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## Questions in English Language Classrooms

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### Abstract

This paper aims to account for how teachers can use questions effectively and how questions can be used to extend students' interaction, as well as promote second language learning. It first presents the characteristics of second language classroom interaction and questions posed by teachers in language classrooms. After introducing the forms of questions and the distinction of the two categories of teacher questions, 'closed'/'open' or 'display'/'referential' questions, the functions of questions are also explicated. Then how wait time alters classroom discourse is also discussed. Practically, this paper can assist not only second language teachers, but also educators to facilitate students' second language development.

**Keywords:** Classroom Interaction, Display Questions, Referential Questions, Closed Questions, Open Questions, Wait Time

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## **Introduction**

No teacher can teach without asking questions. Moreover, much of teacher talk involves teacher questioning, no matter what approach teachers use, the traditional transmission or the communicative language teaching approach. Asking the right question can facilitate students' learning. It becomes apparent that questions play a very important role in maximising student interaction, constructing a facilitative environment for language learning (Faruji, 2011), and providing students with opportunities to use second language to negotiate meaning. The type of questions posed by teachers can construct or obstruct learner involvement that leads to second language acquisition (SLA).

This paper explores the issue of teacher questions in the English language classrooms by looking at the strategies and effectiveness of questions, second language classroom interaction and questions in language classrooms. Then the forms, classification, and functions of questions are examined. Finally, the benefits of wait time and the application of teacher questions are also included.

## **Strategies and effectiveness of questions**

Teaching can be defined as “the art of asking questions” (Hastings, 2006: 67), since questions have direct impact on students' learning and the development of their thinking. Questions are considered to be one of teachers' pedagogical devices. They are a multipurpose teaching tool for teachers, as teachers can use questions to manage classroom routines, promote comprehension, stimulate critical thinking, and check understanding (Nunan and Lamb, 1996, Chaudon, 1988). Furthermore, questioning is a common strategy used by teachers to transfer knowledge, elicit students' responses and evaluate students' progress. Brock (1986: 47) stated that “questions may be a crucial input feature fostering development of second language abilities”. As questions consume about one third of all teaching time, well-crafted questions can generate discussion, lead to new insight and foster student achievement. On the other hand, poorly constructed questions can create confusion, limit students' creative thinking and intimidate students. When teachers ask good questions, the lesson tends to be interactive and enjoyable (Hastings, 2006). This makes questions become predominant.

## **Second Language Classroom Interaction**

Communication in the second language classroom is not the same as other kinds of talk because of the different circumstances. Teachers always control predominantly the pattern of classroom

communication by using language. Teachers not only control the topic of discussion, decide who will respond and participate, but also determine the structure of classroom communication (Johnson, 1995). As Johnson (1995: 9) observed that teachers “retain this control through a question-answer mode of interaction”. The sequence of exchange in the classroom is teachers ask a question (I: initiation), the students respond (R: response) and teachers give feedback to students’ responses (F: feedback) (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) or evaluate the students’ response (E) (Mehan, 1979). The following extract shows the pattern of classroom communication:

Extract 1

- |   |    |   |
|---|----|---|
| 1 | T  | Yuko, where is the printer? (Point to the printer.) |
| 2 | L6 | Behind,... beside me.                               |
| 3 | T  | Beside you? OK. Or (Point to the desk.)             |
| 4 | L6 | On the desk.  |
| 5 | T  | On the desk. OK. On the desk.                       |

This extract clearly shows the IRF/IRE sequence. In turn 1, the teacher gave Yuko the responsibility to answer his question and then Yuko gave her answer, although her first response was not right, but finally she corrected her own mistake, since the teacher showed her the mistake by using rising intonation in turn 3. In turn 3, the teacher not only evaluated Yuko’s response, but also accepted and forced Yuko to rethink by saying, “Or”. After the teacher’s cue, Yuko changed her response, and the teacher ended the exchange by repeating Yuko’s response to emphasise the correctness of her answer. The extract 1 illustrates that the teacher uses a question to shape the students’ SLA and students demonstrate what they have learned by responding. However, Wells (1999) and Nassaji and Wells (2000) point out that the teacher is able to extend students’ interaction, promote students’ participation and engagement, and provide students with more learning opportunities by choosing a variety of options rather than evaluation.

In language classrooms, the sequence of exchange IRF/IRE (initiation, response and feedback or evaluation) is typically found. Additionally, this sequence of exchange is not authentic and does not reflect genuine communication (Seedhouse, 2004; Course, 2014). During the initiation and feedback or evaluation moves, questions have an important role, since teachers use questions as a tool to control the

content of a lesson, the topic of conversation as well as the discourse (Walsh, 2006), to offer interactional space to learner, and to elicit and shape students' responses. Therefore, the types of questions that teachers use influence on the production of target language. However, the type of questions that teachers use depends upon their pedagogical goals and the content of a lesson.

According to the previous study, the amount of students' participation depends upon a teacher's choice of questioning (Wintergest 1993 cited Walsh, 2006). Open questions are influential in the length and complexity of students' responses. Referential questions provide learners more opportunities to use language for communication, and the interaction in the classroom is less controlled (Brock, 1986). Students are less engaged in meaningful interaction and not well prepared for language interaction outside the classroom, when teachers use display questions. Therefore, learning opportunities are able to be minimised or maximised by the use of teachers' questions. In language classrooms, questions are one of the tools that teachers can utilise to create interaction, since interaction is one of the most vital factors of language learning. Through questions, meanings are negotiated, not only between teachers and students, but also students and students.

Although, the structure of classroom communication is IRF/IRE, the incorrect responses from students can be ignored or followed by the second initiation. Therefore, the IRF/IRE interaction sequence is altered, and it is the teachers' responsibility to shape and provide the students opportunities to use language during second language instruction and give the right responses within the established structure (Johnson, 1995). The responses from students are not only from the teachers' questions, but also from the teachers' reformulation of their initiations, elicitation, reaction and evaluation from the teachers in the initiation and evaluation exchange. Cazden (1988 cited Johnson, 1995: 22) stated that "we cannot assume that there is a one-to-one relationship between the teacher questions and student answers as evidence of student learning".

### **Questions in the classroom**

Questions mean "command or interrogative expression used to elicit information or a response, or to test knowledge" (Longman, 1991: 1316). From this definition, all questions are not necessary interrogatives (Please tell me what time it is.), and all interrogatives are not necessary to function as questions (How are you?: Greeting). Questions that are used in the classroom are different from the

questions that are used in many situations outside the classroom as in the genuine communication people do not ask questions that they already know the answers, except in some situations, such as making jokes and quizzing (Lynch, 1991). In the classroom setting, a question is the tool that the teachers deploy to elicit oral responses from students, facilitate students' language use and engage students in the interaction. Teachers use questions for many reasons, such as to find out what the students have learned, to check students' understanding, to stimulate students' thinking, and to diagnose student learning difficulties. Questions are also used to give students' knowledge and opportunities to use the target language in the classroom, to manage the class and to revise a lesson. Questions are considered to be "an important input and process variable for language acquisition to take place" (Lee, 2006: 692). Questioning is the mean that the teachers use to stimulate interaction in the classroom. Closed and open questions are normally the two interaction patterns that are taking place in the classroom. The features of teacher talk consists of the use of questions, and language teachers exploit questions to accomplish their pedagogic goals and carry out social actions, for instance, teaching and explaining topics, contents, as well as concepts.

For second language learners, the process of answering questions in English is quite complex, as they have to listen to the question, understand what is being asked for, answer to self, answer out loud, and rethink and revise the answer (Walsh and Sattes, 2005: 78). It becomes clear that in order to answer one question students need not only time, but also their knowledge of English. If students are second language learners, they have to translate their responses from their first language into the second language.

### **Forms of questions**

There are different forms of questions in English which include the following:

1. Yes/no questions are questions which are answered in the positive or negative.

Do you know anything about him? Yes, I do./ No, I don't.

2. Questions with interrogative words are the question that begins with question words (what, where, when, who, whose, which, how, how long, how many). The answer of this type of question cannot only be a certain piece of information or a limited set of answers, but also seek an open range of replies.

Where did you graduate from? (The answer is limited.)

Why do Thai people celebrate Songkran Festival? (The answer is more than one possible answer.)

3. Alternative questions are questions that include two or more choices of answers in the question.

Are these mangoes sweet or sour?

4. Intonated questions are questions that are formed from statements by using rising intonation. This type of question is the same as yes-no questions.

You are sure?

Tomorrow is a holiday?

5. Indirect questions are polite, and they are formed by a polite phrase, wh- question word or if/whether and a statement

Do you know whether/if John is coming tonight?

Can you tell me what Jennifer majors in?

In language classrooms, the complexity of answers depends upon the form of questions posed by teachers. Some forms of questions elicit rigid, simple and short responses. In terms of language learning more syntactic complicated responses are more desirable. The quality of language output and the possibility of negotiation of meaning are promoted by questions.

### **Classification of questions**

There are numerous categories of questions. The followings are stances of question classification.

#### **Closed and open questions**

Closed questions can be answered with either single word or a short phrase because they have only one correct answer. Consequently, they are easy and quick to answer. Students activate their low order thinking in order to answer this type of question. Additionally, teachers use closed questions to elicit factual information which have pre-determined answers (Myhill and Warren, 2005). Open questions begin with 'Why, 'How' or 'Describe'. They have more than one correct answers and elicit more complex and longer answers. This type of questions also stimulates students to give their opinion and feelings. Open questions give the students opportunities to express ideas, draw inferences, think,

reflect and analyse more before sharing their opinions. The examples of these types of questions are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Examples of closed and open question

Closed questions	Open questions
Do you like ice cream?	Why do you like ice cream?
Did you have lunch at the university?	What are the benefits of having lunch at the university?
What is your favourite colour?	Why do you like 'pink'?

It can be seen from the examples in Table 1 that open questions are able to elicit more language output from students and promote SLA. The interaction space provided by the questions the teacher posed can be seen in the extract below.

Extract 2<sup>1</sup>

- 1 A<sup>2</sup>: How wa:s your trip in (sic) Chiang Mai?
- 2 T: a: bi:  
(Ah, B.)
- 3 B<sup>3</sup>: It wa:s ve:ry impre:ssive.
- 4 T: a: (.) e:<sup>4</sup>  
(Ah, A.)
- 5 A: How long did you<sup>0</sup> stay there<sup>0</sup>? ((Students mispronounces the word 'stay'  
(/steə/).))
- 6 T: stay there
- 7 A: stay there
- 8 B: I stayed in Chiang Mai one week.
- 9 T: a: e: phu:t<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for transcription conventions

<sup>2</sup> Students in group A.

<sup>3</sup> Students in group B

<sup>4</sup> Data in Thai were translated into English by the author, and then validated by a lecturer from the Foreign Languages Department at the university.

<sup>5</sup> The IPA transcription of Thai consonant sounds.

- (Ah, A, speak.)
- 10 A: What wa:s the wea:ther like?
- 11 B: I was=
- 12 S1: =IT ((One student in group B shouts out loud.))
- 13 T: ha:
- (What?)
- 14 S1: it was
- 15 T: tɕ<sup>h</sup>aːj̃ (.) aw maj aw maj (.) bi: phuːt maj
- (Right. Again. Again. B, say it again.)
- 16 B: It wa:s cool.
- 17 T: aː e: phuːt
- (Ah, A, speak.)
- 18 A: What was it about Chiang Mai (.) that (.) was impressive for (sic) you?
- 19 B: The most impressive (.)<sup>0</sup> thing<sup>0</sup> (.)
- 20 SS: <sup>0</sup>thing<sup>0</sup> (2.0) ((Some students in group B say this word.))
- 21 T: àraj thing àraj
- (What? Thing what?)
- 22 S2: <sup>0</sup>were<sup>0</sup> ((One student in group A says this word. He mispronounces it (/weə/).))
- 23 S3: were ((Another student in group A says this word.))
- 24 S4: <sup>0</sup>were<sup>0</sup> ((One student in group B says this words.))
- 25 SS: <sup>0</sup>were the<sup>0</sup> ((Some students in group B say these words.))
- 26 S5: BEAUTIFUL ((One student in group B says this word.))
- 27 T: aw maj lɔːj̃ taŋ tɛː rɛːk lɔːj̃ bi: aw maj (3.0)
- (Again. Start from the beginning. B, say it again)
- 28 S6: <sup>0</sup>the most<sup>0</sup> (.) ((One student in group B says these words.))
- 29 T: the most àraj
- (What?)



- 30 B: <sup>0</sup> the most impressive thing <sup>0</sup> (2.0) ((Not all students in group B say this phrase.))
- 31 T: e: phu:t daj maj ni:a (.)  
(A, do you know how to say this sentence?)
- 32 S6: daj k<sup>h</sup>rap ((One student in group A replies.))  
(I know.)
- 33 T: e: lo:ŋ a:n haj bi: faŋ si  
(A, can you read this sentence to B?)
- 34 A: The most impressive things were the beautiful flowers and fresh air.
- 35 T: a: bi: phu:t ta:m e:  
(Ah, B, repeat after A.)
- 36 B: The most impressive things (.) were the (.) beautiful (.) flowers (.) and fresh (.)
- 37 T: fresh air (.) air t<sup>h</sup>i:ple: wa: a:ka:t  
(Air means a.'ka.'t. (The translation of the word 'air'.))

From Naruemon (2013: 169 – 170)

This extract shows that the teacher tries to control the lesson as she has planned it. The teacher is always the person who nominates who should speak (Mercer and Dawes, 2008), so no student can speak if the teacher does not ask or allow. However, in Lines 10-14, 22-25 and 31-36 in Extract 2, questions assist students to learn from and teach each other. In addition, they had opportunities to learn how to pronounce a dialogue in English by pronouncing it (Naruemon, 2013).

The distinctions of closed and open questions are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2** The distinctions of closed and open questions

Closed question	Open question
1. There is only one correct answer.	1. There is more than one possible answer.
2. It is used to motivate low ordered thinking such as knowledge, comprehension and application. It requires low cognitive skills	2. It is used to motivate high ordered thinking, namely analysis, synthesis and evaluation. It requires high cognitive skills such as reasoning

Table 2 (Cont.)

Closed question	Open question
such as the recall of facts.	. and judgement.
3. The answers are less syntactic complicated.	3. The answers are more syntactic complicated.
4. The use of English in the classroom is limited.	4. It provides more opportunities for students to practice using English.

### Display and referential questions

Display questions (convergent or closed question) are the questions to which teachers already know the answers, so this type of questions is used to ask students to display their knowledge. Thus, they are asked to check whether the students know the answer. Referential questions (divergent or open question) are questions that teachers do not know the answer. Consequently, the students need to give teachers some information (Tsui, 1995). Referential questions are considered helpful in creating more interactions between the teacher and the students (Tsui, 2001). In addition, they can be used to generate more syntactic complicated responses. The examples of these two types of questions are below:

#### Display questions

What is a synonym for ‘purchase’?

Who launched Facebook?

#### Referential questions

What other advantages do you think you would have, if you are well educated?

What is your talent?

Why do you like to read books?

What are your suggestions for getting a good grade in English?

In language classrooms, most questions posed by language teachers are display questions while most questions in authentic communication are referential (Course, 2014). It is evident that referential questions enhance negotiation of meaning, student output and SLA (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1987). Ho (2005: 299) also concludes that referential questions “are not factual or text-embedded but those that invite students to draw answers from their own experiences and viewpoints. This would mean longer, more communicative responses similar to genuine communication.”

When teachers use referential questions, teachers not only help students to learn more, but also stimulate their thinking. Additionally, students' participation is extended. The distinction between closed or display and open or referential questions is provided in Table 3.

**Table 3** A two-level description of question types

Categories of teacher question	Description
Closed or Display	Questions which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ask for answers the teacher already knows</li><li>• prompt short, simple responses</li><li>• often require limited, sometimes one word answers</li><li>• allow students to display knowledge acquired within the classroom</li></ul>
Open or Referential	Questions which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are purely exploratory</li><li>• ask for answers which the teacher genuinely wants to know</li><li>• have no right or wrong answers</li><li>• promote interaction resembling a non-classroom setting</li><li>• stimulates complex and lengthy language output from students</li></ul>

From: (Ho, 2005: 299)

However, Smith and Higgins (2006: 485) argued that the manner that teachers react to students' responses to questions is more important than the questions posed by teachers.

### Functions of questions

Albeit the definition of questions is “command or interrogative expression used to elicit information or a response, or to test knowledge” (Longman, 1991: 1316), questions can be exploited to perform a number of different functions, “purpose for which an utterance or unit of language is used” (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992: 148). In English, the relationship between forms and functions is not one-to-one. The possible functions of questions can be presented in Table 4.


**Table 4** Functions of questions

No	Question	Function
1	Would you like a cup of tea?	Offer
2	After reading my paper, could you give me some comments?	Request
3	Can I leave the room now?	Asking for permission
4	Can you play the piano?	Asking about ability
5	Would you like to come to my birthday party tonight	Invitation
6	Why don't you try to drink a lot of warm water? May I make a suggestion?	Suggestion
7	Do you know where the post office is?	Asking for direction
8	What do you mean?	Asking for clarification
9	What a surprise!	Exclamation
10	Can I have a return ticket to London?	Making a booking
11	Can I have lasagne, please?	Ordering food
12	How are you?	Greeting
13	How do you do?	Knowing someone for the first time
14	May I introduce myself?	Introducing yourself

### Wait time

Teachers can maximise students' learning, engagement, and achievement by giving students enough time to formulate responses. "The amount of time the teacher allows to elapse after he/she has posed a question and before a student begins to speak" is called 'wait time' (Cotton, 2003). According to Cotton (2003), the benefits of increasing wait time beyond three seconds are as follows:

- increasing in the length of the students' response
- increasing in the quality of the students' responses
- increasing more unsolicited responses
- increasing student-student interaction
- increasing the variety of students' responses

- minimising students' failure to respond

### Practical applications

The English language teachers have to realise the importance of questions since students' learning opportunities can be facilitated through answering questions. Questions also have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the teaching/learning process. Teachers can provide their students more interactional space by giving pauses or increasing wait time and shaping students' contribution by scaffolding or clarifying during the feedback move. Moreover, the language in the classroom has two roles, the medium and the goal of instruction. Input, output, interaction, and negotiation of meaning are vital to the process of SLA and created by the teachers' use of questions.

The use of a display question is unavoidable, but mixing it with the other types of questions is able to maximise the use of language which enhances the language learning in the classroom. Teachers are able to create a lot of support for students' comprehension and students' participation in the language lesson by using questions (Hall and Verplaetse, 2000). The effective use of teachers' questions assists students in completing tasks, correcting students' errors, creating involvement and scaffolding second learning. Balancing the two types of questions can help make a lesson more interesting and challenging, mediate the learning opportunities together with extending students' answers.

### Conclusion

This paper is devoted to the role of questions used by teachers in facilitating students' SLA. Strategies and effectiveness of questions, the sequence of exchange in language classrooms, and questions in the classroom are provided. Both the forms of questions and the functions of questions are then introduced. The distinction between display questions and referential questions is presented to illustrate how each category of questions fosters student's learning and sharpens their thinking. The final section of this paper deals with wait time and the guidelines for practical applications.

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### Appendix 1: Transcription Conventions

T	teacher
Ss	several students at once or the whole class
S	student (not identified)
S1	identified student
[ ]	overlapping utterances – (beginning [ ] and (ending ])
=	turn latching: one turn follows another without any pause
(0.4/4.0)	silence; length given in microseconds or seconds
(.)	a micro-pause (1 tenth of a second or less)
::	sound extension of a word (more colons demonstrate longer stretches)
-	an abrupt stop in articulation
(xxxx)	unintelligible utterances
—	underlined letters or words indicate emphasis
↑ ↓	rising or falling intonation
0 0	surrounds talk that is quieter
T-E-M-P-L-E	spelling
(( ))	analyst's notes
→	illustrates the point made
\$ \$	surrounds a 'smiling' voice
DAY	capitals indicate increased volume

Modified from Atkinson and Heritage (1984)

### Thai transcription

p <sup>h</sup> a'.sǎ:	International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) with Phonemic tones
(Thai)	English translation

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