

TEACHER'S QUESTIONING IN ENGLISH FOR OCCUPATIONAL PURPOSES CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Questioning is a useful tool in language teaching and learning. To nurture students' critical thinking, language instructors should ask high-order questions in class. Keeping that in mind, this paper is based on a case study which investigated teachers' questioning in English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) classrooms at a private tertiary institution. The instructors were observed in the classrooms. This paper will discuss the findings of the study.

Keywords: English for Occupational Purposes; Questioning; Critical Thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher questions are *instructional cues or stimuli that convey the content elements to be learned and directions for what to do and how to do it* (Cotton, 1988). Teacher questions or teacher's questioning is important as it helps students to pay attention in class, arouse their curiosity, stimulate their imagination, motivate them to seek new knowledge and elevate students' level of thinking (Muth, 1992; Orlich, 1994; Ornstein, 1995). However, effective teacher's questioning does not always happen (Moore, 1995; Nunan, 1996; Mustapha, 1998), which could affect language learning negatively. Asking low-level questions promotes rote learning and discourages higher-order thinking process among learners (Perrott, 1990). Students will also become demotivated in language learning if incorrect teacher's questioning is used (Timmins Brualdi, 1998).

Keeping the importance of teacher's questioning in mind, this study investigated the types and levels of questions that the English language instructors asked learners in EOP classrooms. The objective of this study was to investigate the levels of questions posed by the instructors in EOP classes.

2. TEACHER QUESTIONS

A teacher's day in school is spent mostly on asking questions (Leven, 1981). Teachers ask questions for reasons including to keep students actively involved in class, to let students openly express their ideas and thoughts, to let students hear different explanations on a classroom material from their peers and to evaluate students' learning (Morgan, 1991). Good questions foster student-teacher interactions, and most student-teacher interactions promote student achievement (Rosenshine, 1971).

According to Bloom (1956), the levels of students' cognitive achievements can be categorized (lower to higher) into the following: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Such categorization, known as Bloom's Level of Taxonomy, suggests that questions requiring students to recall knowledge and check students' understanding fall into low-level cognitive questions while high-level questions require students to apply knowledge and find a generality.

High-level cognitive questions can be defined as questions which require students to use high-order thinking or reasoning skills, including questions that require students to solve, analyse and evaluate. High-level cognitive questions promote high levels of thinking (Darwazeh, 1982), which is important in problem solving, inventing new things and changing perception (de Bono, 2009).

Moore K. D. (2014) and Moore (1995) categorized questions as follows: factual, empirical, productive and evaluative. A factual question is posed to find an answer that is drawn directly from the content instruction, while an empirical question involves recall of facts and possible experimentation. On the contrary, productive questions are open-ended with many correct responses. Hence, students need to think creatively and produce something unique (Moore K. D., 2014). Evaluative questions require a judgment on the merit of information-based criteria set by an objective standard (Kauchak, 1998). To summarise, factual and empirical questions correspond with Bloom's knowledge and comprehension levels, while productive and evaluative questions correspond with Bloom's higher cognitive levels.

Although research suggests the use of high-level cognitive questions to promote critical and creative thinking, it was found that teachers asked fewer high-level cognitive questions than low-level cognitive questions (Ellis, 1993). Teachers relied on low-level questions to avoid a slow-paced lesson, to keep students' attention in class and to maintain the control of the classroom (Ellis, 1993). In Malaysia, eighty (80) percent of teachers' instructions in classrooms fall within the range of literal/knowledge and comprehension types which were non-inferential (Mustapha, 1998). Husin (2006) found that the majority of questions set by English language classes and science classes taught in English were low-level and factual, as teachers sought to align the lessons with the examinations. Hafiz Mohd Radzi (2015) also found that more low-order than high-order questions were asked in Academic English classes at a Malaysian tertiary institution. A possible reason for the higher uses of low-order questions was the emphasis on factual information, which were considered crucial in answering final examination questions successfully (Husin, 2006; Hafiz Mohd Radzi, 2015). Thus, high-order questions, which addressed issues beyond factual information, could be considered unnecessary by the teachers and English language instructors.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Three EOP instructors, Instructor A, Instructor B and Instructor C, were selected based on accessibility (Kvale, 1996) and observed and videotaped or audiotaped once for ninety (90) minutes in the classes during the academic semesters in February 2010 and September 2015. The recordings were transcribed to extract the questions asked by the instructors during the observations. The instructors' questions were then categorized into three categories: academic, non-academic, and pseudo questions. For the purpose of the study, only the academic questions were analysed based on Observation Protocol: Classification of Questions (Husin, 2006) and Mental Operation Questions (Moore, 1995) to seek the levels of questions used in language classrooms: low-level questions (factual and empirical questions) and high-level questions (productive questions and evaluative questions). The frequency and

percentage for each question type were then tabulated in a table for further analysis and discussion.

The percentages were calculated as follows:

$$a \div b \times 100$$

a = frequency of each question type per instructor

b = total number of academic questions per instructor

Instructors A and C hold a postgraduate degree in English for Specific Purposes and Applied Linguistics respectively, while Instructor B holds a postgraduate degree in English Literature. All instructors involved in this study were female instructors. Their permissions were obtained before their classes were observed and audiotaped. The permission of the management of the higher learning institution where this study was carried out was also obtained before the study was completed.

The classes were attended by full-time diploma students and undergraduates of various academic programmes.

4. FINDINGS

The frequency and percentage of each category of high-order and low-order questions asked during the observations are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentages of High-Order and Low-Order Questions asked by EOP Instructors

Instructor	Low-order Questions				High-order Questions				Total	
	Factual		Empirical		Productive		Evaluative		n	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
A	16	69.6	4	17.4	1	4.3	2	8.7	23	100.0
B	12	60.0	4	20.0	1	5.0	3	15.0	20	100.0
C	18	69.2	4	15.4	3	11.6	1	3.8	26	100.0

The instructors asked both high-order and low-order questions during the observations. Generally, all instructors asked more low-order than high-order questions. The question type most frequently asked was the factual question, which accounted for around 60 percent of the academic questions asked by each instructor. The next question type frequently asked was the empirical question. High-order questions recorded lower percentages for all instructors. High-order questions accounted for lower than 20 percent of all academic questions that the EOP instructors asked during the observation. Evaluative questions, ranked at the highest level of academic questions, were more frequently asked by Instructors A and B than productive questions.

The findings are similar with Hafiz Mohd Radzi et al. (2015), who found the higher uses of low-order than high-order questions in Academic Writing classes at a Malaysian tertiary institution. One possible explanation is that teachers focused on short-term goals; to get the students to understand the lessons and to be aligned with the examination (Husin, 2006). Hence, high-order questions were not frequently asked due to the instructors' focus on ensuring students' understanding of the lesson and students' ability in answering final examination questions.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that the English language instructors asked low-order and high-order questions in their EOP classrooms. However, low-order questions were more frequently asked in the classes. This could be due to the short-term goal of the instructions, which was to ensure students' understanding of instruction.

The researchers were aware on the limitations of this study, which focused on only three EOP instructors at a Malaysian institution of higher learning. Hence, the findings could not be generalised in the context of English language teaching at institutions of higher learning. More studies on teacher questions in English classrooms at tertiary institutions are needed before such conclusion can be made.

Lack of triangulation in this study also signals the need to research the perspectives of EOP and English language instructors on teacher questions in the future. Students' attitude towards teacher questions should also be researched for a clearer view on teacher questions in EOP classes and English language instructions in general.

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