

Teacher's Questions in Reading Classes

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Abstract: The present paper discusses an English teacher's questions in Reading classes at MAN Malang III. Types of questions, functions of teacher's questions, question levels and the strategies applied by the teacher were put as the research problems. Non-participant observation was applied to collect the data with the researcher as the main instrument aided by field-notes and a tape recorder. It was found that the distribution of the questions did not allow the students to talk longer and to think more analytically. Meanwhile, the strategies applied by the teacher helped the students to respond to the questions previously unanswered. The teacher is suggested to produce more open and referential question as well as inference and evaluation questions as to give more chances for the students to think aloud more.

Key words: teacher, questions, reading

Conversation and instructional exchanges between teachers and learners contribute the best chances for the students to train their skills in the target language, to test out their hypotheses about the learned language, and to get feedback as well. When the teacher speaks in a proper manner, puts questions in a correct way and gives feedback within suitable situations, the students learn a lot from their teacher's pronunciation, stress, juncture and all included in the teacher's voice quality, as well as their teacher's paralinguistic features such as nodding and gesture. In addition to that, when the students produce utterances, they try to apply their language competence in real situation in which they are in need for the teacher's feedback. In this case, their teacher's response will be influential to the subsequent students' performance.

A teacher's questions play an important role in a classroom interaction. The questions might generate students' target language production or meaningful responses. They play an important role in focusing students' attention, encouraging oral responses, and evaluating learners' progress as well.

However a teacher's questions alone may not promote learners' production unless the teacher is aware of the weaknesses of too closed, too fast, too vague questions, or too many repetitions of the same unclear question. Although modification of questions to improve comprehensibility may be an eventual aid to the learner, the teacher possibly cannot rely on multiple questions to solve a problem of non-comprehension. In this case, the teacher should be sensible to the characteristics of their questions and the aims of issuing such questions.

Teaching reading activities may be divided into three types of pedagogical activity: pre-reading activities, during reading activities, and post-reading activities (Greenwood as quoted by Cahyono, 1992:72). Based on the activities, questions may be asked in the three stages of activities. The fact that questions may be given in the three stages indicates that questioning activities are flexible. In this case, teachers need to realize the potential value of their own questions, in addition to the questions following the reading text, which may be used to develop students' understanding.

Most teachers are worried about classroom interaction analysis. They do not want to have all their daily transactions analyzed under a microscope. However, for it is a fact of classroom life that most teachers need objective feedback on their verbal performance, I insist on conducting a study on teacher's questions as one part of teacher's talk. I owe thanks to one of the teachers at MAN Malang III, whose name is not mentioned in this paper to respect her privacy, who has given permission to me to attend her classes, record her speeches, and analyze her questions.

Previous studies (Bialystok et al., Long and Sato, Dinsmore, Pica and Long, and J.D.Ramirez et al. as quoted by Chaudron, 1988:127) about types of questions show a linear result that teachers asked proportionately more display than referential questions. Likewise, studies on functions of a teacher's questions show the same trends. Early as quoted by Chaudron,

1988:131) found that comprehension checks occurred with substantial frequency, but no confirmation checks or clarification requests were discovered. Long and Sato and Pica and Long also found that comprehension checks were the most frequent in the classroom interactions.

Considering the level of questions in Reading Comprehension and in their sequence, Good and Brophy (1994) emphasize that a good set of questions not only contains a significant percentage of higher level questions but also help students think about their topic systematically and emerge from the discussion with comprehensive understanding.

A teacher's strategies in giving questions have also been examined. Some teachers ask questions by repeating or rephrasing them, giving clues to narrow them down, some others modify their questions by giving alternative or 'or-choice' questions, and other teachers provide additional 'wait-time' to the students (Chaudron, 1988:128).

This observation re-examined types of questions, functions of questions, as well as levels of questions uttered by the English teacher in the classroom. Beside that, I also studied the strategies applied by the English teacher to help the students understand their questions so that they can be answered correctly. I am interested in knowing whether the trends existing in the last two decades as mentioned in the previous research also appear in this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Types of Questions

In research literature, questions are sometimes categorized into two types, 'open' and 'closed'. Open questions allow the listeners to express their opinion, speculation, generation of hypotheses, and putting up of an argument. Closed questions require either a monosyllable response or a single correct answer (Kerry, 1982:7). Good examples of closed questions are 'Where were you born?' and 'Did you sell your house?' An example of open-ended question is "What did you do on your trip?"

Long and Sato as quoted by Chaudron, 1988:127) explored on "display" and "referential" questions. "Display" questions ask for information already known to the teacher, while "referential" questions

information unknown to the teacher.

Functions of Teachers' Questions

Questions have specific function of maintaining interaction : comprehension checks, confirmation checks, clarification requests (Long and Sato as quoted by Allwright, 1991:141). *Comprehension check* is the speaker's query of the interlocutors to see if they have understood what was said for example 'Do you understand?' or 'Do you get what I am saying?' *Confirmation check* is the speaker's query as to whether or not the speaker's (expressed) understanding of the interlocutor's meaning is correct for instance 'Oh, so you are saying that the paintings are beautiful?' *Clarification check* is a request for further information or help in understanding something the interlocutor has previously said, such as 'I don't understand exactly. What do you mean?'

Question Levels

To develop thinking abilities of the students, teachers' questions should be distributed in the levels which are required. Barret Taxonomy of questions in reading comprehension (Sunggingwati, 2001:51) suggests that there are four levels of questions. The first one is *literal recognition (recall)* which consists of recall of details, recall of main ideas, recall of sequence, recall of comparisons, recall of cause-effect relationship, and recall of character traits. Next is *inference* (synthesis) covering inferring main ideas, inferring sequence, inferring comparisons, inferring cause-effect relationship, predicting outcomes, inferring about figurative language. Thirdly, *evaluation level* comprises judgements of reality or fantasy, fact or opinion, adequacy or vitality, judgements of appropriateness, judgements of worth, desirability, or acceptability. The last one is *appreciation* that is awareness of literary techniques, forms, styles and structures.

Teachers' Strategies in Giving Questions

The previous studies on the modifications of teacher's questions suggest that there are four kinds of modifications made by the teacher.

(Chaudron, 1988:128). The first one is *repeating* or *rephrasing*, that is stating or saying again the unanswered questions, either by using the same form of questions or by modified form. The second is "*narrowing*" by *providing a clue* to the students. To mention one of the examples is "What do you understand about cloning? [pause] It is related to Biology."

The third strategy used by teachers in distributing questions is by *rephrasing with alternative* or "*or-choice*" questions. An example of this strategy is "What would you like to drink? [pause] Would you like coffee, tea, or beer?" The last strategy ever investigated is by *providing "wait-time"*. Wait time is the amount of time the teacher pauses after a question, before pursuing the answer with further questions or nomination of another student.

METHOD

This study concerns teacher's questions as a part of teacher's talk in the classroom. Therefore, *discourse analysis* was applied to understand the phenomenon observed. More specifically, *conversational analysis* as one part of discourse analysis was applied to approach and interpret the existing data. Since the conversation studied occurred in a social context that was in two classes of MAN Malang III, the researcher also applied *ethnographic study*.

This research was carried out by applying mixing methods between qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach is applied to support the quantitative approach. The qualitative approach was useful in interpretation and clarification of the quantitative data related to the type, function of the questions, and question levels as well as the strategies applied by the teacher.

The way to collect data was mainly *observation*. It was non participant observation. Data used in this study was the oral communication which covered all teachers' questions in the classrooms in which reading was taught at MAN Malang III. The observation was performed twice in grade II and III during Reading courses. The topic discussed in Grade II was 'Sports' and in Grade III was 'Farming Tools'. A tape recorder was operated to record students' and the teacher's speeches. Besides, field-notes completed with observation format were also used. Upon completing each session, the transcript of the tape

combined with the notes, comments and memos in the field notes taken during the observation were analyzed and tabulated.

FINDINGS

Types of Questions

The teacher's questions were analyzed in terms of open/closed questions and display/referential questions. The following table shows the distribution of the questions.

Table 1. Types of the Teacher's Questions

Types of Questions	Open (O)		Closed (C)		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Display (D)	18	14 %	71	56 %	89	70 %
Referential	8	6 %	30	24 %	38	30 %
Total	26	20 %	101	80 %	127	100 %

The table shows that closed questions (C) took place more frequently than open questions (O). The closed questions comprise 80% of all questions, 56 % of them are display questions (D) and 24% are referential questions (R). Closed questions dominate teacher's questions. The examples are "How many questions are there?" (3.23), "What is 'fertile'?" (3.25), and "My brother *artinya apa?*" (2.8). All the questions needed only monosyllable answer from the students, and since the kind of questions was the largest in proportion to other questions, the students' participation was very little.

Open questions that encourage students to talk longer is significantly fewer than the closed ones. Data 3.56 show the open question, "*Bagaimana dengan tempatmu, Bariyah?*" This question was the continuation of the previous questions stated in English which asked the students about the efficiency of a hoe and a tractor as farming tools in one place and in the other places. Since the students did not respond well, the teacher repeated the last question in *Bahasa Indonesia*. Here, the teacher invited the students to tell the fact in her surroundings which needed her opinion and argument which were supposed to longer. However, the number of this kind of question is small.

Likewise, display questions are more than twice as much as referential ones, 70 % compared to 30 % occurrences. "Which sentence supports your answer?" (3.40), and "Who is Fred?" (2.9) are the examples of display questions in which the teacher has known the answer that relates directly to the text.

Meanwhile, referential questions found in the data asked phenomenon outside the text. In the following instances "Is he better now?" (3.2), and "Do you help your parents?" (3.13), the teacher asked the facts that she does not know. Through these kinds of questions, students were actually encouraged to 'create' various answers without being afraid to be accused of making up the answer since they knew that the teacher did not know the reality, and they were free to supply the response they wanted. Since the number of the questions was not large, and moreover most of them were closed questions that just needed brief answers, the students responded the questions briefly and talked a little.

Functions of the Teacher's Questions

The following table presents the functions of the teacher's questions.

Table 2. Functions of the Teacher's Questions

Type Functions	OD	OR	CD	CR	Total	Percentage
Comprehension Checks	14	1	58	1	74	58.3 %
Confirmation Checks	1	5	7	23	36	28.3 %
Clarification checks	3	2	6	6	17	13.4 %
Total	18	8	71	30	127	100 %
Percentage	18%	6 %	56 %	24 %	100%	

As shown in the table above the distribution of functions of the teacher's questions is not equal. Comprehension checks occurred with substantial frequency (58.3%), most of which were closed-display questions. "What does the word 'cultivate' mean?" (3.28), "Which one is right?" (3.73), and "What is the third form of wear?" (2.15) are the examples of questions which are used to check students' understanding to

the given information. All of them just needed short answer from the students.

Clarification checks presupposing a positive answer from the listeners occurred 36 times or 28.3% of all occurrences. In teacher's question such as, "How are you this morning?" the teacher presumed that the students were all right so that they could go to school, and she wanted to get a confirmation from the students. Likewise, the following data are also confirmation checks. "Did you study last night?" (S10: Yes:) "What about the others?" Here, the teacher's first question was answered positively by S10, then she needed to get the same answer from other students as a confirmation.

The last function of question is clarification check. Clarification check here is the least frequent in the teacher's questions (13.4%). In "Jadi, apa jawabannya tadi?" (3.51), "Is that right, can you read it again?" (3.70), (SS: Short) "Long or short?" (2.16) and "Apa asal katanya?" (SS: xxx) "What?" 2.59), the teacher wanted to make the students' talk clearer to her ears and make the students more sure with what they had said.

Question Levels

Barret taxonomy that is used to analyze the levels of questions is best suited for the questions related to a reading text. In this study, there are 22 questions which are not directly related to the reading texts, and therefore, not analyzed. The following table shows the result of the analysis of the related questions.

Table 3. Question Levels

Question Levels	Number	Percentage
Recognition	41	39 %
Inference	34	32 %
Evaluation	30	29 %
Appreciation	-	-
Total	105	100 %

The distribution of the levels of the teacher's questions is almost equal. Recognition questions, as the lowest level, are the most frequent

ones (39 %), followed by inference questions (32 %), and evaluation is the least in number (29 %). Appreciation question cannot be found in the teacher's questions. None of the questions asks literary aspects since no literary items contained in the reading text.

The Teacher's Strategies in Giving Questions

The teacher's questions sometimes were not answered directly by the students. Many factors could be attributed to this. The questions lacking of clarity, and contained too many difficult words could be the sources. Besides, the students' lack of knowledge and courage could also be the other causes. Therefore, the teacher applied techniques to help students answer the questions correctly.

In this study, there were 37 questions which could not be answered directly by the students. The teacher then applied strategies to help the students. The following table shows the distribution of the strategies employed by the teacher.

Table 4: The Teacher's Strategies in Giving Questions

Strategies	Number	Percentage
Repeating/rephrasing	15	41 %
Narrowing by giving a clue	12	32 %
Giving alternative	6	16 %
Providing wait time	4	11 %
Total	37	100 %

As table 4 shows the most frequent strategy applied by the teacher was repeating or rephrasing (41 %). This strategy was sometimes used by the teacher by uttering the questions in the same way, "What is unhappy? What is unhappy?" (2.52), by saying the questions in different way, "Do you feel hungry? You have had you breakfast, right?" (3.5), or by translating the questions into Bahasa Indonesia, "Which sentence supports your answer? *Kalimat mana yang mendukung jawabanmu?*" (3.40).

The next strategy used was narrowing the questions by giving a clue (32%). The followings are the examples of the strategy applied by the teacher. "What do you see on the top of the paper? What pictures are there?" (3.16). The teacher mentioned the word 'pictures' to help students focus their attention to the picture only, so that they could answer the

questions correctly. "Do you find difficult words in the questions? What is the meaning of 'fertile'?" (3.25). 'Fertile' was mentioned as a clue to the words that might be difficult.

Giving an alternative or 'or-choice' was another strategy found in the teacher's questions. When the students seemed doubtful in answering the questions, or the students did not know what to say, the teacher helped them by offering alternatives. "The second? The second or the third?" (3.42), "Bagaimana menurut Anda? Right or wrong?" (3.48), and "What about a hoe? A hoe is a modern or traditional tool?" (3.53), are examples of the strategies by providing alternatives.

The least number of the strategies employed by the teacher was that by providing "wait time". It was only 11 %. The teacher gave a question, and then offered some amount of time for the students to think about the question. At the moment she knew that the students were ready with the answer, she pointed certain students or repeated the question and let the students raise the hands. The examples are "Who can answer? (pause) What do you think, Yuni?" (3.33), and "'Cry', what is the synonym? (pause) What do you think the synonym of 'cry'?" (2.56).

DISCUSSION

The data show that the distribution of types of questions prevents the students from talking extensively. Open questions that invited the students to think aloud, to generate new sequences of thought, and to explore implications were significantly fewer than the closed ones. Correspondingly, display questions took place more than twice as much as referential ones. Besides, most of the teacher's questions functioned as a way of checking pupils' specific recall of facts. As the result, the students' participation was very little.

In asking questions, a teacher assumes that a student or students will give a response. If, however, the students are used to living in a school and social system where a pupil's talk is not encouraged and where a pupil's response is characteristically limited to brief, monosyllable word, then it will be difficult to use questions as an effective teaching aid. Consequently, the first priority is to encourage students to talk more.

The teacher needs to set the atmosphere for classroom talk. More opportunities need to be provided for the students to give response.

During the classroom discussion, the teacher should create casual conversation that can break the ice so that the students are more anxious to respond to questions and the idea of talking to and with the teacher will be more familiar. If responses are handled skillfully, the students will continue to offer ideas.

I will take an example from the data where the teacher could encourage the students to think aloud.

T : Good, who has rice fields? Do you have rice fields, Heny?

Ss : Yes, my father has.

T : Those who have rice fields, do you help your parents?

Ss : Yes ...

Ss : Sometimes, yes....

T : Okay, students. Now we start reading the passage. Any one wants to read.

It appears in the data that after asking the students whether the students helped their parents in the rice fields, the teacher changed the ground of the speech immediately by gearing the students to read the passage. In so doing, the teacher had lost invaluable time which could be used to generate more students' responses. The teacher should not have changed the topic so abruptly. The teacher should have given opportunities for the students who help their parents to tell how they help the parents.

Furthermore, since the school was not situated in the location closed to rice fields, the number of the students who could offer responses was possibly small. This fact should not have hindered the teacher from developing a more live conversation either. The teacher could have invited the students to imagine about what they would have done if they had had rice fields. In so doing, the teacher could have motivated the students to generate new sequences of thought through their imagination.

Questioning effectively is a skill which does require much thinking and experience. Therefore, it needs adequate preparation and forethought. A less experienced questioner needs to train himself to use both verbal and non verbal cues to motivate the students to participate in a classroom talk. The teacher needs to have a skill of choosing good questions that can enhance live discussion. The teacher needs to exercise herself on how to distribute the questions around the class, so that not only bright, high

motivated students who are eager to join the discussion, but also shy, and previously reserved students. All of these need training and habit formation which, can be done by every one who is motivated to make improvements.

CLOSING REMARK

The finding of the current study in which more closed questions than open ended ones and more display than referential questions are revealed come into view. Besides, most of the teacher's questions were to check students' comprehension and to recall facts. Very few of them involved the students' ability to give inferences and judgement. Moreover, four strategies were applied by the teacher to help the students reply previously unanswered questions. The largest proportion was on repeating/rephrasing strategy.

To develop more effective questioning activities, the teacher needs to engage in a training on how to offer questions effectively. Relevant books and programs should be provided by relevant institutions so that teachers in our society can participate in order to develop their quality, especially in using questions as effective teaching tools.

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