FREQUENCY OF QUESTIONS IN AN EFL CONVERSATION CLASS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was conducted to investigate the types and the purposes of questions used by the teacher in an EFL conversation class. The subject of this study was the English teacher at SMA Lab School Banda Aceh who taught the second graders of XI classes; XIp1, XIp2, XIp3, XIs. Observation form, a set of interview questions and field note were used as the instruments. The questions posed by the teacher in the classroom were then categorized and described in accordance with Brown's theory (2001) on the two types of questions: display and referential questions. Data from interview were coded in relation to the purpose of asking each question type. The findings showed that apart from Brown's types of questions, three additional question types were also found. Therefore, a total of five types of question were found viz: display, referential, comprehension check, confirmation check and procedural question. The data from the observations showed that the teacher used more display questions than referential questions. From a total of 259 questions posed by the teacher in the classroom, 120 were display questions (46%), 101 were referential (39%), 17 comprehension checks (6.5%), and 20 procedural questions (8%). Only one confirmation check question (0.4%) was found during the teaching-learning processes. Furthermore, the data from interview exposed the purposes of the teacher asking these questionsviz: to encourage the participation of students in the lesson, to get feedback from them, to encourage them to think and focus, to create a good classroom atmosphere, to stimulate and maintain their interest, and to emphasize certain points in the lesson.

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INTRODUCTION

English Language or *Bahasa Inggeris* is one of the subjects taught in senior high schools in Indonesia. To improve the academic performance of high school students and enhance their communicative competence, language teaching methods play a significant role in an English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. One of the aspects that are dealt with in teaching methods is classroom management which also involves classroom interactions.

Both teachers and students need to be active to create good interactions. Brock (1986) as quoted in Shomoossi (2004) says that an increase in the amount of classroom interaction will help EFL students learn the target language more easily and quickly. She believes that increasing language output will improve language learning. Besides, Razzaghi in Razzaghi and Yaqubi (2012) has said that classroom interaction is usually dominated by questions and answers. Questions provide practice and feedback essential for development of material.

If we take a look at English teaching practices in Acehs' senior high schools today, we can see multifaceted and deep rooted problems. A study by Makhsum (2016) in an EFL classroom confirm that lack of questioning modifications or strategies used by the teacher in the classroom is one of the obstacles to develop an interactive environment and to reach learning language goals. Language teachers who are well aware of interaction skills can motivate their students to ask questions and to provide responses. Richards and Lockhart (1994) have stated that students' language proficiency can be improved through better interactions between the teacher and her students and between the students themselves.

In many EFL classrooms, the teacher talks much of the time. Delamount (1983) as cited in Azerefegn (2008) claims that teachers spend about 50 percent of their teaching time lecturing, questioning students and concentrating on the academic lesson. This is one of the inadequacies in any kind of oral learning work that shares time and prevents students from having time to ask questions and give responses. Most scholars agree on the importance of questions to alleviate some of these problems. Chaudron (1988, p. 126) has stated that "teacher

questions constitute a primary means of engaging learners' attention, promoting responses and evaluating the progress of learners".

Taking this into the context of teaching EFL in Indonesia, the national curriculum has emphasised the importance of encouraging students to think about the learning materials as well as to activate students' critical thinking. This study assumes that one of the ways to achieve this expectation is through teacher questions. Therefore, this study looks further at the types of questions posed by a teacher in an EFL classroom in relation to the encouragement of students' thinking and oral responses. In addition, the teacher should have some reasons to ask some types of questions. This is also investigated in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interaction

There are several definitions of interaction set out by experts. Ellis (1999) describes interaction as two phenomena, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Interpersonal is done, face to face, in interactions between people to negotiate meaning. This is when participants, who share similar needs, make efforts to understand each other through communication. Therefore, there is an occurrence of social behavior when one person communicates to another because there is at least the involvement of two persons in an interpersonal interaction. Besides that, intrapersonal interaction is a mental process. It is the interaction which occurs in one person's mind. These two types of interaction are closely related when a person is using and acquiring a language.

In a classroom, interaction is counted as an interpersonal phenomena because there are two or more people involved during a communication. Student-teacher or student-student interactions understand and negotiate meaning between each other.

According to River (1987, p. 4) interaction involves not just expression of one's own ideas but comprehension of those of others. One listens to others; one responds (directly or indirectly); others listen and respond. The participants work out interpretation of meaning through this interaction, which is always understood in a context, physical or experiential, with non-verbal cues adding aspects of meaning beyond the verbal.

Chaudron (1988) has claimed that interaction is viewed as a significant role because he says that: (1) Only through interaction can

the students learn to compose the target language structures and derive meaning from the classroom activities; (2) Interaction gives learners the opportunities to incorporate the target language structure into their own speech; (3) Whether the interaction works or not depends on the extent of communication which is happenig between the teacher and her students.

Brown (2001) has defined interaction as an activity between two or more people in order to exchange feelings, thoughts and/or ideas which will result in a feedback effect between them.

Teacher Questions

According to Banbrook (Banbrook & Shehan, 1989) cited in Brumfit & Mitchell (1989), teacher questions have a particularly important role. They can be used to allow learners to keep participating in the discourse and even to modify it so that the language use becomes more comprehensible and personally relevant. Besides, Dillon (1988) as cited in Shen (2012) asserts that teacher questioning plays a very important role to initiate classroom talk. It is self-evident that questions can stimulate students' motivation, focus their attention, help them learn and think better, and also help the teacher know how much her students have learnt.

Kinsella (1991) as cited in Brown (2001) elaborates that appropriate questions in an interactive classroom can fulfill a number of different functions. First, teacher questions give students the impetus and opportunity to produce language comfortably without having to risk initiating language themselves. Later, teacher question can serve to initiate a chain reaction among the students. Besides, teacher questions can often give the instructor immediate feedback about the comprehension of her students. After posing a question, a teacher can use the students' responses and decide what other specific information she needs to provide for her students. Lastly, teacher questions provides students with opportunities to find out what they think by hearing what others say.

Types and Classifications of Teacher Questions

There are many different ways to classify questions. Brown (2001) and also Shomoosi (2004) classify question into two broad categories, display questions and referential questions. Another classification is proposed by Richards and Lockhart (1994). They classify questions in terms of the purpose of the question in the classroom which includes

procedural questions. In addition, there are other classifications, viz: comprehension checks and confirmation checks proposed by Boulima (1999) as cited in Yanita (2015).

Display Questions

Brown (2001) categorizes teacher questions into display questions and referential questions. Display questions refer to questions for which the teacher knows the answers, this means that whenever the teacher asks such questions, he is sure that he knows the answer to the question. In line with this, Shomoossi (2004) also states that display question refer to those questions for which the teacher knows the answer beforehand. Furthermore, they often demand a single word or short response. Similarly, Dalton-Puffer (2007) also says that the answers to display question (contrary to referential questions) quite often are seen to consist of just one or a few words. Examples of display questions are: "What do we need to make one?", "Okay, what are they?", "What do you need after a WH question?", "*Is, are*. What do we call them?" and "What colors are in a rainbow?".

Referential Questions

Referential questions refer to questions for which the teacher does not know the answer; this means that the answer cannot be predicted by the teacher. This type of question demands more thought and generates longer responses. In addition, Shomoossi (2004) defines referential questions as those questions for which each question may require interpretation and judgment from the student. Dalton-Puffer (2007, p. 78) says that "referential questions are frequently seen as more 'natural' and are expected to generate student answers that are somehow qualitatively better, more authentic, more involved, longer, and more complex than answers to display questions". This means that referential questions provide opportunities for students to think critically to get an answer to the question. Examples of referential questions from the data of this study are: "What do you think about fake friends?","What kind of hobby do you love to do at home?", "What would you do if you were very, very rich?"

Procedural Questions

Richards and Lockhart (1994) define procedural questions as questions which are related to classroom procedures and routines, and

not to the content of the lesson. They have to do with classroom procedures, routines, and classroom management. They are used to ensure a smooth flow of the teaching process in the classroom (Qashoa, 2013). This means that procedural questions are designed to engage students in the content of the lesson to facilitate their comprehension and to promote classroom interactions, such as checking that all the assignments have been completed or whether the instructions for a task are clear, and/or whether the students are ready for the next task. Examples of procedural questions from the data from this study are: "Is five minutes enough to do it in?", "How long do you need?", "Okay, is 10 minutes enough for you to do it?", "Do you all understand what I want you to do?", "How much more time do you need?", "Have you all finished it? Is it done?", "Who wants to be a volunteer for the second number?".

Comprehension Check, Clarification Checks and Confirmation Checks

According to Allwright and Bailey (1991), a comprehension check is when the teacher asks her students if they understand the material that she has taught them. For example, "Do you understand that, now?", and "Is that clear?". Comprehension checka are used by a teacher as a strategy to check whether or not the material taught has been understood by the students (Boulima, 1999, cited in Yanita, 2015). Examples of comprehension checks are, "Ok, do you all understand that now?", "Ok, *Udah mengerti semua*?", "Ok, any questions?".

Equally important, a clarification check is done when a teacher asks for clarification of a students' previous utterance. For example, "Family or families?", "Dictionary or dictionaries?", "The teacher *apa* the teachers?"

A confirmation check is the repetition of what a student has just said by the teacher to ensure she has understood him. Confirmation checks are used by a teacher in the form of a repetition which is done when the teacher immediately repeats what the student has just said to make sure that what was said has been said correctly.

The Purposes of Questions

Many researchers have different views about the purposes of questions in the classroom. For example, Ma (2008) says that questions serve two purposes; these are to introduce students into a topic and to check or test the students' ability of understanding or practical skills in

the language. Furthermore, Richards and Lockhart (1994) explain there are several reasons why questions are so commonly used in teaching; they stimulate and maintain students' interest, they encourage students to think and to focus on the content of the lesson, they enable a teacher to clarify what a student has said, they enable a teacher to elicit particular structures of vocabulary items, they enable teachers to check students understanding, and they encourage students' participation in a lesson.

In short, Willen (1991) suggests that teachers ask questions in their classrooms generally to check students' understanding, to give students practice, and to find out what students really think or know.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative classroom research methods were selected by the researchers for this study. As Glesne (2006) has emphasized, qualitative research provides a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena. It is clear that qualitative research allows the subjects being studied to give 'richer' answers to questions put to them by the researchers, and to give valuable insights which might have been missed by another method. In addition, the researchers can discuss the classroom conversations by focusing on the types of teacher question, and the purposes of asking such questions.

Technique of Data Collection
Observations

Observations were done eight times. The types of questions used in the classroom interactions were observed here. During the process of data collection in the classroom, the researchers acted as non-participant observers by joining the class from the beginning until the end, and did not involve in any activity in order to prevent interruption in the interactions carried out by the teacher. Every teacher question and students' response was written down on an observation form. The classroom sessions were also video-recorded. The data from these observations was used to answer the first research question.

The instruments used for the observations were observation forms. The forms were used to note every interactional event that occured in the classroom. The data noted included the name of the class, the topic, the date, the time and the interactions that were observed, the questions used by the teacher, the students' responses, the students'

understanding and the dialogues from the interactions between the teacher and her students.

Larsen (1991) has noted that researchers can observe a language class using a data–collection device or instrument to record their observations e.g. using a recorder. A video-recorder is an important tool that was used to record all conversations during the instructional processes observed in this study. Glesne (2006) has said that video recordings can enhance observations and can provide dense permanent records. The authenticity of data is guaranteed by the use of a video recorder as a primary tool used for the observations. This enabled the writer to record every student-teacher interaction which was impossible to be captured in time on the observation forms.

Field notes were also used as instruments for the class-room observations. They are also an important instrument when gathering data. Glesne (2006) claims that field notes or field logs are the primary recording tool for qualitative research. They were filled with the descriptions of people, places, events, activities, and conversations and became a place for ideas, reflections and notes about patterns that seemed to be emerging. They also became a place for exploring the researchers's personal reactions.

Interviews

To get a clear understanding of the reasons why the teacher asked different types of questions, the researchers interviewed the teacher. The interviews were used to get additional information which was important for the researchers to complete the data and answer the second research question. The interviews were deemed essential for providing data for this study.

The interviews were organized using an interview guide which consisted of some questions and they were recorded using an audio recorder. The purposes of conducting the interviews were also to get additional personal information about the teacher and to understand several issues arising from the questioning activities.

Technique of Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging data. The analysis of the data from this research followed the concepts from Bogdan and Biklen (1992); transcribing the data, organizing it, categorizing it and deciding what it means in order to tell others.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Types of Questions Posed by The Teacher

Eight (8) english conversation sessions were observed and video recorded. Each session lasted for 45 minutes. From the recordings and the observation forms, five types of questions were presented, identified and classified. The 5 types were display, referential, comprehension check, confirmation check, and procedural questions.

In describing the findings re the question types, this study uses some codes: "E" refers to extraction, "T" is for the teacher, "S" is for a student, "Q" is for a question and "M" is for a meeting. The types of question are shown in the table that follows:

Table 1. Frequency of Questions

Meeting	Display Q	Comprehen-sion check	Confirma-tion check	Referential Q	Procedural Q
1	26	3	-	6	-
2	29	2	-	13	4
3	16	2	-	16	-
4	13	2	-	1	-
5	7	4	-	13	4
6	12	2	-	22	9
7	6	2	-	15	3
8	11	-	1	15	-
Totals	120 (46%)	17 (6.5%)	1(0.4%)	101(39%)	20 (8%)
Total sum	259				

The table shows that the teacher used more display question than referential questions. Out of a total of 259 questions, 120 (46%) were display questions, 101 (39%) were referential questions, 20 (8%) were procedural questions, 17 (6.5%) were comprehension checks and 1 was a confirmation check.

The Purpose of Asking Different Types of Questions

From the interview with the teacher, this study reveals the answer for the second research question concerning the reasons for and the importance of asking questions in the classroom. The results show that

the teacher's questions are essential to encourage the students to participate in the lesson, to get feedback from the students, to encourage the students to think and to focus, to create a good classroom atmosphere, to simulate and maintain student interest, and to emphasize certain points from the lesson.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

This study found two main types of questions suggested by Brown (2001); these were display and referential. In addition, this study also found three other question types, viz: comprehension checks, confirmation checks and procedural questions. From these five types, the display questions were the most common ones used by the teacher in her classsroom interactions.

The teacher believes that by asking a lot of questions, the students will become more motivated to speak during the instructional processes. Each question type has a different purpose. Display questions were used to discuss about grammar and contexts. Referential questions were used to ask about personal opinions, hobbies and future planning.

Generally, questions were used by the teacher to stimulate the students to be more active and to participate more in classroom interactions.

To encourage students to think critically about the learning materials, this study suggests that referential questions be used more in the classroom.

Suggestions

This study recommends that in conversation classes, like this, teachers should use referential questions more than display questions. Using referential questions is important for ice breaking during the opening as well as during the main learning activities. This study suggests that the use of various kinds of questions will trigger students to speak up more. Moreover, at senior high school level, teachers should not shorten the questions because it makes the students less creative and makes the classroom atmosphere less lively.

This study suggests that future researchers should investigate from the students' perspective whether the use of different types of questions will readily encourage them to speak up in the classroom. This is an area which was not covered by this study.

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