

Analysing Instructors' Questions in ESL Classroom

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Abstract: In teaching, instructors have the responsibilities to ensure that the objectives of the lesson for that day are accomplished and that the students understand the lesson. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is by asking questions. Although most of the questions asked in the classroom are usually related to the pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning, questions can also serve different functions. This study identified the functions of questions in ESL classroom discourse in a public university. The data consisted of audio recording data of five ESL instructors. The data were transcribed and analysed based on the framework set for the investigation: the functions of questions, types of questions and speech act. The analysis revealed that the functions of these instructors' questions were limited mainly to evoking students' response and seeking information. The findings raise some legitimate concerns for the instructors' limited use of questions in the classroom for effective teaching. Some recommendations are put forward for instructors to explore and enhance the use of different functions of questions in their teaching.

Keywords: ESL, Functions, Instructors, Questions

Introduction

There is little doubt that questions play an important part in teaching and learning as the primary function of questions is to seek or elicit information. Since communication among instructors and students primarily happen in the classroom, perhaps the question posed is not only focusing on the lesson at hand but to elicit something else as well. For example, if the instructor asks, '*What is a topic sentence?*' and immediately after that starts to explain the definition and what topic sentence is all about, then, the question is not to seek information but to introduce information.

Questions can be categorized into many types. According to Tsui (1992), Thompson (1998) and Fortanet (2004), questions can be divided into 1) audience-oriented questions, and 2) content-oriented questions. Questions that call for an answer are called audience-oriented questions while questions that expect no reply are called content-oriented questions (Thompson, 1998). For example, questions that have the functions of seeking information, feedback and evoke students' responses fall under the category of audience-oriented. Questions that have the functions of raising issues, introducing information and stimulating thought, on the other hand, fall under the category of content-oriented (Querol-Julian, 2008). Although most of the questions asked in the classroom are usually related to the pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning, questions can also serve different functions. This study analysed and highlighted the functions of question used by instructors in the classroom so that they can explore the use of different functions of questions in their teaching.

Literature Review

This section reviews the relevant literature based on the framework set for the investigation which are 1) functions of questions, 2) types of questions and 3) speech act and questions.

Functions of Questions in Classroom

Walsh (2006), puts forward that 'typically, classroom discourse is dominated by question and answer routines, with teachers asking most of the questions as one of the principal ways in which they control the discourse'. This suggests that a question posed may have various functions depending on what the instructor wants to elicit from the students. These functions may overlap with each other unless we look at them thoroughly based on the context that they are used.

Morgan and Saxton (1991) suggest that teachers ask questions for several reasons: 1) to keep students actively involved in the lesson, 2) for the students to be able to express their ideas and thought openly, 3) for the students to be able to hear different explanation of the material learnt by their peers, 4) to help teachers to pace their lesson and moderate students' behaviour, and 5) to help evaluate students' learning and revise their lesson when necessary.

Along the same line, Tsui (1992) and Thompson (1998) identify the functions of questions as follows. First, it is used to check. This means that questions are used by the speaker to ensure audience perceive and understand the speaker's message. Second, questions are used to evoke audience's response, or to elicit response or information from the audience. Tsui (1992) contends that the question may be addressed to the audience, but only a few may respond to it verbally. In addition, a question may function to seek agreement. Tsui (1992) explains this as 'to agree with the speaker's assumption that the expressed proposition is self-evidently true'. The next function of question is to raise issues, which means that the speaker does not immediately attempt to answer the questions him/herself but may provide commentary on or evaluation of the question. Finally, a question may be used to introduce information, i.e the speaker usually asks a question and immediately answer it him/herself.

In the same vein, Gabrielatos (1997) classifies the functions of questions based on a pedagogical aspect. He classifies four functions of questions by focussing them on the teaching and learning aspect in the classroom. Table 1 summarizes this classification:

Table 1. Functions of Questions (Gabrielatos, 1997)

Function of Questions	Examples
Checking understanding	<i>Does this sentence need adjectives or adverbs?</i> <i>Who do you think he is saying this to?</i> <i>Do I need to add '-ing' here?</i>
Elicitation	<i>What is she doing (in the picture)?</i> <i>How did you guess the meaning of the word given?</i> <i>Which sentences do you think you need to understand? Why?</i>
Guidance & Awareness Raising	<i>How does she express her disappointment?</i> <i>Does the speaker really mean this or is she being humourous?</i> <i>Did you have to read everything to get the answer?</i>
Class Management	<i>Who is in group C?</i> <i>Are you ready? Can we continue?</i> <i>Have you all brought your textbooks?</i>

Types of Questions

There are many types of questions asked by instructors in the classroom. Gabrielatos (1997) suggests that the questions can be distinguished between 1) genuine questions vs. question-forms performing other functions; and 2) authentic questions vs. pedagogical questions. Genuine questions are those that teachers ask to seek information while question-forms serve pragmatic functions such as expressing irony or sarcasm. Authentic questions are actually genuine questions that teachers ask in order to obtain information which can be raised out of personal interest. Pedagogical questions are also genuine questions that are asked as part of the teaching and learning process. Nunan and Lamb (1996) put forward that 'choice of questions should depend on the objective of the lesson, the task within the lesson, the size of the class and the particular pedagogical imperative driving the management of the learning process at that particular time'.

Genuine classroom questions are broadly categorised under display and referential questions. According to Ellis (1994), a display question is designed to 'test whether the addressee has knowledge of a particular fact or can use a particular linguistic item correctly' (p. 700). Pica (1999) suggests that display questions can be further divided into 'open display questions' and 'closed display questions'. Open display questions are those which elicit linguistically complex answers, such as "*Can you summarise the five important characteristics of a good leader?*". Closed display questions, on the

other hand, are question that require and often results in short answers, such as “*What’s the opposite of ‘before’?*”.

Referential questions are questions that are ‘genuinely information-seeking’ (Ellis, 1994, p. 721) and ‘those to which the asker does not know the answer’ (Nunan & Lamb, 1996, p. 88). Referential questions can also be divided into ‘open referential questions’ and ‘closed referential questions’ (Pica, 1999). The former requires linguistically complex answers such as “*What are the functions of code-switching in conversation?*”. The latter usually results in simple answer of factual information such as “*Where do you live?*”.

Speech Act & Questions

Any action performed via or thorough utterance or speaking is known as speech act. Questioning is a speech act which affects the way information is given and organized. Lyon (1995) as cited in Camiciottoli (2008) states that in speech act theory, questions are not seen as a formal structure but as an illocutionary act. Camiciottoli (2008) adds that questions carry the speech functions of focussing information, stimulating thought, suggesting action, eliciting response, requesting clarification and confirmation and soliciting agreement.

According to Austin (1962), speech acts can be divided into locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts in which questioning falls under the illocutionary acts. He further states that a person who believes that he/she is in the position to ask question has a legitimate claim to an answer. On the other hand, Searle (1969) states that “*the utterance of P counts as the undertaking of an obligation to do A*”. Now, if we relate it to the acts of asking questions in the classroom, it can be said that those who asked questions actually had a set of purpose in mind which questions were merely the tools. Thus, we can say that, questions can have different functions depending on the intention of those who asked them.

Athanasiadou (1990) lists several functions of questions under speech act which; 1) as means of requesting information, 2) providing information, 3) as a polite request and 4) as rhetorical questions to stimulate thought. She further adds that the use and the functions of questions are also characterized by the different roles speakers play and the setting they are in. For example, a teacher will obviously use questions for pedagogical purposes as compare to a mother or friends which may have other purposes. It is generally known that the main purpose or function of questions is to elicit information – we ask questions to get answer. Thus, by asking questions regardless the intentions, not only to communicate meaning but also to influence the hearer in some ways (Athanasiadou, 1990).

According to Ellis (1993), teachers use questions to review, to check on learning, to probe thought processes, to pose problems, to seek out alternative solutions, to challenge students to think critically and to reflect on issues or values. According to Boyd and Rubin (2006), teacher talk dominates classroom discourse in which teachers typically produce two third of classroom utterance. Boyd and Rubin (2006) further add that questioning constitute 50.2% of teacher utterance and most of the utterances are display questions in which the teachers themselves know the answer. This is supported by Noorizah Mohd Noor, Idris Aman, Rosniah Mustaffa and Teo Kok Seong (2010) whose study found that questions can have the function of eliciting feedback from the students. They add that feedback is an effective instructional component in the second language classroom.

The Study

Walsh (2006) suggests that teachers use questions as a method to control the discourse in the classroom. It is typical that classroom discourse contains the question and answer routines. However, one needs to be aware that questions used in the classroom may serve various functions and should not be understood literally. The main objective of this study is, therefore, to analyse the functions of questions in ESL classroom with the hope to provide some evidence for the continuous and continual improvement of the current practice of questioning in the classroom. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. identify the functions of questions that the instructors used in ESL classroom; and
2. analyse the frequency of functions of questions used ESL classroom

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The main data collection for this study involved recorded discourse of ESL instructors' speech in the classroom. 10 ESL classes at university level involving 5 instructors became the subjects of the study. The instructors were selected based on the convenience method of sampling, in terms of availability, lessons conducted as well as their willingness to take part in the study. The time allocated for each class in the course schedule was 1 hour and 50 minutes each. However, since the study only aimed at investigating instructors' use of questions in their teaching, only the discourse that contained instructors' talk was analysed. This included the instructors' monologic talk and interactive talk with the students. The following table informs the instructors' background in terms of their teaching experience and the course component of the classes recorded.

Table 2: Instructors' Background and Classes

Instructor	Years of Teaching Experience	Component
A	18	1. Grammar 2. Reading
B	3 ½	1. Grammar 2. Writing
C	8	1. Grammar 2. Grammar
D	8	1. Writing 2. Speaking
E	2	1. Reading 2. Grammar

In categorising the functions of questions used, this study relied on content analysis procedure where the audio recordings of the classroom discourse were transcribed. The recorded discourse contained segments of monologic instructors' talk and the interactive segments where the students' responses were elicited by the instructors.

The framework adopted for this study was based on the acceptable functions of question adapted from Athansiadou (1990), Tsui (1992), Gabrielatos (1997) and Thompson (1998). However, due to the numerous existing functions of questions, only eight functions were analysed thoroughly for the study, considering the rich data and the scope of the study. The rest of questions which did not fall under any functions listed were categorized under 'non-pedagogical functions'. These included building rapport with the students and small talk. The following table shows the framework for analysis.

Table 3. Framework for Analysis (Adapted from Athansiadou, 1990; Tsui, 1992; Gabrielatos, 1997 & Thompson, 1998)

Function	Example
Seeking information	- <i>Who are familiar with the term 'brain dead'?</i> - <i>Where in the text did you find the information?</i>
Providing guidance & Raising awareness	- <i>Do you need an adverb or an adjective here?</i> - <i>Do you need to understand all the words to answer it?</i> -
Managing classroom	- <i>Have you found a partner for Task A?</i> - <i>Have we come to an agreement here?</i>
Giving feedback & checking	- <i>Can you list back the Part of Speech?</i> - <i>Any questions on Section A? Are you following me?</i>

Evoking students' response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Alright, what is the title of that book?</i> - <i>Which is the correct answer for Question 1?</i>
Seeking agreement & confirmation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Don't you think that an adjective is the most suitable answer for Question 5?</i> - <i>The topic sentence for this paragraph is in line 15, right?</i>
Introducing information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Have you ever read about mercy killing?</i> - <i>What is a 'Weblog'? Have you come across any 'weblog?'</i>
Stimulating thought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Look at the pictures...What is the lady doing? What is the manner?</i> - <i>Can you imagine what will happen to the world if cut down most of our trees? Will we be able to live?</i>
Non-pedagogical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Hanif, could you please close the door?</i> - <i>Anybody, can you help me with this LCD?</i>

The data collected were treated to both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The qualitative analysis of the data was done at the functional level based on the framework set for investigation. The analysis examined the instructors' questions with the functions served in the discourse. As for the quantitative analysis, the data were analysed in terms of frequency and percentage counts and presented in a table form.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the analysis indicates that the instructors did not use a lot of questions in their teaching. Quantitatively, only 668 questions were found in the twenty hour discourse of the 5 instructors, with the highest number of questions posed by Instructor A (302 questions or 45.2%), followed by Instructor D (132 questions or 19.8%), Instructor C (106 questions or 15.9%), Instructor B (103 questions or 15.4%) and the least by Instructor E (25 questions or 3.7%). The following table summarises the use of questions by the instructors.

Table 4. Instructors' Use of Questions in the Classroom

Instructor	No. of Questions
A	302 (45.2%)
B	103 (15.4%)
C	106 (15.9%)
D	132 (19.8%)
E	25 (3.7%)

The findings also suggest that teaching experience may exert its influence on the instructors' questioning behaviour in the classroom. The data indicate that the more experience the instructor, the more questions that he/she would use in the classroom, and vice versa. As can be seen in Table 1, Instructor A, with the most teaching experience compared to the others, used the highest number of questions, while Instructor B, with the least teaching experience, used the least number of questions.

As can be seen from the results, despite the dominant use of questions in classroom teaching as attested by previous researchers (Gabrielatos, 1997; Walsh, 2006), the present study shows that the use of questions as a teaching strategy in the classroom was not that popular among the instructors.

The analysis of the functions of the questions used by the instructors show that most of the questions fall under the functions of evoking students' response (25.1%) and seeking information (22.5%). This is followed by seeking agreement and confirmation (13.8%) and giving feedback and checking (11%). The least common functions of questions found were introducing information (3%) providing guidance and raising awareness (3.4%). The following tables summarise the total occurrence of the functions of questions used by the five instructors.

Table 5. Total Occurrence of the Functions of Questions

FUNCTIONS OF QUESTIONS	TOTAL OF OCCURRENCE
Seeking information	150 (22.5%)
Providing guidance and raising awareness	23 (3.4%)
Managing classroom	41 (6.1%)
Giving feedback and checking	73 (11%)
Evoking students' response	168 (25.1%)
Seeking agreement and confirmation	92 (13.8%)
Introducing information	20 (3%)
Stimulating thought	55 (8.2%)
Non-pedagogical	46 (6.9%)
TOTAL NO OF QUESTIONS	668

Table 6: Summary of the Functions of Questions and Its Occurrence as used by the Instructors

FUNCTIONS	INSTRUCTOR				
	A	B	C	D	E
Seeking information	82 (27.2%)	21 (20.4%)	20 (18.9%)	25 (18.9%)	2 (8%)
Providing guidance and raising awareness	20 (6.8%)	0	1 (0.9%)	2 (1.5%)	0
Managing classroom	5 (1.7%)	20 (19.4%)	4 (3.8%)	7 (5.3%)	5 (20%)
Giving feedback and checking	7 (2.3%)	18 (17.5%)	25 (23.6%)	17 (12.9%)	6 (24%)
Evoking students' response	92 (30.5%)	8 (7.8%)	26 (24.5%)	33 (25%)	9 (36%)
Seeking agreement and confirmation	31 (10.3%)	27 (26.2%)	17 (16%)	17 (12.9%)	0
Introducing information	11 (3.6%)	3 (2.9%)	5 (4.7%)	1 (0.8%)	0
Stimulating thought	30 (9.9%)	5 (4.9%)	1 (0.9%)	18 (13.6%)	1 (4%)
Non-pedagogical	24 (7.9%)	1 (0.9%)	7 (6.6%)	12 (9.1%)	2 (8%)
TOTAL	302	103	106	132	25

The following table illustrates some samples of the questions and the functions as found in the discourse.

FUNCTIONS OF QUESTIONS	SAMPLES
Seeking information	<p><i>Who here has an i-Phone?</i> <i>How old are you guys?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor B)</p> <p><i>Alright now, can you tell me the cliché that you can find in Korean dramas?</i> <i>Now, what about Malay dramas? Who likes to watch them?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor E)</p>
Providing guidance and raising awareness	<p><i>Making it less...so what do we call that?</i> <i>Verbs...how do you know it is a verb?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor A)</p> <p><i>How do we determine it is an adverb? What is the clue?</i> <i>First of all, is the story in the present or the past?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor C)</p>
Managing classroom	<p><i>So, do you understand what I want you to do?</i> <i>So, any questions?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor B)</p> <p><i>Are you ready?</i> <i>Ok done? Finish your reading?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor C)</p>
Giving feedback and checking	<p><i>Really? Can you see the difference?</i> <i>Did you get the answer? Anything else?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor D)</p> <p><i>Now, are we ok with the points listed? Anyone still not clear?</i> <i>Alright class, this stuff about thesis statement, topic sentence, supporting details...do you still remember them?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor E)</p>
Evoking students' response	<p><i>Can you imagine living in the dark? Total darkness?</i> <i>What is life like an artist?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor A)</p> <p><i>What would you do, Haris?</i> <i>How about foreign films?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor E)</p>
Seeking agreement and confirmation	<p><i>Satellites have all about transmission and all that, correct?</i> <i>Nobody like bad words, correct?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor A)</p> <p><i>Ok...ok...you know who won, right?</i> <i>You read the news, right?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor B)</p>
Introducing information	<p><i>What is 'chronological'? It is the order...</i> <i>Alright, what is defaming someone? 'Defaming' means...</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor A)</p> <p><i>What would you say if I say you have won a car, a Porsche?</i> <i>This is about ...</i> <i>How many of you like to watch Korean dramas? Can you guess what we will be discussing today?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor E)</p>
Stimulating thought	<p><i>Why is that the life span is so short? Why not 10 years, or 20 years?</i> <i>What do you think is going to happen?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor A)</p> <p><i>If you use the same word it will be very boring. It just likes wearing the same clothes every day. Will you do that?</i> <i>Six billion US dollars...can you imagine that?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor E)</p>
Non-pedagogical	<p><i>Could you guys just sit around for a moment?</i> <i>Why are you looking at me so blur?</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Instructor E)</p>

As attested by previous studies, asking questions is one of the tools that instructors can utilise for effective teaching. This can be seen from the examples above, where instructors used questions to achieve the objective(s) of the lesson. However, as recorded in Tables 4 and 5, most of the instructors' questions served the functions as to evoke students' responses, seek information and give feedback and checking. These three functions are usually the most common functions of questions in any pedagogical sense and common classroom discourse especially when students are involved. It is also important to note that the use of questions by these instructors were rather scarce as out of 20 hours of the total classroom discourse recorded, only 668 questions were found uttered by the five instructors. The limited use of questions for limited functions suggests that instructors should explore different functions of questions and utilize them for effective teaching and learning.

It is also important, however, to mention one important aspect that delimits the study - since the study only focuses on the pedagogical functions of questions, the analysis did not look into specific details like the prosodic elements or other conversational behaviour related to the questions used. If these were looked into, the functions of questions would have been broader as the pragmatic meanings of the questions might be included.

Conclusion

Empirical studies have shown that questions are an important tool in teaching. However, the findings from the present study suggest that questions were not fully utilized by instructors in their teaching. It seems that the questions used were mainly focused on eliciting students' responses, seeking information, and giving feedback and checking. This suggests that questions with limited functions were mainly used for pedagogical purposes in the classroom. The authors strongly suggest that instructors explore the use of questions and their functions, and enhance their skills in using questions to facilitate learning. Using different forms of questions for different functions can also enhance students evaluative thinking as they are exposed to different ways of asking questions for different pragmatic functions.

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