ENHANCING STUDENT INTERACTION
THROUGH TEACHER QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

EFL students are often hesitant to interact in classrooms. Oral questioning is a very powerful way for teachers to interact with students. However, asking questions and responding to answers in classrooms are not always as easy as they seem. For the sake of enhancing students' interaction, teachers should develop a repertoire of questioning skills. This article intends to show that question and answer activities in classrooms, if exploited appropriately, can enhance student interaction. Clarity of questions, types of questions, techniques of asking questions, and techniques of responding to answers are aspects that influence the quality of student interaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is commonly found that students of English as a foreign language (EFL) are often hesitant to interact in classrooms. They often lack ways for initiating and sustaining interaction. The most important key to creating an interactive language classroom is the teacher-initiated interaction. As stated by Smith, Meyers, and Burkhalter (1992, p. 71), teachers are responsible for initiating interaction because teachers' role is not only presenting information but also interacting with learners to help them reflect on, interpret, analyze, and synthesize information. For the purpose of initiating and sustaining interaction, teachers need to provide stimuli in the initial stage and throughout the lesson.

One of the main forms of interaction which is popular in teaching and learning activities is asking and answering questions. Teachers often ask many questions in all stages of instruction. In initial stage, questions function to stimulate learners' interest by relating the new language or topic to their prior knowledge or by activating their schemata. In the presentation of teaching materials, teachers often periodically stop explaining and ask questions to maintain learners' participation, stimulate discussion, or check their comprehension. Questions can also be delivered at the end of session for checking learners' comprehension, inviting their opinions, thoughts, and feelings, or stimulating their curiosity of next topics.

However, asking a lot of questions will not certainly stimulate interaction. Teachers' effective questions and appropriate techniques of asking questions and responding to answers can foster good interaction between teachers and students. Conversely, questioning may impede learning process if questions asked are ineffective or if teachers pose the questions and respond to answers in an inappropriate manner. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers need to develop a repertoire of questioning strategies because, as explained by Brown (2001, p. 169), it is one of the best ways to increase teachers' role as an initiator and sustainer of interaction. The problem is *how teachers should ask oral questions and respond to students' answers effectively in order to stimulate student interaction?* This article intends to show that question and answer sessions which are very common in classroom activities, if exploited appropriately, can stimulate student interaction.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Interaction

Interaction is the mutual exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people and each receives a reciprocal effect (Brown, 2001, p. 165). Interaction is the key to communication in the communicative language teaching era. In classrooms, interaction occurs between teacher and students and between students and students.

The most important key to creating an interactive language classroom is the teacher-initiated interaction. For the purpose of initiating and sustaining interaction, teachers need to provide stimuli in the initial stage and throughout the lesson. One kind of interaction is asking and answering questions. As quoted by Kabilan (1999), in classroom interaction, teachers are encouraged to use pedagogy of questions proposed by Freire - teachers are required to pose questions to students and to listen to students' questions.

2.2 Questioning

Questioning is popular in teaching and learning process. In EFL classrooms, Heaton (1981 cited in Richards 1998:7) identifies that questioning is one of essential functions of classroom discourse for language teaching. According to Reece and Walker (1997:376), oral questioning is a very powerful way for teachers to interact with students because it involves the students in the session through thinking and provides the teachers with feedback on the level of learning. Furthermore, Smith, Meyers, and Burkhalter (1992:69) state that to teach in a more interactive way, teachers can ask questions throughout the lesson and respond to their students' answers. This section highlights teachers' questions including: purposes of asking questions, types of questions, techniques of asking questions and responding to answers.

2.2.1 Purposes of Asking Questions

There are some purposes of asking questions. Chaudron (1988:126) states that teachers' questions are a primary means of attracting students' attention, encouraging verbal responses, and assessing students' progress. In addition, Morgan and Saxton (1991 cited in Brualdi, 1998) explain that teachers pose questions in order to keep students actively involved in lessons, to provide students with the opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts, to enable other students to hear different explanation of the material by their peers, to help teachers pace their lessons and moderate students' behaviour, and to help teachers evaluate student learning and revise their lessons as necessary. Moreover, Sheffield (2002) gives detailed purposes of asking questions as follows:

1. diagnose students' understanding and evaluate their performance;
2. identify students' interests and backgrounds;
3. lead students to consider new ideas and make use of ideas already learned;
4. assess students' prior knowledge;
5. help students clarify their ideas and thought processes;
6. motivate students by encouraging them to participate in learning actively;
7. encourage students to ask their own questions;
8. provide a means for stimulating class discussion;
9. challenge beliefs and guide reconsideration of values students hold;
10. assess the effectiveness of teachers' teaching;
11. develop rapport with students;
12. find out any student having difficulties on tasks;
13. revise information from a previous session; and

to provide a springboard for discussion.

2.2.2 Types of Questions

There are some ways to classify kinds of questions. The following three classifications are adapted from Chaudron (1988), Kennedy (2000), and Tsui (2001).

1. Closed questions versus open questions. Closed or convergent questions have limited correct answers, whereas open or divergent questions accept more than one answer.
2. Display questions versus referential questions. Display or pseudo questions attempt to elicit information which the questioner already knows, whereas referential or genuine questions are those which the answers are not known in advance.
3. Low-level cognitive questions versus high-level cognitive questions. Low-level cognitive questions assess knowledge, comprehension, or application, whereas high-level cognitive questions check synthesis, analysis, or evaluation.

All of the types of questions have their place in the interactive classrooms and, as stated by Van Lier (1986 in Nunan, 1989), they are designed to get students to produce language.

The types of questions asked are based on the purposes of questioning, students' age, and students' proficiency levels. For example, as stated by Brown (2001:171), display questions are very useful in eliciting both content and language from students. Moreover, Chaudron (1988:127) supposes that referential (open or general) questions would promote greater learner productivity and display questions would likely promote more meaningful communication between teachers and learners. Furthermore, Gall (1984 in Brualdi 1998) cites that low-level cognitive questions (potentially display questions) are more effective for young learners and learners of low ability while high-level cognitive questions (potentially referential questions) are more effective for students of average and high ability.

Some classroom studies have examined teachers' questions. Based on both L1 and L2 classroom studies it is found that 'display' questions are predominant in teacher-student interaction, and that 'referential' questions are more conducive to the production of lengthier and more complex responses by learners (Barnes 1969, Long & Sato 1983, and Brock 1986 cited in Tsui 2001:122; Pica & Long 1986, Dinsmore 1985, Early 1985, and J.D. Ramirez et al. 1986 cited in Chaudron, 1988:127). The only finding possibly discrepant with these trends, according to Chaudron (1988:127) is that of Bialystok et al.'s (1978) comparison between core and immersion French. It is found that the immersion teachers use more general information (potentially referential) questions. Brock's (1986 in Nunan, 1989) study focuses on the effects of the types of questions on students' target language production; the finding is that the students'

responses to referential questions are significantly longer and more syntactically complex than their responses to display questions. Therefore, Brock concludes that "referential questions may increase the amount of speaking learners do in the classrooms."

2.2.3 Techniques of Asking Questions and Responding to Answers

Teachers' techniques of asking questions and responding to answers can influence student interaction. Two things dealing with asking questions are distribution of questions and employment of wait-time.

The followings are research findings concerning how teachers commonly distribute classroom questions. A typical questioning pattern is that teachers pose questions and students volunteer answers. In addition, teachers seldom address questions to individual students, except to 'good' students (Jacobson, 1984 in Reece & Walker, 1997). This means that responses are elicited from limited students - those who volunteer answers and those who are nominated. Such a phenomenon exacerbates the condition of the passive class, particularly students who tend to be unresponsive or those who are reluctant to participate in classrooms. If this condition keeps happening, outspoken or 'good' students will dominate talking whereas students who are reluctant to speak out remain silent. What has been discussed above is the result of unequal distribution of questions.

The other aspect regarding asking questions is employment of wait-time. Wait-time is the amount of time to pause after posing a question and before nominating a student to give an answer. It is the time needed for students to think and formulate an answer. There is no agreement concerning the length of wait-time. Smith, Meyers, and Burkhalter (1992) claim that waiting time for answers is more than three seconds, whereas Holley and King (1971 in Chaudron 1988) proposes at least a five-second wait.

The employment of wait-time affects students' responses as well as their feelings. As stated by Tsui (2001:124), "not giving enough wait-time for students to process a question and formulate an answer is another reason for the lack of response from students." On the other hand, Holley and King (1971 in Chaudron 1988) claimed that teachers who employed at least a five second wait in college German classes obtained an increase in students' responses. Furthermore, Holley and King (1974 in Tsui, 2001) found that longer wait-time made the learners much better able to respond correctly. However, extra wait-time does not necessarily improve students' responsiveness (Tsui, 2001) nor result in longer utterances (Chaudron, 1988). In addition, excessive lengthening of wait time creates students' anxiety and embarrassment.

Adapted from Reece and Walker (1997) and Sheffield (2002), the followings are items that teachers should consider when addressing questions:

1. ask only one question at a time;
2. ask an effective question clearly;
3. pose a question to the whole class;
4. provide wait time to allow students to think of the answer;
5. nominate or name a student to answer the question;
6. don't answer our own question;
7. rephrase the question only after the wait time; and
8. encourage the students to give the answer.

Having posed questions, responding to answers is another dimension. Students need acknowledgement and encouragement whether their answers are correct or incorrect so they would like to participate again in classroom interaction. Teachers should reward correct answer by saying 'Yes,' 'Correct,' or 'That's right. On the other hand, teachers should not ridicule incorrect answers.

3. DISCUSSION

Teachers often ask many questions in all stages of instruction for a variety of purposes. Asking and answering questions is one kind of interaction that can make classes more interactive. However, asking a lot of classroom questions will not guarantee stimulation of interaction. For the sake of enhancing students' interaction, teachers should develop a repertoire of questioning skills because asking questions and responding to answers in classrooms are not always as easy as they seem. This chapter discusses four aspects of using oral questions to stimulate student interaction: clarity of questions, types of questions, techniques of asking questions, and techniques of responding to answers.

3.1 Clarity of Questions

How questions are phrased influences students' responses. Questions phrased inappropriately can mislead and confuse students in responding. The followings are four kinds of questions with phrasing problems (Chaudron, 1988; Lorsch & Ronkowski, 1982; Brown, 2001).

1. Vague questions are phrased in an abstract or ambiguous language, such as: *When you have a lot of rain, what do you have then?*
2. Wordy questions use language that is too complex or too wordy for aural comprehension, for example: *Given today's discussion, and also considering your previous experience in educational institutions, what would you say are the ramifications of, or the potential developmental impacts on, children functioning in an educational system in which assessment procedures largely consist of multiple-choice, paper and pencil instrumentation?*

3. Compound questions consist of several questions to consider at once, like *How did the revolution begin, and what did the nobles have to do with it? Did tax reform have anything to do with it?*

4. Spoon-feeding questions give too much guidance. There are two types: leading questions (e.g. *So we can say that, no matter where we live, people need food and shelter. Isn't that right?*) and or-choice questions (e.g. *Are things necessary or only desirable?*)

Teachers should not ask either vague, wordy, or compound questions because it is difficult for students to understand such questions. When the students get such questions, they tend to give no answers because they do not want to be embarrassed with their wrong answers. Another consequence is that the students give incorrect or unsatisfactory responses. The students' failure to respond to teachers' questions might cause them to be more hesitant to participate and interact in classrooms.

Questions should be phrased carefully in order students can comprehend questions and provide extended responses. Questions used to encourage students' interaction should be clear and specific. Have a look at the following two questions.

1. How do people learn languages?
2. How do young children acquire new words?

It would be easier for students to answer the second question because it is clearer and more specific than the first question. The students know what sort of answer is required, and at last they can express their ideas or share their experience; it is a form of interaction.

3.2 Types of Questions

Teachers need to think of the kinds of questions to ask because one type of question will be more appropriate than others. Sheffield (2002) provides five kinds of questions to be asked in classrooms including:

1. different levels of questions;
2. questions that require extended responses rather than yes/no answers;
3. open-ended questions instead of closed-ended questions;
4. divergent as well as convergent questions; and
5. questions that have an educative component.

Questions asked should be based on purposes of questioning, students' age, and students' proficiency levels.

In order to stimulate and maintain student interaction, teachers can ask any type of questions based on students' age and proficiency levels because all of the types of questions have their place in the interactive classrooms. For example, display questions would likely promote more meaningful communication between teachers and learners (Chaudron, 1988:127) whereas "referential questions may increase the amount of speaking learners do in the classrooms" (Brock, 1986 in Nunan, 1989).

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3.3 Techniques of Asking Questions

Teachers' techniques of asking questions can influence student interaction. Here are steps for asking oral questions in classrooms.

1. Pose one question to the whole class clearly and specifically. We should move our eyes around the room without focusing on any one student. This will keep every student thinking the answer.
2. Pause or provide wait-time to allow students process the questions and formulate their answers. Provide extra wait-time when asking higher-level cognitive questions.
3. Nominate a student to answer. Ensure that we do not ask the same student again and again. Also avoid nominating a student in an obvious systematic order (e.g. based on attendance list or students' seats) because the student who has answered or that who knows that it is not his or her turn tends to relax and not to think of the answer.
4. Rephrase the question only after the wait time when the question cannot be understood.
5. If the student is reluctant to give the answer, encourage him or her with phrases such as "Relax! Give it a try." "It's okay if your answer is wrong." "Don't be afraid to give a wrong answer. Nothing will happen."

3.4 Techniques of Responding to Answers

Another dimension closely related to the act of questioning is responding to answers. Students need acknowledgement whether their answers are correct or incorrect in order they would like to participate again in classroom interaction. The students' responses could fall into one of the following six categories: an appropriate or correct response; a partially correct response; an incorrect or inappropriate response; a response in their native language, rather than in English; another question; or no response (Mohr & Mohr, 2007).

Most teachers praise students for correct responses. However, if the question-answer sequence attends to low-level thinking processes, teachers can make appropriate use of praise, but they should also encourage students to elaborate their responses. If a student provides a partially correct response, the teacher can value the contribution, reinforce the correct portion, and then attempt to refine the response. If a student responds in a language other than English, the teacher can see such a response as encouraging. At least such a student seems to be interested and transacting with the lesson. Sometimes a student responds the teacher's question by asking another question. Students' queries are important diagnostic opportunities for teachers and should be appreciated and responded to carefully.

When a student responds incorrectly or insufficiently to the teacher's question, the teacher can feel disappointed because the teaching-learning process does not seem to be proceeding smoothly and efficiently. However, the teacher must avoid the temptation to blame the student for not listening or processing the question well. Instead, the teacher should use incorrect responses as a means of ongoing assessment to determine the student's needs and misunderstandings. If the teacher checks students' understandings during instruction, rather than wait until the end of the lesson, the teacher has the opportunity to re-teach or clarify misunderstandings.

Sometimes a student might respond with silence or the ubiquitous "I don't know." When this happens, a teacher can be easily frustrated and tempted to make judgments about a student's low ability and motivation to learn. Such a conclusion is at best premature and certainly not productive. So, rather than move on to another student or provide the answer himself or herself, the teacher needs to communicate belief in the student's ability to contribute more and maintain high expectations for the student's performance. Waiting a few more seconds for an answer is certainly one option. Smiling, moving closer to the student, and rephrasing the question in a more conversational style may also encourage the student to respond. Asking for other contributions and then returning to the student after a few other students have participated communicates a kind, but powerful, message that values the student's participation. The examples of teachers' phrases for acknowledging students' responses are displayed in Table 1.

Situations	Phrases
1. Correct Responses	• "You're right. Can you tell me more?" • "Yes, that's good. What else do you know about that?" • "You are correct. How did you learn that?" • "Yes, that's a very good answer. Can you also tell me why this (concept, information) is important?" • "Good thinking. Good English." • "I like that good thinking and I like the way you said that." (Repeat or rephrase the answer.)
2. Partially Correct Responses	• "Yes, I agree that ___ . Now, let's think more about ___ ." • "You're telling me some good things, especially the part about ___ . What else?" • "We're heading in the right direction, but that's not quite complete. Do you or anyone else have something to add?"
3. Responses in a Language Other than English	• "All Right. That sounds interesting to me. How can we say that in English?" (Wait and model conventional English.) • "Do you know any words in English to say that?" • "Call on someone (one of your friends) to help tell us what you said in English." • "Can you help us translate this into English?" (Repeat the question; call on more than one student and then model an appropriate response in English.)
4. Responses that are Questions	• "Thank you for asking. Understanding is important. Good learners ask a lot of questions." • "Thank you for asking a question. Questions can help us all be better learners.

		• "Wow! That's a great (important) question. Do you know anything that will help answer that question?"
		• "I am glad you asked that question. How can the rest of us answer your question?"
		• "Let me first answer your question, and then I will ask my question again.
		• "Do you want to call on another student to answer your question. Do you want one of your classmates to help you?"
5. Incorrect Responses		• "Help me understand what you mean. Tell me again."
		• "Tell me more so I know what you're thinking."
		• "I want to know what you are thinking. Can you tell me more."
		• "You said ___. But, I thought that ___. Please, help me understand."
		• "Do you think ___ or ___?" (Give a right answer as one of the options.)
6. Silent Responses		• "I think you know something about this, and I think I would like to hear what you have to say."
		• "Can you show us what you know by acting it out or drawing it?"
		• "I'm going to come back to you and ask you again. Please get ready to talk with us."
		• "I want to hear from you in this lesson. Get ready with an answer or a question."
		• "I expect you to know this/to have something to say. Let me know when you are ready." (Provide a yes-no question or a choice question.)

(Mohr & Mohr, 2007).

Table 1. Examples of Teachers' Phrases for Acknowledging Students' Responses

4. CONCLUSION

Teachers' oral questions posed throughout the lesson, if exploited appropriately, can stimulate and maintain not only teacher-student interaction but also student-student interaction. A teacher asks a question and a student answers. Then, the teacher responds to the student's answer. While one student is answering a question, the other students are listening to their peer's explanation so it can encourage their comments.

For the purpose of stimulating student interaction in classrooms, teachers should develop questioning skills. Teachers should consider four aspects of using questions that influence the enhancement of student interaction. The aspects are clarity of questions, types of questions, techniques of asking questions, and techniques of responding to answers. Questions used to encourage students' interaction should be clear and specific. All of the types of questions have their place in the interactive classrooms but they should be based on students' age and proficiency levels. The teacher should ask a question to a whole class and provide wait-time before nominating a student to give a response. Then, the teacher should appropriately and carefully appreciate and acknowledge any response provided by the student – a correct response, a partially correct response, an incorrect response, a response in a language other than English, a response by asking another question, or silent response – in order the student would like to participate again in classroom interaction.

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