

The Effect of Teachers' Questioning Upon Junior High School Students' English Classroom Activity: Taking W School for Example

Yeying Lou¹

¹ School of Teacher Education, Huzhou University, Huzhou, China

Correspondence: Yeying Lou, School of Teacher Education, Huzhou University, Huzhou 313000, Zhejiang, China.

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Abstract

Taking W Middle School for example, this paper is aimed to explore the effect of teachers' questioning upon junior high school students' English classroom activity. Classroom observation, questionnaire and face-to-face interview are employed as the research method. The results show that classroom questioning can be divided into display questions and referential questions in English teaching. Besides, the easier questions are, the more active students are, so it's interesting to find out all the students interviewed by the writer said they prefer to answer questions of appropriate difficulty. In addition, most students prefer open questions according to the data from questionnaires. What's more, there are many factors leading to low activity and negative classroom atmosphere is the main factor.

Keywords: teachers' questioning, classroom activity, English teaching

1. Introduction

Putting question in class is a kind of communication between teacher and students. It is an important part in classroom teaching, which is considered as the core of effective teaching. However, we can find many problems existing in junior high school English classroom easily in the process of research. First of all, junior English teachers ask too many closed questions and lower-order questions. Secondly, the techniques for choosing questions are not paid much attention. Thirdly, teachers' evaluation on answers from students is too simple to some extent, generally speaking, there are only "good", "very well" (Gu, S.-X., 2014).

The "Student-centered, teacher-led" new model of English teaching is advocated in the new curriculum, while classroom questioning can make sure students' class participation. Classroom questioning is a complex art. Suitable classroom questioning can help students a lot. However, without suitable questioning, sometimes, there will be serious influence on normal English teaching. Thus, every teacher should master the skill of questioning so as to lead students to ask, answer, and talk in English more.

Unfortunately, teachers' questioning techniques are in different level because they have never trained systematically. Without doubt, different questioning techniques will have different influence on students' English learning. Good classroom questioning can enlighten students and drive them to answer questions actively while unsuccessful classroom questioning will discourage students' participation, even lead to classroom silence.

The writer of this thesis aims at analyzing the effect of junior high school English teachers' questioning on students' activity. Taking W Middle School for example, the writer wants to provide teachers who are teaching in junior high schools with some advice. The purpose of the research is threefold. First, the research attempts to illustrate classroom questioning, including the definition and function as well as types. Secondly, the research lists the problems existed in teachers' questioning so as to better improve teachers' performance from the perspective of asking questions. Thirdly, the research sets out to explore effective strategies to classroom silence with the hope that can reduce classroom silence, create a relaxed and harmonious class atmosphere and arouse the students' interest in learning English.

The present study is aimed to figure out the effect of teachers' questioning upon junior high school students' English classroom activity while taking W Middle School for example. To be more exact, the present study is designed to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the types of classroom questioning?
- (2) What is the effect of different types of teachers' questioning on classroom activity?
- (3) What are the factors leading to low activity in class?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classroom Questioning

2.1.1 Definition of Classroom Questioning

Classroom questioning has a long history with its great importance in teaching and learning. For years, it has been paid great attention to by researchers at home and abroad. Because it gives prominence to students, many teachers adopt the approach of asking questions in class (Lynch, 1991). But what is classroom questioning? When it comes to the classroom questioning, we have to first explain what is question. As a matter of fact, the definitions of question from different experts are different.

According to *Oxford Dictionary*, question is a sentence worded or expressed so as to elicit information. As for *Longman Dictionary*, it defines question as a sentence or phrase that is used to ask for information or to test someone's knowledge.

In this paper, classroom questioning refers to questions asked by teachers in English class, with the hope that students can give response to them actively. In the same time, teacher can check students' learning situation and promote students' second language acquisition.

2.1.2 Functions of Classroom Questioning

Effective classroom questioning plays a very important role in English teaching and many researchers have given their findings about the functions of it. Their findings are largely identical but with minor differences, so the writer here just takes one of them for example. Cotton (1988, p. 1), in his *Classroom Questioning*, has given detailed functions of classroom questioning:

1. To develop interest and motivate students to become actively involved in lessons
2. To evaluate students' preparation and check on homework or seatwork completion
3. To develop critical thinking skills and inquiring attitudes
4. To review and summarize previous lessons
5. To nurture insights by exposing new relationships
6. To assess achievement of instructional goals and objectives
7. To stimulate students to pursue knowledge on their own

2.1.3 Types of Classroom Questioning

There are many types of classroom questioning. It can be classified in various ways.

Barnes (1969, as cited in Shu, B.-M., & Li, M.-L., 2008) divided questions into closed questions and open questions, according to what he had observed in middle school classes when he was in England.

Typically, closed questions often begin with is, are, or do, for example, "Do you like green?" Open questions begin with what, how, why, or could, for example, "What is your favorite color?" Open questions are broader in nature than closed questions and less restricting or structured; hence, they offer students more freedom with regard to the choice and scope of an answer. Teachers can employ different kinds of questions to achieve their desired purpose.

Long and Sato (1983) classified classroom questioning into two categories: display questions and referential questions. The display question is "not a real question (i.e. which does not seek information unknown to the teacher) but which serves to elicit language practice" (Richards, *et al.*, 2000, p. 142). Some examples of display questions are as followed. How many things do we have this term? When can our parents come to the school in this text? Which month is the busiest according to the text?

The referential question "asks for information which is not known to the teacher" (Richards, *et al.*, 2000, p. 390). Some examples of referential questions are as followed. What do you think of the story? What is your favorite subject? Why do you like it? Which is the best part in this passage in your opinion?

2.2 Studies on Classroom Questioning

According to the survey, there are still many existing problems of classroom questioning. One of them is the

questions asked by teachers are always in low-level, which is not conducive to cultivating their independent thinking and creativity. Besides, though teachers are good at calling on somebody after asking questions, lacking teachers' guidance and induction becomes common like potluck. Furthermore, teachers' feedback to students' answers is too simple, usually are "good job", "well done" or "right" (Gu, S.-X., 2014).

Questioning strategies refer to the science, art or skill of using questions in classroom to accomplish a specific teaching aim. It's of great importance to teachers. In the paper *A Study on Teacher Questioning in English Major Classroom from the View of Scaffolding*, the writer Zhao (2012) summarized five strategies, they are extending waiting time, repeating or rephrasing, simplifying, redirecting and self-explaining.

2.3 Classroom Silence

2.3.1 Effects of Different Types of Classroom Questioning

The questioning strategies have a great impact on students study, especially students' activity in class. By studies, even asking the same question in different ways has some impact on students' activity (Gayefa, *et al.*, 2014).

According to Mao (Mao, T.-T., 2012), the students' oral replies to referential questions are usually longer and syntactically more complex, while their replies to display questions are usually shorter and syntactically less complex. Furthermore, increasing the wait time appropriately (wait time of more than 5 seconds) has positive influence on students' reply, but decreasing wait time will apparently hinder the lower-level students' oral replies.

2.3.2 Factors Lead to Low Activity

Some studies have found unsuitable teachers' classroom questioning will lead to low activity in English class. The researcher Zhang (Zhang, Y., 2011) found classroom atmosphere may directly influence students' interest in learning and class participation. In a warm atmosphere, even a quiet student might say something in English once he has chance. However, in a tense class, nobody is talking, then, though some students know the right answer, they might be unwilling to stand up and answer the question.

It was found that students were passive and reticent in language classrooms as a result of such reasons as fear of losing face, their inability to understand concepts, the passive learning styles they were accustomed to, lack of preparation before coming to class, and their perceived linguistic ability (Riasati, *et al.*, 2014, p. 2).

Students might lose their interest in answering questions because of teachers' monotonous questioning types, ambiguous and less creative questioning contents; waiting time less than three seconds will result in students' reticence; too long waiting time will also cause students' lack of concentration thus leading to reticence; if teachers' questions are confined to checking comprehension and feedbacks given by the teacher are uniformly similar and lack of guidance, students classroom reticence will be sure arise (Gao, J., 2013).

2.3.3 Solutions to Reticence

Many students are unwilling to take part in the class and answer questions. In order to improve this kind of state, it is necessary to have a discussion about the solutions to reticence.

Classroom humor helps to activate students' thinking, active the classroom atmosphere, harmonize the relationship between teachers and students and edify students' temperament. Thus, in classrooms with students as the center, it is important to build a harmonious, interactive and active classroom atmosphere (Wu, X., 2014).

Classroom atmosphere (Harvey, *et al.*, 1968) is built up both by teachers and students. However, teachers, due to their decisive position in the classroom, become an important factor influencing the classroom atmosphere. According to Han, J.-J., 2014), English teachers need to change the questioning pattern and give up the questioning initiative. What's more, teachers can organize various forms of visiting and criticizing classes since it is an effective way to promote the quality of the classroom teaching.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

Taking W Middle School for example, the present study is aimed to figure out the effect of classroom questioning on students' activity in English class. To be more exact, the present study is designed to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the types of classroom questioning?
- (2) What is the effect of different types of teachers' questioning on classroom activity?

(3) What are the factors leading to low activity in class?

3.2 Research Method

This study adopts the researching methods of class observation, interview and questionnaires to obtain data concerned systematically.

Classroom observation is one of the main methods to conduct this study. To gather data ideally, the approach mainly manually is planned, including note-taking and audio-recording in order to help record students' talk, teachers' talk and silence. Through face to face interviews with students who were chosen from each class randomly, many facts were emerging from the conversations with students. In total, there were 8 interviews with different students separately.

To further explore the effect of different types' classroom questioning on activity and the factors lead to low activity in the English class, questionnaire was designed as a research method to relevant collected data. It was adapted from Zhang (Zhang, Y., 2011), a study on the factors affecting students' silence in middle school English classroom. There were 120 students participate the research, only two answers were invalid. As a result, there are 28 girls and 30 boys of Grade 7, 29 girls and 31 boys of Grade 8. The information gained from the questionnaire would make the research more accurate and valid.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Types of Classroom Questioning

How many questions and what kind of questions is asked are the crucial parts in an English class because it reflects the quality of a class in some extent. Thus, investigating the ratio of different types of questions is of great necessity. By the means of classroom observation, the total number of questions asked by the teachers can be known easily. Here, the writer divides questions into two types: display questions and referential questions. The data is showed in the Table 1.

Table 1. Number and percentage of display questions and referential questions

Class	Total number of questions	Display questions		Referential questions	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Class 1 in Grade 7	68	48	70.6	20	29.4
Class 2 in Grade 7	71	47	66.2	24	33.8
Class 5 in Grade 8	52	34	65.4	18	34.6
Class 6 in Grade 8	47	26	55.3	21	44.7
Sum	238	155	65.1	83	34.9

According to the data above, the total number of questions asked by the teachers is different. Teacher in Grade 7 asks more questions than teacher in Grade 8, and teacher in good class asks more questions than in normal class. Besides, there is a common characteristic in classes, display questions about 65.1% in total, are more than referential questions.

Through interview, students in Grade 7 said that most questions are so easy that they can give the answer immediately. And students in Grade 8 said that questions are more difficult than in Grade 7, but most questions are still easy. Know then, teachers are more likely to ask low-level questions.

4.2 The Effects of Different Types of Classroom Questioning

As we all know, teachers always ask questions in various ways since different types of questioning can lead to different results. Even the same question asked by different ways can cause different effects upon students' activity.

Through classroom observation, it can be found easily that the easier questions are, the more active students are. In the opposite, if the questions are difficult, only a few students would like to answer questions. Thus, the classroom falls back into silence now and then, especially in Grade 8 since the content of textbook is much more difficult. We even could say classroom silence has become a very striking feature in Grade 8 according to observation.

There is a very interesting thing, all the students interviewed by the writer said they prefer to answer questions of appropriate difficulty. If the question is too easy, they would be unwilling to answer because there is no challenge. And if the question is too difficult, they would also unwilling to answer because they are not confident enough.

According the date collected from questionnaire, 69.49% of students like to answer questions which have no exact answer, because they can share opinions freely. That is, 69.49% of students think open questions can lead to active classroom atmosphere. Besides, 33.05% of students like questions which their answers can be found directly in the text or teacher's talk. That is, 33.05% of students like low-level questions.

4.3 Factors Lead to Low Activity in Class

According to classroom observation, teacher talk takes up a larger percentage while students talk takes up a smaller percentage. The Table 2 shows the number and percentage of students who are keeping silent in the whole class, except answering questions together.

Table 2. Number and percentage of students who are keeping silent

Class	Number	Percentage
Class 1 in Grade 7	5	16.6
Class 2 in Grade 7	5	12.5
Class 5 in Grade 8	13	32.5
Class 6 in Grade 8	18	60

According to the Table 2, there are more students keeping silent in Grade 8. As for the reason, the content of textbook in Grade 8 is more difficult and boring. And they have less chance to express themselves.

Face to face interview figures out a lot of unknown questions. Students in Grade 8 told the writer that they spent a lot of time listening and note-taking, they get used to listen and unwilling to open their mouths. Besides, they are scared to raise their hands because they if give the wrong answer, others may laugh at them. Some students say nothing because those who are better than them are keeping silent. Besides, the mood also has influence to students' performance. If students are in bad mood, they are less willing to answer questions. One student told the writer, because the teacher never asks him to answer questions, he never raise his hand. Another student told the writer that classroom participant is not important since it won't affect his final grades. If teacher marks his classroom participant, he would deliver a speech more often.

Broadly speaking, the questionnaire results have a lot of common with the interview results. According to the data collected from questionnaires, the classroom atmosphere is the main factor leading to low activity since 70.34% of the respondents said classroom atmosphere affects them whether participate in the interactive learning activity or not. 72.03% said they are more willing to think and then answer questions when the teacher questioning the whole class. It also indicates that atmosphere matters a lot.

Students' confidence is one of the factors. 39.83% of the respondents said they don't have confidence and the reason why they are inactive in English class is that they are afraid of making mistakes. 18.64% think they are not expected to answer questions because the teacher always fixes her insight to good students. 28.81% said others especially those who are better than them are keeping quiet, so they decide not to answer questions.

Students' characteristic is also an important factor. 30.51% said they are introverted, their speaking might attract others' attention and it makes them anxiety. 16.95% think the class belongs to all the students, their speaking might waste everybody's time, so they speak as little as they can. 45.76% said they would be more likely to answer questions if students are less in the classroom.

Besides, students' mood has influence on their initiative since 43.22% are unwilling to talk when they are in bad mood. And 40.68% said the class period is too long, they get tired and it leads to their low activity.

5. Conclusion

From the data, the writer finds that teachers' questioning does exert influence on students' activity. The main findings are as follows:

Firstly, teachers ask plenty of questions in class since classroom questioning is a necessary method of teaching

knowledge and an effective way of thought training. According to what students have told the writer, the teachers is more likely to ask questions that known to them, it means teachers apply more display questions than referential questions.

Secondly, there are lots of factors that lead to students' low activity in class. In the aspect of students, they are lack of confidence and not in mood. In the aspect of teacher, they are too serious to students and put more emphasis on good students. Classroom atmosphere is also an important factor.

As both the interview data and questionnaire data display, students prefer questions that have more than one answer because they can express themselves freely. Thus, teachers should apply more referential questions. Due to referential questions can make the classroom dialogue have interactivity, trigger students' deeper understanding of the content they have learnt, promote students' self-expression by the knowledge they have gained and cultivate students' abilities to have conversations in English, referential questions should be added in the English class without doubt.

Since classroom atmosphere may directly influence students' interest in learning and teaching effect, teachers should ask questions in a humor way. For it can help to activate students' thinking, active the classroom atmosphere, harmonize the relationship between teachers and students and edify students' temperament.

The present study bears some limitations in some aspects. The first limitation in the present study is the limited samples. The teachers and students all come from W Middle School, thus the number of them is not large enough to be representative in Chinese context.

The second limitation comes from classroom observation. The writer has no device to make video-recording. Thus, the writer doesn't have access to non-verbal language in the analysis of the data. And the words and sentences can't describe the both the teachers' and students' performances, especially non-verbal communication, which is also important during classroom interaction. Besides, the writer might ignore or miss something important without video-recording.

Classroom questioning has a long history with its great importance in teaching and learning. It will efficiently enhance the teaching effect in English classes when research work is boosted into the art of classroom questioning. The present study investigated the effect of classroom questioning on students' activity in English class. Hoping can inspire English teachers to ask more effective questions in class, thus students can have a better performance.

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