

EXPLORATION OF TEACHERS QUESTIONING IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS :STATUS QUO ,STUDENTS EXPECTATIONS & ATTITUDES TOWARDS QUESTIONING

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Abstract

Questioning is an important part of the teachers talk in the ESL/EFL classroom . However , while previous research abroad focuses mainly on questionings division and feedback ,less has been written on students expectations and attitudes towards questioning . Those related studies at home seem to be mainly concerned with present situation exploration . This paper explores teachers questioning in English classrooms with respect to the seven aspects of questioning :types of questions ,questioning strategies ,the way questions are answered ,answering opportunity ,question distribution ,wait time ,and feedback . Through analysis on the results of a status quo investigation as well as an expectation questionnaire which was given to 285 students , this paper attempts to describe the existing classroom questioning situation in college English teaching and students expectations and attitudes towards questioning . By means of interview among the six expectation questionnaire participants ,this paper also tries to make sense of the students interpretation on the expectation survey results . In depth analysis and discussion about the results are presented .

Key words

English classroom ;questioning status quo ;students expectations and attitudes

1 .Introduction

Questioning is one of the most common techniques used by teachers . Teachers questions “ can be used to allow the learner to keep participating in the discourse and even modify it so that the language used becomes more comprehensible and personally relevant ”(Banbrook & Skehan 1989 :142) . Questioning has been “ the focus of research attention in language classrooms for many years ”(Nunan 1991 :192) .

Much has been discussed and written on questioning in our country ,but most of the work seems to primarily concentrate on present questioning features description and researchers suggestions accordingly . There is scant discussion about students expectations and attitudes towards questioning , while these expectations might have the closest and most direct relationship with questioning effectiveness . The present study aims to explore the present questioning situation in our English classroom and , more importantly ,to explore students attitudes towards questioning . This is probably not only of practical significance in providing a different direction for reflecting on questioning but also of theoretical importance to some degrees in enriching and broadening questioning study .

2 .Previous studies

Questioning research abroad seems to focus mainly on developing taxonomies to describe teacher question types ,investigating their respective functions in facilitating students learning as well as studying

feedbacks . Long & Sato (1983) refer to knowledge checking questions as display questions and those to which the teacher does not know the answer as referential questions . Brock's study (1986) suggests that the use of referential questions increases the amount of learner output , and such questions may be an important tool in the language classroom . Lee (2006) argues that display questions are central resources whereby language teachers and students organize their lessons and produce language pedagogy . Mackey & Philp (1998) focuses on one feature of interaction , called recasts or corrective feedback . The results suggest that for more advanced learners , interaction with intensive recasts may be more beneficial than interaction alone in facilitating an increase in production of targeted higher level morphosyntactic forms . There seems to be no investigation abroad about students' attitudes towards questioning . The present study aims to address this topic .

Those related studies at home seem to be mainly concerned with present situation exploration . Xu (2003) finds that if teachers can make good use of questioning in class they will make their teaching more effective , and he also suggests asking more referential questions to make the class more interactive . Zheng (2003) explores teachers' questioning from the perspective of anxiety and finds that : the more difficult the questions are , the more anxious the students turn out ; random nomination keeps students alert and arouse their anxiety ; fear of negative evaluation stimulates quite a few students to adopt avoidance behavior . Hu et al . (2004) conduct a survey on the questioning pattern of four college English teachers in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies , focusing on types of questions , wait time , distribution of questions , teachers' feedback , ways of answering questions and modification techniques . In Kong & Li's paper (2007) , a qualitative quantitative study is conducted to explore the similarities and differences of one teacher's questions in two classes ; the modification strategies adopted by the teacher and the effect of different question types on students' language output . Still , all these studies at home fail to give answers to what the present one is going to focus on : students' expectations and attitudes towards questioning . So this research is expected to fill this gap .

3 . Research questions

The present study , through both qualitative and quantitative investigations , attempts to find out some information about questioning in current English classrooms as well as students' attitudes towards questioning . The investigative items are adapted from Li (2006) and Zhi (2007) , namely , the features of teachers' questioning behaviors , students' expectations towards questioning and their assessment to the expectations . To be specific , this study aims to answer the following two research questions :

Research question 1 :

What are teachers' questioning features in English classroom ?

Research question 2 :

What are students' expectations for the English teachers' classroom questioning and their interpretations of those expectations ?

4 . Methodology

The present study is to find out and describe the typical features of teachers' questioning and students' expectations to the English teachers' classroom questioning as well as their interpretation on it , so exploring any causality is not the objective of the study . As a result , data will be collected using "naturalistic inquiry" (Allwright & Bailey 1991) methods , such as questionnaires and interviews . Students took part in the surveys of "questioning situation in English classroom" and "students' expectations towards questioning in English classroom" . Students were interviewed about their interpretations on the expectation survey results . The different perspectives elicited by different methods combine to provide a truer picture of your teaching and your students' learning (Genesee & Upshur 1996 :266) . Many of the most successful studies have employed multiple data collection procedures (Ellis 1994 :535) .

4 .1 Participants

The survey participants were 285 freshmen and sophomores from nine classes chosen at random from the author's college , including four English major classes and five non-English major classes . They were all non-native speakers of English , and English was their primary foreign language . These students had

been studying English for at least seven years ,their ages ranging from 20 to 23 .Six students among the survey participants were selected as interviewees .In order to guarantee a broader representative sample , the six interviewees were selected evenly from the advanced ,medium ,and low levels .

4.2 Data collection

Participants were asked to answer multiple choice questionnaires .All the questionnaires were written in Chinese in order to avoid misunderstanding by the participants .They were answered anonymously ,so students would be more open and honest . A pilot study was conducted where an interview among 20 students and six teachers was carried out in order to see whether some questions could be modified to produce better results . According to the proposals received from the pilot study and with the consultation of an English professor in the author's college ,the questionnaires were revised . The questionnaires consisted of seven items . Each item was made up of some sub items . For example ,“Types of Questions ” was composed of display and referential questions ,whose definitions were given afterward in brackets , the former referring to knowledge checking questions and the latter being such questions which the teacher did not know the answer to .¹ The author asked the English teachers of the nine classes to help organize the investigations .

The interview was conducted in Chinese because it provided more opportunity for participants to contribute meaningful and accurate descriptions in a limited time . Participants were told that their answers would be analyzed anonymously and only in research so that they would be more open and honest . The interview was recorded by audio .

4.3 Data analysis

Some questionnaires were excluded in the data analysis for different reasons .If participants answers were contradictory (for example ,when one participant selected that the teacher mostly used display questions ,but the same participant again selected that the teacher mostly used referential questions) ,or if the sub items to one item were either all chosen or all not chosen . Finally ,data from 255 students was found to be valid . Two teachers were asked to do the statistics task and checked each other's result . If there was any inconsistency ,they recalculated and decided the right percentage together . In this way a correct figure came out .

Two English teachers were in charge of converting the recorded materials of the interview into written language respectively . They checked each other's transcriptions . If there was any inconsistency , they listened to the materials again and decided the right expressions together . In this way accuracy was guaranteed . But only typical and representative transcriptions were presented in the form of excerpts or summaries in 5.2 of this paper ,as it was impossible and unnecessary to include in one paper those several thousands of transcriptions ,many of which were either similar or the same expressions .

5. Results

5.1 Questioning features in English classroom

Major findings from students questionnaires concerning questioning in present English classroom were reported in Table 1 .

Table 1 . Information about English classroom questioning

Items	Contents	Students	Questionnaire(%)
Frequency of different types of questions	Display questions	74	5
	Referential questions	25	5
Teachers questioning strategies	Repeating	36	9
	Paraphrase	68	2
	Prompting	36	5
	Translating	27	1
	Decomposition	30	2

Items	Contents	Students Questionnaire(%)
Different ways of answering questions	Whole class	30.6
	Volunteering	36.6
	Nomination	67.5
	Teachers self answering	9.8
Features of answering opportunity	All the students	54.9
	Active students	29
	Inactive students	8.6
	Random choice	66.7
Features of question distribution in classroom	The front part	27.1
	The middle part	16.5
	The back part	11.4
	Random choice	80.4
Wait time	About 10 seconds	65.7
	About 5 seconds	21.9
	About 3 seconds	12.4
Features of teachers Feedback	Simple praise	34.1
	Praise and evaluation	51.4
	Criticism	5.5
	Correcting errors	5.5
	Eliciting students self correction	42.4
	Ignoring and correcting later	12.5

The features of teachers questioning were analyzed in terms of frequency of different types of questions ,teachers questioning strategies ,different ways of answering questions ,features of answering opportunity ,features of question distribution in classroom , wait time , and features of teachers feedback . Students first choices over the above items were respectively Display questions ,Paraphrase , Nomination ,Random choice ,Random choice ,About 10 seconds ,and Praise and evaluation .

Students contended that their teachers had a tendency to ask a higher proportion of display questions . In present classrooms ,teachers seem to use more topics to check learners recall of previously presented information but fewer to generate discourse which more nearly resembles the normal conversation learners might experience outside of the classroom . However ,students had preference on referential questions in the expectation survey result . But there is one problem that students language foundation seems to determine which kinds of questions are used more frequently . There is possibly no point in asking too many referential questions among low level learners .

Among questioning strategies ,paraphrase was used most commonly ,which was consistent with the result of students expectation investigation that learners preferred paraphrase . We do not mean that paraphrase should be applied all the time ,but it is desirable to apply each approach properly so as to benefit learners as much as possible . For example ,when most students fail to understand the questions asked ,translation might as well be employed so as to make the questions understood directly .

On ways of answering questions ,students deemed “ Nomination ” method was the most used (67.5 %) ;this was perhaps due to the fact that the teachers liked to nominate those high proficiency students ,while “ Volunteering ” was the first choice in the expectation survey . So it might be our effort direction to reduce nomination and increase volunteering ,as nomination tends to cause students stress and tension . Volunteers are usually those active students and proficient learners . And if volunteers answer most of the questions ,those with poor language foundation will be denied more opportunities . Then the preferred way perhaps is to let students apply various ways of answering .

About the current condition of answering opportunity ,the first choices were “ Random choice ” and “ All the students ” , which indicated that teachers tried to give each student an equal opportunity and

which was also what students expected ,as their first two hopes were “ All the students ” and “ Random choice ”in the expectation survey results . But there also remains one problem that the inactive and low - level students could not answer even if they are given the opportunity to answer ,especially when the questions are difficult . Is it feasible to give easy ,display questions to those inactive weak learners and hard ,referential questions to active strong learners ?Yes ,it is feasible . In so doing ,the weak learners can enjoy a sense of achievement while the strong are more competitive .

As far as question distribution was concerned ,teachers questions seemed to spread at random . This indicated that teachers gave every student in class an equal opportunity to participate in the questions . Teachers should avoid calling only those highest achieving students who might give the correct answer to the question in order to maintain the flow of class . At the same time ,teachers are supposed to ask more questions to underachievers ,especially those knowledge checking questions ,so that the whole class can make progress simultaneously .

With reference to waittime ,most students chose about 10 seconds . This showed when the students had classes ,their teachers allowed them suitable length of time after a question . Within too short a time , it is hard for learners to comprehend and begin to respond . But waiting too long also causes the problem of wasting time and getting students annoyed .

We found “ Praise and evaluation ” approach was the most employed one ,which suggested teachers were cautious with using negative feedback . Positive feedback can give students confidence in learning as well as decrease their anxiety . We might as well consider using more . Giving explicit negative feedback would not only attack the student who is being criticized ,but also would affect other students ,which would eventually influence the whole classroom atmosphere . Therefore ,rare occurrence of explicit negative feedback is expected .

5.2 Students expectation towards teachers questioning

The questionnaire findings of students preference for teachers questioning were listed in Table 2 .

Table 2 . Students preference for questioning

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6
Different types of questions	RQ 60 .4	DQ 39 .6				
Questioning strategies	Paraphrase 77 .9	Decomposition 43 .3	Prompting 35	Translating 25 .4	Repeating 17 .1	
Ways of answering questions	Volunteering 63 .7	Whole Class 37 .5	Nomination 24 .6	Teacher S . 19 .2		
Answering opportunity	All Ss 60	Random Choice 58 .3	Active Ss 20 .8	Inactive Ss 11 .3		
Question distribution in classroom	Random Choice 77 .9	Front Part 19 .6	Middle Part 19 .2	Back Part 11 .7		
Wait time	About 10s 65 .1	About 5s 25 .4	About 3s 9 .5			
Teachers feedback	P . and E . 66 .7	E . S . 47 .5	Simple Praise 36 .7	I . and C . 12 .9	Criticism 4 .2	Correcting Errors 3 .3

All the numbers are as a percentage ;RQ = Referential questions ;DQ = Display questions ;Teacher S . = Teacher self answer ;Ss = Students ;10s = 10 seconds ;P . and E . = Praise and evaluation ;E . S . = Eliciting students self correction ;I . and C . = Ignoring and correcting later

Students first choices over the investigated items in the expectation survey were ,in order ,

Referential questions ,Paraphrase ,Volunteering ,All Students ,Random choice ,About 10 seconds ,and Praise and evaluation . The interviewees later expressed their interpretations and ideas about these survey results .

We found that students tended to appreciate referential questions more than display questions . The rationale of such a preference might be due to what was reported in EXCERPT 1 from the interview transcriptions .(The original excerpt was in Chinese ,and the author translated it into English . The remaining interview excerpts were also translated .)

EXCERPT 1

(Student 2)

Student 2 :I like being asked referential questions . This kind of question encourages diverse student responses ,and requires students to engage in higher level thinking ,and can train our spoken English ;we can communicate with the teacher or other students ,right ?In so doing ,our communicative ability and learning enthusiasm get developed ...

At the same time ,another student expressed differently in the following excerpt .

EXCERPT 2

(Student 1)

Student 3 :...display questions are also very necessary in class because these questions serve to facilitate the recall of information . We can learn the meaning and structure of the text ,the language points ... So ,we hope teachers hold a good balance between two kinds of questions in class .

It could be judged that ,although students preferred referential questions ,they thought display questions were necessary . So teachers are supposed to hold a certain balance between two kinds of questions in real class .

For the questioning strategies ,a majority of students were fond of paraphrase strategy . One interviewed student told the researcher his interpretation in the following excerpt :

EXCERPT 3

(Student 1)

Student 1 :...when there are some difficulties in answering the present question ,teachers rephrase by means of simple words ,phrases and sentences ...I think ,in this way ,we go over old knowledge as well as learn new thing .

Despite this ,the author proposes that ,in different circumstances ,some strategies can be focused on rather than just concentrating on one the entire time . For example ,if students with poor academic backgrounds fail to understand questions ,teachers might as well apply translation to help those students directly understand and answer the questions ,because paraphrasing will make them even more complex and hard to answer .

Up to 63 .7 % of students preferred volunteers to answer questions . Students assessments could be seen in Excerpt 4 &5 .

EXCERPT 4

(Student 3)

Student 3 :Volunteers should be asked to answer the question because they are so active and usually they have got ready for the answers . Why not let them ?

EXCERPT 5

(Student 6)

Student 6 :Volunteers get the opportunity to express ideas and construct knowledge by themselves ;at the same time ,classroom atmosphere gets activated ,students courage trained and their self-confidence built up ...

It seems appropriate for volunteers to answer . But if teachers always ask the volunteers to answer , the class will be dominated by them ,then how do we treat non -volunteers ?This calls for our full attention

because a class has both volunteers and non-volunteers generally .

In the aspect of answering opportunity and questioning distribution , students maintained that teachers should be equal and fair in distributing questions . They expected their teacher to pay attention to all the students . They even suggested that teachers should ask more questions to underachievers so that the whole class could make progress simultaneously . So , teachers should avoid calling only those highest achieving students . For this purpose , teachers are required to have such information about students as proficiency level , personalities and individual cognitive styles so that teachers can ask right students right questions .

Nearly half of the students wanted the average wait time to be about 10 seconds . They gave some explanations in the following excerpts .

EXCERPT 6

(Student 5)

Student 5 : ...five minutes is enough , in my opinion , within a short time , it is hard for us to comprehend a question , consider the available information , formulate a meaningful answer and begin to respond . Waiting too long also causes the problem of wasting time , and students to get annoyed .

EXCERPT 7

(Student 4)

Student 4 : I think the length of wait time could depend on the questions difficulty . If students can answer quickly , wait time can be short ... But if students can think on the question utilizing time , a wait of proper length should be provided ...

It is reasonable that wait time is up to questions difficulty or easiness .

Up to 66.7 % of the questionnaire participants demanded teachers " Praise and evaluation " feedback and only 3.3 % wanted " Correcting errors " .

Excerpt 8 & 9 contained students interpretations .

EXCERPT 8

(Student 3)

Student 3 : ...feedback with explanation in detail is more favorable because this type of feedback can not only explain to us why the answer is true or false but also increase motivation and build a supportive classroom climate .

EXCERPT 9

(Student 4)

Student 4 : ...I like feedback plus explanation , I hope teachers give feedback that can elaborate , explain or justify our contributions , it is useful ... Correcting errors often seems to cause students to be afraid of feeling like taking risks to respond , to have esteem threatening influence , or even to put learners on the defensive .

It could be inferred that learners preferred to receive teachers positive feedback when they responded . Teachers should be cautious with using negative feedback .

The present study indicated that teachers ignored some of the students expectations . For instance , they were unaware of students expectations in terms of types of questions as well as ways students answer . It is hence necessary for teachers to analyze students needs and to decide what most students expect . Only by then can teachers adjust their teaching performance in an attempt to maximize students enthusiasm and participation in answering teachers questions .

6 . Discussions

This paper attempts to find out the existing situation about questioning in English teaching and students expectations and attitudes towards questioning . This paper also tries to make sense of students

descriptions and comments on the expectation questionnaires outcomes . We get some multi dimensional characteristics of English classroom questioning and some pedagogical implications .

Firstly ,teachers have higher frequency use of display than referential questions ,but students want more referential questions ,as referential questions are more beneficial to their language learning . Students express that display questions are also useful .

It is generally believed that referential is more efficient . The use of referential questions increases the amount of learner output ,creates a flow of information from students to teachers and generates discourse which more nearly resembles the normal conversation learners experience outside of the classroom (Brock 1986 ;Nunan 1987) . However ,Lee (2006) argues that display questions are central resources whereby language teachers and students organize their lessons and produce language pedagogy . So it is advisable that ,on the basis of learners levels and lessons purpose ,teachers need to increase the number of referential questions to a proper ratio .

Secondly , paraphrase is the most frequently employed technique of questioning strategies . Paraphrase is also expected to be the most effective technique . The interviewees believe that it is advantageous for students to think in the target language when teachers paraphrase questions with similar or easier words ,phrases or sentence structures .

A study by White &Lightbown (1984) suggests that paraphrase is very effective ,which can make a question appropriately comprehensible and answerable within the learners subject matter and L2 competence . But ,under different circumstances ,it seems preferable that different strategies can be focused on rather than just concentrating on one . As it has been mentioned that when most students fail to understand hard questions ,it is acceptable to employ translation . In such a situation ,if teachers still stick to paraphrasing in English ,it will only make the questions even more complex and hard to answer .

Thirdly ,most questions are answered by means of nomination ;while students present a preference to the volunteers answering questions ,because this method can direct students to think and answer questions individually and train their courage .

Volunteers answering questions already have the above-mentioned advantages . At first sight ,it seems a favorable phenomenon ,however ,that is not the case if explored further . If the teachers always ask the volunteers to answer ,the class will be dominated by them ,and the non-volunteering students will lose chances to answer questions (He 2007 :32) . Teachers are called to pay attention to all the students in class and should be fair in distributing questions to high achievers ,average students and low achievers (including volunteers and non-volunteers) .

Fourthly ,teachers mainly tend to let learners answer on the basis of random choice . Students favor questions that go to all the students or at random . In students interpretation ,by distributing response opportunities widely ,all learners are kept alert and given an opportunity to respond .

Teachers attention zones should cover the whole territory of the classroom so that all the students will feel that they are treated equally and have the enthusiasm to answer the present question . Distributing response opportunities widely is a simple idea but difficult to implement . It requires careful monitoring of students and a great deal of a teacher's attention .

Fifthly ,both the current condition and expectation questionnaires reveal " Random part " is the most useful distribution pattern . Students think that allocating questions to every direction rather than to certain districts can maximize students enthusiasm and participation in answering teachers questions .

Although teachers generally try to treat students fairly and give every student in the class an equal opportunity to participate in the lesson ,it is often hard to avoid interacting with some students more than others . This creates what is referred to as the teacher's action zone (Freiberg & Driscoll 2000 :223) . It is common that teachers have their own action zones when asking questions ,but do not forget the equality concept .

Sixthly ,more than half of the students think that the mean wait time is about 10 seconds . The first

choice is also about 10 seconds in the expectation questionnaire. Students' beliefs are that questions can not be pondered to a full extent and answered properly within too short a time, while some students tend to get upset during too long a time.

When wait time is increased to three to five seconds, the amount of student participation as well as the quality of that participation often increased (Long et al. 1984, cited in Richards & Lockhart 1996: 188). Nevertheless, the research by Long & Crookes (1986) discovered that increased wait time did not lead to greater mastery of content by ESL students (cited in Nunan 1991: 193). Perhaps a 10-second wait time is reasonable, which is also the length students appreciated more in the expectation survey.

Just as it is that a question's difficulty or easiness might affect the length of wait time, which is discussed in 5.2 of the paper; we need to consider a question's purpose. If it is to test whether students have good mastery of certain specific facts, it could be short, but if it is to go beyond recall of information and demonstrate a personal grasp of the material using explanation, summary, or elaboration, teachers need to give students more time in order to speak their opinion extensively.

Seventhly, praise plus evaluation is applied more than any other kinds of feedback. The first choice of feedback is praise and evaluation in the expectation questionnaire, too. Students maintain that positive feedback with explanation provides them with not only motivating confidence but also the difference between right and wrong answers.

Positive feedback can give students confidence in learning, decrease their anxiety as well as convey certain information of where the mistakes lie. We might as well consider using this more. Providing students with proper assessment after their response is necessary. "For any sort of comment to be effective, reasons for the teacher's approval or disapproval needed to be stated" and "If, on the other hand, fails to provide this kind of information, it could have entirely the opposite effect" (Williams & Burden 2000: 135-136).

Giving explicit negative feedback would not only attack the student who is being criticized, lowering his learning enthusiasm, but it may also affect other students, which would eventually influence the whole classroom atmosphere. Therefore, it is desirable to be cautious about adopting negative feedback.

7. Conclusion

Combining qualitative and quantitative description and analysis, this paper explores teachers' questioning in English classroom and students' expectations and attitudes towards questioning. Especially, exploration of students' expectations will perhaps help to extend our horizons of thinking concerning questioning performance in a different perspective; and thus improve our questioning skills. This study is carried out on a small scale in one school. Certainly, it is necessary to conduct more research further in different schools in order to arrive at a more convincing claim.

Note

1. For the questionnaires, please contact the author at xiazhanghong@hzvtc.net.

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