use decrease the level of effective interaction in my classroom.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Following a reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) approach, I examined the types of questions I used during my class hours through the audio-recording of 4 class hours, and the data were analyzed based on the classification of Richards and Lockhart (1996). The results revealed that most of the questions I used during these four hours were convergent, seeking yes/no or short answers, procedural questions served as routines and the number of divergent questions was really scarce.

According to Brown (2001, p. 169), "to provide an effective interaction in classroom atmosphere, one of the most important features that teachers need to have is effective questioning skills." For this reason, the results of this study taught me a lot in terms of my questioning skills. First of all, I found out that although I sometimes used procedural questions to attract the attention of my students and prepare them for the content of the course, I asked them just for the sake of asking most of the time and they served as conversational routines and gap-fillers during my interaction with students. Moreover, I became aware of the fact that I used too many convergent questions. Due to this overuse, the lessons get too loaded with my questions, my students even do not have the opportunity to ask their own questions and they sometimes get confused by the existence of too many guiding questions. This situation, at the end, makes my lesson totally teacher-fronted ones. In addition to this, the results showed that I hardly ever use divergent questions, I do not wait enough so that my students can prepare to answer these questions, and I turn to convergent ones without getting my students' responses, which means I cannot provide effective transitions between these questions types. In general, all these results showed me my weaknesses as a language teacher in asking questions and provided significant guidance in developing my skills.

This study also revealed how important and significant reflective practices are in developing one's skills as a teacher. As a language teacher, I try to attend conferences

and teacher training sessions to develop my certain skills. However, this study showed me that reflective practice is a unique opportunity for me to improve my skills since they provide a very clear picture of my real practices, help me identify my weaknesses or strengths, and take the necessary steps in the end which result in obvious development as a teacher. That is, this study was kind of looking myself in the mirror, and I benefitted from it more when compared to conferences and training sessions, because it is directly associated with me and my real practices in my classroom with my students. For this reason, I believe that language teachers should be encouraged to conduct such studies since reflective studies are and will be powerful tools for us throughout our continual professional development.

REFERENCES

Allwright, D. & Bailey, K. M. (1991). *Focus on the Language Classroom research for Language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

Barnes, D. (1969). Language in the secondary classroom. In D. Barnes, J. Britton, & M. Torbe (Eds.), Language, the learner and the school. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

Brown, D. H. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy (3rd Edition)*. London: Longman, Pearson Education.

Creswell, J. W. (2011). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Boston: Pearson.

Dashwood, A. (2005). Alternative to questioning: Teacher role in classroom discussion. *Asian EFL Journal, 7*(4), 144-165.

David, F. (2007). Teacher Questioning Behavior and ESL Classroom Interaction. *Humanity and Social Sciences Journal, 2,* 127-131

Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed second language acquisition: learning in the classroom*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Farahian, M. & Rezaee, M. (2012). A case study of an EFL teacher's type of questions: an investigation into classroom interaction. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 47,* 161-167.

Gabrielatos, C. (1997). *A question of function: Teacher questions in the EFL classroom.* Paper given at 18th Annual TESOL Greece Convention, National Bank of Greece Training Centre, Glyfada, Greece, 12-13 April 1997.

Hamiloğlu, K. & Temiz, G. (2012). The impact of teacher questions on student learning in EFL. *Journal of Educational and Instructional Studies In The World*, 2 (2), 1-8.

Long, M.H., & Sato, C.J. (1983). Classroom foreign talk discourse: Forms and functions of teachers' questions in classroom oriented research in second language acquisition. In H. Seliger & M. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 268-286). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Maley, A. (2003). Questions: a prime resource for teachers. Teaching English with minimal resources. Retrieved July 20, 2005, from http:// .onestopenglish. com/ teaching_minimal_resources/minimal_maley.htm.

Mikio, K. (1989). *Question-Answering Behavior in ELT Classrooms.* Washington. George Town University.

Nunan,D. (1989). *Understanding language classroom.* New York: Prentice HALL.

Nunan, D. (2007). *Task-based Language Teaching.* Cambridge, UK: CUP.

Pica, T. & Long, M.H. (1986). The linguistic conversational performance of experienced and inexperienced teachers. In R. Day (Ed.). *Talking to learn: Conversation in second language.* Cambridge: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.

Richards, J. C. & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* New York: Basic Books.

Shomoossi, N. (2004). The effect of teachers' questioning behaviour on EFL classroom interaction: A classroom research study. *The Reading Matrix, 4*(2), 96-104.

Thompson, G. (1997). Training teachers to ask questions. *ELT Journal, 51*(2), 99-105.

Tsui, A. B. M. (2001). Classroom interaction. In R. Carter & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages* (pp. 120-125). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walsh, S. (2011). *Exploring Classroom Discourse.* New York: Routledge.