TEACHER’S QUESTION MODIFICATION AGILITY:
A PORTRAIT OF TEACHER QUESTIONING BEHAVIOR IN A
MIXED-ABILITY CLASS

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Abstract

As a part of teacher talk paradigm, Modification of Teacher’s Questions plays a pivotal role in language teaching in the classroom. Substantially, teachers’ agility to vary its typology enhances students’ understanding so as to facilitate their comprehensible inputs. Hence, students are spurred to produce intelligible language outputs at full. This paper aims to portray the existent Question Modification Techniques conducted in a mixed-ability class at a well-established private university. Two sessions were video-taped, then teacher-student interaction was transcribed and analyzed so that the practiced techniques were profoundly revealed. Upon the presented findings, a partial part of presenter’s Master’s Degree Thesis, the question modification essence is discussed, regarding the elaboration of what, when, why and how posed question modification techniques should be imparted. Furthermore, it relates to the identity of the teacher subject, concerning her beliefs: Cultural and Pedagogic ones. Seemingly mundane question modification, as recommended, shall be better insightfully comprehended.

Keywords: Teacher Talk, Interaction, Question Modification, Teacher Beliefs

Introduction

There has been a large amount of research on the teacher talk in recent years. This interest reflects the essence of such talk in language teaching in that teachers questioning, one of its issues, plays a pivotal role in language learning. Teachers mundanely pose questions in the classroom for a number of reasons. They may impart them students so as to get them involved in learning, bail out weaker students participate, help elicit certain structures and vocabulary (Richards and Lockhart, 1994). Indeed, teachers pursue to modify questions they have uttered so as to create a highly quality interactive process (Ellis, 1985; Richard and Lockhart, 1994). In other words, it is argued that successful language learning is found to rely on as much on the type of interaction triggered by teachers’ intelligible questions occurring in the classroom as on the method used (ibid). Subsequently, encouraging students to be more actively engaged in learning is pedagogically valuable on the grounds that their active involvements will promote substantial learning regardless of well-designed method that the teacher implement (Nystrand and Gamoran, 1991). If teachers manage to produce intelligible ones, prolonged interactions are initiated to trigger. Thus, enhanced students’ comprehension as well as more production of outputs by them are existent (Pica et al., 1987). Yet, it is common for the teacher going through a moment of bewildering: the questions are still puzzling. Unexpectedly, they are confusing students, then forcing him to modify them. His
decision to implement a preponderantly particular technique is substantially imposed by his pedagogic belief held dear.

This paper aims to depict how the teacher as a research participant to work on modifying the questions produced and seek reasons for such existence culturally embedded. Such portrait and teacher’s reflection hopefully enable us to comprehend the intricacy of question modification to the practical betterment in language learning in the classroom.

**Teachers’ beliefs**

It is asserted that beliefs as one of cultural elements pivots to teachers’ ways to anticipate questions they have imparted. Then, what is the concept(s) of belief in general and that of teachers’ beliefs in particular? A belief is summarized To sum up, a belief is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behavior (Pajares, 1992). Furthermore, teachers’ beliefs is a term usually used to refer to teachers’ pedagogic beliefs, or those beliefs of relevance to an individual’s teaching (ibid). It is proposed that, “All teachers hold beliefs, however defined and labeled, about their work, their students, their subject matter, and their roles and responsibilities” (ibid). As recommended the teachers’ beliefs are specifically narrowed down and focused on teachers’ educational beliefs about teaching and learning and teachers’ roles. (pedagogical beliefs). The role and importance of beliefs have been studied in several key areas of interest to ELT professionals: the influence of teachers’ pedagogical beliefs on their classroom behaviours, Teachers own numerous metaphors to describe what they do during classroom instructions, shifting from one role to another depending on lesson stages they are engaged. Their roles constitute “teachers as a controller, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, tutor and observer (Wright, 1987). Specifically, teachers as a controller take the role, tell the students things, organize drills, read aloud topic-leading question poses and other various classroom activities, exemplifying the qualities of a teacher-fronted classroom (Harmer, 2001). In addition, teachers frequently self-describe as “actors” (ibid). In particular, teachers often take a role as teaching aid: they manipulate mime and gestures, facilitate students with language models, and provide comprehensible inputs (ibid). Krashen (1985) defines comprehensible inputs as language that students understand the meaning of, but which nevertheless slightly above their own production level. Facilitating students with comprehensible inputs is pedagogically valuable, for it promotes language acquisition. Even, a good teacher is characterized as the one being able to make learners understand the inputs (Krashen,1982):The requirement that inputs must be comprehensible has implied that in talking to students, among other things via questioning, the teacher needs to be concerned primarily with whether the students understand the message (Krashen & Terrel, 1988)

Thus, teachers acting as a provider of comprehensible inputs denote their awareness of the effective teacher-talking time (TTT). In fact, this requires them, among other things, to have a pedagogical ability in posing variously intelligible questions as language inputs and
employing speech – particularly question - modification techniques. Such abilities are very vital to anticipate students’ communication breakdowns when teacher-student interaction occur during classroom instructions.

Teacher’s question modification

It is pedagogically valuable for students to be exposed teacher questions that they understand. In fact, teachers modify their speech - among other things, questions- so as to turn them into comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). The teacher-student interactions (Long, 1991) occur during question-answer exchanges, then, promote language acquisition.

The taxonomy for teacher’s modification of questions based on the framework of Chaudron under the domain of discourse is, first of all, self-repetition (Chaudron 1988). Repetition of an utterance (either unchanged or rephrased) is assumed to give learners more chances to process the input by providing another opportunity to comprehend words they didn’t catch the first time. It is found to aid immediate recall (Cervantes 1983; Chaudron 1988) cited by Moritoshi (2001) though immediate recall may not equate to comprehension.

Subsequently, giving the learner more time – a pause - to process the input may aid students’ comprehension as well as avail the teacher planning time on how to modify their speech to the competence and needs of their students termed as Receptive Pauses and Productive pauses function to assist learners in the production of the TL and are most commonly encountered after the teacher has asked a question (Chaudron, 1988).

Furthermore, wait time is a type of pause in the teacher’s discourse and research has found that increased wait time can be beneficial. Firstly that learners have more time to process the question and to formulate a response (ibid). Secondly, it results more learners in attempting to respond (Richard and Lockhard,1994). In addition, Nunan (1991) citing Holley and King (1971) claims that the length and complexity of the responses increases. Similarly, Richards, J.C., Platt. & Platt, H (1992) argues its essence to get students involved in learning. White and Lightbown (1984) cited by Chen (2001) advocate the importance of longer wait time from five to ten seconds in this respect. In the following passage:

This does not mean that that lengthening wait time necessarily improves students’ responsiveness. In a study of teachers’ action research, it was found that excessive lengthening of wait-time exacerbated anxiety amongst students (Carter 2001).

Eventually, one technique, which is not classified, is to translate the questions into L1. Such modification technique, as Chaudron (1988) citing Bruck and Schultz (1977) notes a gradual tendency for a teacher to use her dominant language for instructional tasks (whether the L1 or L2) will result in a similar shift in the learners’ preferences for language use.

Teacher’s preferences for using L1 influence students to tend use L1 in English language classroom, leading to students’ wrong habits of word-to-word translation. Such students’ drawbacks hinder their autonomy in TL communication. Hence, it undeniable that the benefits of TL exposure and practice are prevalent.

However, L1 use in English language classes, in terms of translating the questions into mother tongue, is still advantageous, provided that the teacher uses it judiciously.
(Atkinson, 1993). The teacher is responsibly and sensibly aware about using L1 questions for the sake of affective and practical reasons. Pertaining to affective reasons, it denotes an imposition for socio-political issues. L1 use, in such cases, causes students conscious that their mother tongue and their own cultural values are as equally important as FL ones (Schweers, 1999). Among the practical issues the most essential is the teaching of grammar, spelling and phonology, vocabulary, language similarities/differences and cultural issues (ibid).

Therefore, the prospective teachers’ question modification techniques in this study relative to the discourse are self-repetition, rephrasing, question addition, pausing and code-switching.

Research Methodology

Classroom observations were conducted in one language classroom: an EFL class of freshmen in Speaking English 2 facilitating them to practice and exercise their speaking ability. The class consisted of 20 students having no an orals tests to determine their current speaking proficiency. Even, they did not any institutional or even international TOEFL tests so as to reveal their current English Proficiency. A few of them had got an English course, though. Six males and fourteen females, aged 18 – 19 years took up the second semester of their academic year of English Department, Language Faculty at well-established private university in Bandung.. They attending a 90 minute session per week had a mix-ability in which the majority was considered weak by the teacher.

One female, an Indonesian English teacher of English as a foreign language is a research participant. She’s a master’s degree in English Pedagogy with 10 years teaching experience in diverse academic settings, some of which 5 years have been at her present university. The materials employed during the class were exercises 1 and 4 of unit. The subject-compiled hand out is “Spoken English 2” whose materials are referred to “Speaking 3” by Collie and Stephen (1993) and “Speak for Yourself Book 1” by Fein (1984). The hand-out is prescribed for first year students majoring English in the second semester. There were no prior assignments for students to study the materials before they had the class.

An adapted FLINT System together with Ethnographic approach was deliberately employed. Despite availability of classroom data such as teachers’ questions, the number of distinctive students’ responses, and students’ language production, its system does not cater the data of question modification techniques. The textual analysis of the transcript attained from a recorded classroom was opted (Nunan, 1989). Data were collected in two stages: observation of the class (two sessions) and a semi-structured interview with the teacher. The researcher as a non-participant observer employed a program of observing, recording/video-taping and transcribing (Van Lier, 1988). An observer’s presence observing and involving video equipment to record any classroom emerging utterances would not yield unnatural and distorted data as no such thing as natural speech in any absolute sense. In other words, in all situations, people are aware of being monitored to some extent by others present (Wolfson, 1976). Subsequently, two video-tape sessions were transcribed employing the adapted
transcript conventions from Van Lier (1988) and Wells (2003). Also, a semi structured-interview was conducted to find out the deep reasons for the teacher’s existent implementation of question modification techniques.

Research Findings and Discussion

Employing the framework of Chaudron, Bruck and Schultz, it is found out that the teacher applies a few techniques: simply repeated, rephrased, additional questions, and pauses. The subject teacher employs these as she is familiarizing students with the topic *Perfume* as well as eliciting the characteristics of quality perfume advertisements by assigning students to work on the exercises. Let’s take a look at the grid showing the distribution of teacher-employed techniques attained from the two sessions that the teachers undertook below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Modification Techniques</th>
<th>Simply repeated</th>
<th>Rephased</th>
<th>Additional question</th>
<th>(Pauses) Wait-time</th>
<th>Code-switching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>1.4 %</td>
<td>6.1 %</td>
<td>13.0 %</td>
<td>79.5 %</td>
<td>0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequent question modification technique is pauses (79.5). Mostly, the subject teacher simply waits for students’ spontaneous answers just after the questions are posed. The time allotment in seconds is spent by the hope that students are able to comprehend the questions. Otherwise, the subject teacher employs other three other techniques: Simply repeated, rephrased (the questions) and additional question. The subject teacher prefers adding the questions (13.0%) to just repeating ones (1.4%). Occasionally, the subject teacher attempts to shift particular words in order to aid student comprehension (6.1%). One thing for sure is that the subject teacher blindly avoid translating the questions into L1 (0%) as they are not comprehended at all.

Unlike the findings of Moritoshi’s research (2001), the teachers does not self-avail with Code-switching. Moreover, while in Moritoshi’s study (2001), the teacher was probed to repeat the questions (simply repeat) as a technique more dominantly than any others (82%), the present study reveals the predominant teacher’s modification technique is pauses (79.5%) the teacher said,

“I have to be patient...their competence in English, mostly, is not so good...Only of few students are excellent. So, I give some time to think...trying to understand my questions patiently...“

The number of frequent techniques is 146 in which the teacher never utilizes the one proposed by Bruck and Schultz, that is Code-switching (0%). Dissimilar to Moritoshi’s study (2001), the teacher absolutely avoid translating incomprehensible questions to students’
mother tongue. The teacher expects all students to plunge into the extensive practices of TL so that the restrictions of using *bahasa* are fully implemented as stated:

"I have to push them to speak in English. Studying in my class subject means practicing it...using it!"

Students’ are inevitably exerted to care for using TL as the teacher prefers communicating in TL to mother tongue (Chaudron, 1998; Bruck and Schultz, 1977) due to a number of reasons uttered by the teacher:

"I am worried if I let them speak in *bahasa*, they get addicted...get lethargic to speak English. I feel it is useless for them to attend my class. Besides, to keep asking them speak in English is a good way for them to master it. If I don’t do it, they will not speak fluently!"

The occurrence of rephrased questioned also emerged from the analysis of the discourse. The teacher confessed that according to her experiences it was easy to rephrase unintelligible questions easily and quickly. Besides, the teacher believed it would humiliate them if frequently phrased questions were not comprehended yet in front of their classmates. Thus, if once unsuccessfully understood, the same question was directed to the floor or other students as explained:

"If they don’t understand my question, I’ll ask the same question again.....well, it is confusing her...I try to make a simpler one spontaneously.... I know it is not easy to make it....but, if they are still confused...I think I have to stop asking....I’ll try asking to everyone...let one of them answer.....or I just ask the smart one to answer...for me, it will make students embarrassed if they can’t answer my questions in the classroom even though I have made it simpler...

It is pretty frequent for the teacher to repeat the same question appended with another for clarity (13.0%). It is possible that the first question is too ambiguous for students at their current proficiency so that the teacher adds a second question to enhance students’ comprehension. Regarding this, the teacher uttered,

"It is good to repeat (the same) questions....many confusing words, probably...I avoid doing this too often, though because I am afraid they are regarded dull...I prefer waiting...waiting for their answer...even only yes or no. No problem!"

In summary, the teacher soundly relied on a certain question modification techniques, namely wait time. She was of patience to elicit students’ response as it was believed to be in with the learners’ interests calling for authentic world-contexts. She controlled the students’ active engagement in learning by deliberately posing an easy question requiring yes and no answer, while the same time she was in charge of saving students face: Students were avoidably saved from being humiliated by the fact that she couldn’t answer the posed questions, then singled out the smart one to take over (Wright, 1987). Even, it seemed that the teacher played a pivotal role as a language input controller in that she attempted to ascertain the intelligible questions by repeating, adding questions, and rephrasing (Hammer,
To rephrase poses questions as a way to provide comprehensible inputs was not easy at all, though as she confessed. Equally important, the teacher seemed to embrace the perspectives of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework on the grounds that she exerted students to produce language for authentic, meaningful communication (Brown, 2000). Such interactive learning as taping authentic topic was confronted by the fact that most of them were not able to respond spontaneously and adequately, requiring the teacher to self-capitalize with diverse skills to modify unintelligible questions. The last was concerning the total avoidance of L1 use in the classroom. As an legitimate controller, she made sure English was the only medium of communication. English Only (EO) concepts were seemingly attractive although the values of code switching situations were not worth overlooking (Stern, 1992).

**Conclusion**

Teachers’ belief as a controller and the concepts of teaching and learning influenced the plausible choices of question modification techniques implemented in the classroom. The teacher’s aware pedagogic decisions lead to unforeseen impacts on the contextual situations in which she was expected to be tactfully agility to make use of available ways to evoke students understand the posed questions. Even, it was possible to attend a particular technique to be reinforced as to anticipate the actual challenges taking place in mixed-ability students in the classroom. Despite the study limitation (in one teacher and one class only), the depiction of the real question modification techniques geared by the teachers’ beliefs has convinced us that what is called a teacher’s common practice is no longer pedagogically considered mundane.

**References**


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A portrait of Teacher Questioning Behavior in a Mixed-ability Class


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