EFL TEACHERS’ PERCEPTION ON COMMUNICATIVE QUESTIONING IN SECONDARY AND PREPARATORY SCHOOLS IN ETHIOPIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT
This study intends to investigate EFL teachers’ perception and understanding of communicative questioning in English classroom in the context of Ethiopia. Using a mixed approach, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from twenty secondary and preparatory schools from Eastern Oromiya, Ethiopia. In general, 145 participants for survey questionnaire were selected randomly and among them ten of them participated in semi-structured interview. As per the schedule, the data were collected, tabulated and transcribed. Finally, it has been found that most EFL teachers have a clear understanding of the purpose of questing in language classroom. However, the data analysis of both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview revealed that there is misunderstanding on the question type used in the language classroom. Most teachers believed that they should know the answer of the question which they may ask their learner in their language classes. In other words, they prefer display types of question which is non communicative type where communicative language is implemented.

Keywords: Communicative Teacher Talk; Classroom Talk

INTRODUCTION
Asking questions is one of the most important aspect of teachers talk which enable to make the language learners active participant in teaching learning process. In other words, it helps to obtain ideas and responses from students. According to Darn (2008), asking questions is a natural feature of communication which has a number of benefits. A case in point is, it is crucial to the way teachers manage the class, engage students with content, encourage participation and increase understanding. Similarly, Tsui (1995:23) also notes, “questions are... a very important aspect of classroom talk”. Wood (1998:175) adds that “classroom talk is dominated by teacher questions”. Having these remarkable importances of questioning in EFL classroom, this study, therefore, aimed at investigating EFL teachers understanding communicative questioning in English classroom in Ethiopia context.

Teacher’s Questions
Asking question is one of the most important components of teacher talk. According to Richards and Lockhart (1996) questioning is one of the most common techniques used by teachers and serves as the principal way in which teachers control the classroom interaction. Teachers’ questions have attracted considerable attention from researchers of language classroom. In other words, the teacher questioning
is a fundamental and important means of classroom interaction. According to some study shows that teacher questions take up a very high percentage of teacher talk (Chaudron, 1988). Tsui explains how “studies on ESL classrooms have focused on the effect of teacher questions on learners’ productions of the target language and on the types of learner response.” (1995:14). In some classrooms over 50% of class time is taken up by question-and-answer exchanges (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Types of Teacher’s Questions

Most of the researches have used many different ways to classify teachers’ question on the basis of different view on the nature of the questions. They are classified into: (1) procedural questions recall/ process questions and closed/ open questions; (2) “Convergent” and “divergent”; (3) Display and referential questions; (4) and another taxonomy based on the cognitive level of classification are: higher and lower level questions. Furthermore, Tsui (1985) classified questions in terms of their eliciting functions into six subcategories: a) informing: inviting the addressee to supply a piece of information; b) confirming: inviting the addressee to confirm the speaker’s assumption; c) agreeing: inviting the addressee to agree with the speaker’s statement; d) committing: inviting the addressee to commit to further interaction; e) repeating: inviting the addressee to repeat the previous utterance(s) and f) clarifying: inviting the addressee to clarify the previous utterance(s). The review below will use these two categories: Open vs. Closed questions, Display vs. Referential questions, and Divergent Vs, Convergent questions

Open Vs. Closed Questions:

Questions are closed because there is only one existing answer. The closed questions are usually yes/no questions or either/or questions. Therefore a ‘closed’ question is apparently more restrictive in terms of students’ language output (Barnes 1969, as cited in Tsui 1995) while to open questions there is more than one answer. Open questions which ask for reason, explanation, description and opinion evoked linguistically and cognitively more complex student replies than questions for facts (Dalton-Puffer, 2006). So ‘Open-ended questions allow more insight into the way children think’ (Allerton1993: 47). In other words, they provide learners with more opportunities of interactions at advanced level of thinking and encourage learners to participate actively in their learning for producing more language output (Dalton-Puffer, 2006).

Display vs. Referential questions

Emphasizing on communication in language classrooms, some scholars such as Brock (1986); Long & Sato (1983); Pica & Long (1986) have further suggested two questioning techniques for the teacher in EFL classrooms: “referential” and “display”. The difference between these two types of questions is resembles to that between closed and open-ended questions. However, they differ in that display questions which the teacher knows the answer tend to be closed whereas referential questions which are the responses of the students are not known by the teacher are either open or closed ended (Long & Sato, 1983). According to Tsui, display questions “generate interactions that are typical of didactic discourse” whereas referential questions “generate interactions typical of social communication” (Tsui, 1995: 2).

The purpose of referential questions is mainly to seek information. It is used to foster students’ skills of providing further information, giving an opinion, explaining or clarifying (Ellis, 1994:587). In other words, teachers ask referential questions for the purposes genuine communicative rather than testing the students’ knowledge. In this regard, students’ response to referential questions are often more meaningful, longer and subjective (Brock 1986, and Tsui 1995). Moreover, Nunan (1989) added that a major characteristic of genuine communication is the occurrence of referential questions since such questions are important classroom tools to generate more target language use by the learners by increasing the amount of learner output and participation (Lynch, 1991:202). In general, referential questions are the types of communicative use of questions which encourages and enhance the learner to use the target language in foreign language classrooms.
“Display” questions; on the other hand, help to elicit learners’ prior knowledge that it focus on the form or meaning of language structures and items and the purpose is to know if the students understand the text and the words, and to enable them to display their knowledge (Long & Sato, 1983; Thornbury, 1996). This kind of question is asked for comprehension checks, confirmation check or clarification requests. However, it requires short or even one-word answers and hence are less likely to get learners to produce large amounts of speech (Long & Sato, 1983; Brock, 1986). Therefore, display questions “generate interactions that are typical of didactic discourse. (Tsui, 1995:2). Tsui also point out that teachers who often ask display or ‘closed questions’ are likely to restrict students output.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents an overview of the research methodology that has been employed by the researcher to conduct this study. The section contains an account of the procedures used in the study, including research design, selection and description of the participants, setting, instruments used for data collection, data analysis and trustworthiness of the study.

Research Design

Since the present study aims to respond to the research questions of qualitative and quantitative nature, data collection and analysis techniques from both methodologies were implemented, thus mixed-method approach was chosen as the methodology of this research. Mixed methods research may be defined as “the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research” (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003, p. 212). Thus, in this study, the mixed methodology helped explain the Ethiopian EFL teachers' understanding of communicative questioning behavior with the help of the semi-structured interview and survey questionnaire.

Instruments

Questionnaire

A researcher requires data-gathering tools, which are suitable for the collection of relevant data. Since one of the intentions of this study was to find out EFL teachers perception and understanding of communicative questioning, survey questionnaire was used as one of research tool. The merits of using questionnaires as data collection tools mainly come from its outstanding advantage including “providing structured, numerical data, being able to be administered without the presence of the researcher, and often straightforward to be analyzed” (Wilson and Mc Lean 1994, as cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000: 245), and it is also economically that helps to collect large amount of data in short period of time from a huge sample (Krathwohl, 1998). Moreover, as one of the most common forms of data collection tools, questionnaires can easily be judged in terms of reliability.

Thus, for further examination of the EFL teachers’ perception on referential vs display questioning behavior in the respect to the communicative teacher talk, a closed ended questionnaire was used as one of research instrument since closed-ended questionnaires are used more than open ones so that respondents may find them easier to complete and it allow comparability of responses (Bryman, 2004). Each of these close ended statements in the questionnaire was prepared based on the related literature. However, besides these strengths, the questionnaires usually fall short in examining complex social relationships or intricate patterns of interaction (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In this study, data related to the perceptions of the teachers gathered via the questionnaire was further reinforced by the use of semi-structured interviews.

The Semi-structured interviews

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interview was conducted as another important mode of data collection for this study. The interview is the most widely employed method in qualitative research. As Denzin (1989) point out that interviews are widely viewed as an appropriate means to
obtain data in qualitative research. In addition, Selinger and Shohamy (1989) indicate that the use of interview as a data collection tool allows a level of in-depth information, free response, and flexibility that cannot be obtained by other procedures. Regarding to the merit of interview, Mackey and Gass (2005:173), also emphasized that since interviews are interactive instrument of data collection “researchers can elicit additional data if initial answers are vague, incomplete, off-topic or not specific enough.” In other words, the purpose of this instrument was to triangulate the data collected by the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedure and Participants

As Selinger and Shohamy (1989) stated, once a specific research design stated for the research study, the next step is to collect the research data. In collecting the data it is important to use procedures which elicit high quality data, since the quality of any research study depends largely on the quality of the data collected and the data collection procedure. As stated above, this study has employed multiple procedures to collect data from the sample subjects. The study was carried out in Eastern Oromiya Ethiopia; using purposive sampling method a total of 20 secondary and preparatory schools were selected which were partner schools of Haramaya University where the researcher is working. Before the data have been collected, the researcher communicated with each school’s principals and agreed to collect data.

Data collection was started at the very beginning of the first semester. I started the pilot study at the beginning of October 2012, one month after the semester had started, and ended at the end of November 2012. The major objective of conducting the pilot study was to check the content validity and clarity of items, and to tackle any problems related to distributing, collecting and administering instruments. Accordingly, some modifications were made to the questionnaire after the pilot study.

To fulfill the quantitative and qualitative aims of this research study, two instruments were administered. Questionnaire and semi structured interview was held during semester one of academic year 2012/13. Thus, for the quantitative data, a survey questionnaire was administered to all the sampled school teachers. A total number of one hundred forty-five volunteer EFL teachers completed the questionnaire and returned on the dateline agreed from 20 senior secondary and preparatory schools.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted after the questionnaire administered. Taking one volunteer EFL teacher from each school, ten were agreed to have an interview. As per convenient or free time of the participants which they suggested, an average of 10 minute interview was conducted and recorded using digital audio. To collect data using these two instruments: questionnaire and interview, it took an average of one week time in each schools.

Data Presentation

Data from questionnaire

Questionnaire presents respondents' views of question type. In this instrument, 5 items were asked and different perception had been obtained to each items. Table 1 reveals information about teachers’ perceptions on types of question type which should be implemented in EFL classroom. As the table 1 indicates, almost all the English teachers (91.1%, n=132), agreed or strongly agreed that ‘the main purpose of teachers’ questioning is to provide opportunities for students to practice the target language and to promote verbal responses.’ Likewise, the vast majority of the respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that ‘the main purpose for language teachers to ask questions in class is to provide more opportunities for students to elicit more conversational output in the process of classroom interaction’ (88.9%, n=13). Concerning to these two statements, only a few respondents (6.9% and 4.8% respectively to item 5&2) disagreed or strongly disagreed that teachers’ questioning aim to provide more opportunities for students to use or practice on the target language.
Conversely, responses to Items 4, 1, and 3, in the same table, were slightly neutral and negative results had been found. As it can be seen in Table 1 below, the mean score were below the neutral value (M=2.98, 2.06 and 1.87) respectively. Regarding to the response to item 4, respondents can be divided into three groups on the statement that ‘every teacher’s question asked during a language lesson demands a student response. Questions need not be language related, and are often the basis of brainstorming’ a topic with the class.’ Thus, nearly half of the respondents (44.8%, n=68) agreed or strongly agreed. Whereas, almost one third of respondents (33.8%, n=49) were disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 5 (21.4%, n=5) EFL teachers felt undecided. This implies that different EFL teachers have different views or understanding concerning the relation between questioning and brainstorming in the classroom.

Table 1. Teachers’ Perceptions of the type of question (n = 145)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item No</th>
<th>Frequency (Percentage)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q.3*</td>
<td>55(37.9%) 68(46.9%) 8(5.5%) 12(8.3%) 2(1.4%)</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>.939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.1*</td>
<td>36(24.8%) 81(55.9%) 11(7.6%) 16(11.0%) 1(0.7%)</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>.910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.4</td>
<td>11(7.6%) 38(26.2%) 31(21.4) 49(33.8%) 16(11.0%)</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>1.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.2</td>
<td>0(0%) 7(4.8%) 9(6.2%) 74(51.0%) 55(37.9%)</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>.768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q.5</td>
<td>3(2.1%) 7(4.8%) 3(2.1%) 82(56.6%) 50(34.5%)</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfavorable statements are indicated by an asterisk (*). For these items scored 1 for ‘strongly agree’ up to 5 for ‘strongly disagree’

Survey item (with original questionnaire number)

1. The main purpose for language teachers to ask questions in class is to evaluate how learners achieve the target language input and to see students’ target language proficiency.*

2. The main purpose for language teachers to ask questions in class is to provide more opportunities for students to elicit more conversational output in the process of classroom interaction.

3. Language teachers should be expected to know the answer of the questions which they are going to ask their students in the classroom in order to assist their learners.*

4. Every teacher’s question asked during a language lesson demands a student response. Questions need not be language related, and are often the basis of brainstorming a topic with the class.

5. In language classroom, the main purpose of teachers’ questioning is to provide opportunities for students to practice the target language and to promote verbal responses.

On the other hand, the vast majority of the respondents responded negatively to item 3 and item 1. As table 1 displays, 84.8% (n=123) agreed that ‘language teachers should be expected to know the answer of the questions which they are going to ask their students in the classroom in order to assist their learners.’ Again, 80.7% (n=117) of the teachers also believed that ‘the main purpose for language teachers to ask questions in class is to evaluate how learners achieve the target language input and to see students’ target language proficiency.’ In other word, only a few teachers 11.7% (n=17) understood that the main purpose of asking a question in the class is not for the sake of evaluation rather for interaction, and 9.7% (n=14) understood that language teachers should use referential question which the answer may not be known by the teacher.

Data from the Questionnaire

1. What types of question do you frequently ask in your language classroom? Why?
The interviews asked teachers about the types of questions they ask their learners. Three interviewees explained that they were asking open ended types of questions since these types of questions. And they were also asked why they prefer to ask this type of question. As a result, they reason out that open ended question “demands some information from the learners” (T3), since there were no specific or wrong answer, it encourages the students to discuss a lot (T7) and it help the learners to express their opinion (T8). In the same way, one respondent articulated that he asked WH types of question because WH types of question can “….expand and make them generate idea especially…..” (10) Moreover, one interviewee said, “I use a kind of guided question which provides some sort of clue, and the students run on …” Then, I asked him what he mean that guided question, and he elaborated that it is “….. a kind of referential question… You may just give them a reference question, just explain where to go. You may just give them comprehending the passage and they can just skim the passage. So, there are different activities.”(T5). On the other hand, two of the interviewee explained differently: the first one said that he asked types of paragraph as follow: “on the paragraphs, you know the four paragraphs like descriptive, argumentative, narratives and this one and the other one is on debate even, on debate presentation”(T1), and the other respondent explained that she asked a kind of dialogue types of question which a student respond turn by turn(T2).

For some interviewees who did not respond properly to the types of question, I asked the indirect question to see the types of the question implemented in the classroom. In this regards, six interviewees indicated that they all know the answer of the questions which they ask during group work task. In other words each questions which asked by the teachers have a specific answer which may be prepared by the teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T8 & T10). For instance, two respondents explained as follows:

Of course, if I don’t know the answer I don’t prepare the questions. If I ask the question which It may not have specific answer, it may create disturbance on my students. Because of this, if I don’t know the answer, just … ahh… I leave that one, you know, up to I get the answer, the exact answer…(Teacher 1, 1/16/2013 9:03:26 AM)

For me, yes there is specific answer for each question. There is specific answer for each because I have already taught them about that thing. So I have to know the answer before I ask the students…(Teacher 4, 12/18/2012 10:25:40 AM).

2. Do you prepare your own questions in addition to textbook questions? Why?

All interviewees uttered that they all sometimes prepared their own questions. Following this the interviewer asked two additional questions: the reason why they prepared their own question and the type of question indirectly. For the first question, two interviewees indicated that the reason why they prepare their own question is that to practice their students for their national examination (for university entrance) which is going to be taken at the end of grade 12 (T1 & T10). Unlike this, other two respondents explained that they prepared additional question when the questions in the text book become too difficult or too simple. In order the questions match with the level of the students they modify or prepare new questions (T2, & T3). Similarly, two respondents explained in the following way:

Sometimes, you know, the questions I found in the text book I don’t get them that they will interest the way they prepared. The way they prepared is very much complicated so I tried searching them in the way that students understand them. This is most of the time what I do( T6, 1/2/2013 8:55:08 AM)

….to make lesson more clear for the students to relate with natural, with our environment. For example I am teaching about tourism now. While I am teaching about tourism here some tourism center in Ethiopia somewhere in northern or south like that again we have to ask about tourist attractive areas, then they will speak on that area (T8, 1/4/2013 10:05:39 AM).

On the other hand, Teacher 7 explained to the interviewer that he prepared his own question when he want his students talk more, he extracted some question from the book he read and ask them in group
having grammar in context. This helped the learner to get more opportunity to talk. Finally two interviewees described that they prepared their own question in order students comprehend and skim the reading passage (T4& T5).

**DISCUSSION**

Regarding to the purpose of teachers’ questioning and the types of question asked in EFL classroom five statements were presented to the participants. The data analysis of items 1-2 revels that although most EFL teachers have a clear understanding of the purpose of questing in language classroom, there is misunderstanding on the question type used in the language classroom. Thus, as it can be seen in table 6, more than average score (i.e mean value of 3.88) has been found regarding to the purpose of questioning. This indicates that EFL teachers have positive response to the purpose of questioning in language classroom. In other words, EFL teachers have positive understanding on the notion that the main purpose of teachers’ questioning is to provide opportunities for students to practice the target language and to promote verbal responses. Similarly, in their response to the statement “The main purpose for language teachers to ask questions in class is to provide more opportunities for students to elicit more conversational output in the process of classroom interaction” again more than average mean score ( 3.69). From this, it can be understood that EFL teachers of Ethiopia has a positive understanding on the purpose of EFL teachers’ questioning i.e. is to create opportunity to the learner to use the target language (see Table1 ). Asking question is one of the most important components of teacher talk. According to Richards & Lockhart (2000) teacher questioning is a fundamental and important means of classroom interaction. And Tsui also explains how “studies on ESL classrooms have focused on the effect of teacher questions on learners’ productions of the target language and on the types of learner response.” (1995:14).

However, on their response to Item 1, the majority of the participant (79.7%, N=117) believed that the purpose of questioning in the classroom is to evaluate students achievement and proficiency in the target language. In this regard , the mean score for the unfavored statement ‘the main purpose for language teachers to ask questions in class is to evaluate how learners achieve the target language input and to see students’ target language proficiency’ is below the average score( M=  2.06).

As far as display vs. referential questions concerns, the data analysis of two Items (3&4) revels that a negative score has been found. Thus, on the response to the statement ‘Every teacher’s question asked during a language lesson demands a student response. Questions need not be language related, and are often the basis of brainstorming’ a topic with the class’. The mean score for this statement is 2.98 which is below the average score. This indicates that EFL teachers prefer display questions to referential questions in their language classroom. Similarly, it is found that EFL teachers understood that language teachers should know the answer of the question which they ask their learner.

In their response to Item 3, it has been obtained the mean score is 1.87 which far below the average mean score for the unfavored statement ‘Language teachers should be expected to know the answer of the questions which they are going to ask their students in the classroom in order to assist their learners.*. This is a good indication of the preference of display to referential question. As it has been indicated in review of literature , referential questions “prompts a greater effort and depth of processing on the part of the learner” (Nunan ,1989: 30).Unlike display questions which the teacher already has the answer, referential questions often focus on content rather than language and the answer is not necessarily known by the teacher . Questions where the teacher asks the class something (e.g. ‘What did you do at the weekend?’) is an example of this type of question which is intend to gain real information from student; therefore, referential questions have a genuine communicative purpose (Long and Sato, 1983). Additionally, Thornbury (1996) proposes that some respects of TT are communicative: using questioning questions when the teacher has the purpose of communicating without knowing the answers to the questions beforehand and non communicative where exclusive or excessive use of displayed questions.
Similarly, qualitative data collected using semi-structured interview also shows similar findings. For the question they were asked, the types of question they may ask in the language classroom, most of them explained that they asked open-ended and WH types of questions and they reason out that they asked these types of questions since these kinds of questions have no specific or wrong answer and help the learner to generate idea. However, the majority of them believed that EFL teachers should know the answer of each question which they ask their students. Display refers to questions for which the teacher knows the answer and which demand a single or short response of the low-level thinking kind. Referential questions, by contrast, demand more thought and generate a longer response and for which the teacher does not know the answer in advance (Brown, 2001: 171). This indicates that teacher prefer display questions to referential which is less important for target language practice.

CONCLUSION

Combining quantitative and qualitative description and analysis, this study investigates EFL teachers’ understanding of the purpose and the type of communicative questioning in language classroom. The questionnaire and semi structured interview data reveals that EFL teachers in Ethiopia have a good understanding that the purpose of questioning is to provide more opportunities for students to elicit more conversational output in the process of classroom interaction. However, their preference on the use of content vs. display questions is inconsistent that most teachers give more priority to display questions than referential questions which is non communicative feature of teacher talk as indicated by famous authors such as Long and Sato (1983); Nunan (1989); Thornbury (1996), Brown(2001). In other words, Teachers taught that non communicative aspect of teacher talk help them to overcome the problem in language classroom. So therefore, to achieve the desired goal of language teaching, EFL teachers should balance the use of referential and display questions.

REFERENCES


