

**Teacher questioning, modification and feedback behaviours and their implications for learner production: an action research case study.**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **1 Introduction**

For several years the affects of various aspects of teachers' utterances on their students' L2 acquisition and use have been popular foci for research. Common topics have included teachers' questioning behaviours (Redfield and Rousseau, 1981 cited by Chaudron, 1988: 174) and how various question types affect the quantity and complexity of students' TL use in spoken discourse (Brock, 1986 noted by Chaudron, 1988: 173). Others have examined how teachers modify their L2 utterances to improve the comprehensibility of their input to students and the efficacy thereof (Pica and Long, 1986 cited by Nunan, 1989: 25) and the effect of feedback on students' L2 acquisition and use (Lysakowski and Walberg, 1982 noted by Chaudron, 1988: 176).

Chaudron (1988: 171) and Nunan acknowledge the importance of these issues, the latter saying that questions, modifications and feedback have a significant part to play in second language acquisition (Nunan, 1991: 7). The ability to identify and discuss components of these behaviours may therefore lead to more informed practice.

This paper does not aim to significantly further the knowledge in these areas through large scale investigation. Nor does it seek a high level of generalisability or to demonstrate causal relationships. Rather, through observation and analysis of one EFL lesson, as Hewings et al (1998: 104) recommend, it attempts to demonstrate the writer's ability to identify, through transcribed examples, the major classifications relating to a teacher's questions (and associated learner production), modification techniques and feedback. It further aims to utilise these examples to explain and discuss these aspects of one EFL teacher's teaching behaviour.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Question types and associated learner production.**

Much of teachers' talk relates to questions (Holland, R. and T. Shortall, 1998: 65) and substantial research exists demonstrating that questions can assist learners in improving their linguistic ability (McDonough and Shaw, 1993: 271-2). Chaudron (1988: 131) goes further, warning that poor questioning practice can be counter-productive.

Questions are classified by the type of response they solicit or the purpose they serve. A taxonomy of question types is given in table 1 (page 3).

Nunan (1989: 30) notes that Van Lier (1988: 222) rejects the distinction between display / referential questions in favour of instructional versus conversational types because both display and referential types solicit learner L2 production, the type of production

being irrelevant. However, if referential questions encourage more voluminous and complex learner TL responses (Nunan, 1987a cited by Nunan, 1991: 194), then the distinction seems highly significant, with implications for a teacher's appropriate choice of type being dependant on the kind of production he/she wishes to elicit.

Convergent questions predominate over the divergent type in L2 classrooms (Richards and Lockhart, 1994: 187), while display questions predominate over referential questions (Long and Sato, 1983 cited by Nunan, 1991: 194), despite the latter being much more common in discourse outside the classroom (Thornbury, 1996: 281).

A rare counter-claim found that referential questions were more common in a French immersion group (Bialystok et al, 1978 cited by Chaudron, 1988: 127), though this may be explained by Thornbury's observation above if the pedagogical items used were similar to those in 'real-life' discourse.

Nunan (1989: 30) intuitively proposes:

....it is not inconceivable that the effort involved in answering referential questions prompts a greater effort and depth of processing on the part of the learner.

If so, it may be because imparting previously unknown information to the teacher enhances the learner's self-image. Nunan (1991: 194) also says that "students will improve more rapidly if they are actively engaged in interaction than if they are passive". If Nunan's two proposals are correct, then the preference among EF/SL teachers for questions which inherently limit learners' opportunities for TL use has serious implications for their students' learning outcomes. This concern is supported by a finding that referential questions elicited longer and grammatically more advanced responses (Brock, 1986 cited by Chaudron, 1988: 173).

It is also possible that fewer opportunities to interact or utilise the English they *have* acquired can demotivate students. Thornbury (1996: 282) quotes Van Lier (1988) as writing:

A significant source of motivation and attention is lost when turn taking is predetermined rather than interactionally managed by the participants.

**Table 1 A taxonomy of question types.**

<b>Question type</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Noted by</b>
Closed	have a short, fixed answer, for example "What day is it today?"	Barnes (1969)

Open	typically require a longer, less limited response, for example "What did you do yesterday ?"	
Display	those to which the questioner already knows the answer and is merely testing the respondent's knowledge or understanding.	Brown (1994a: 165)
Referential	those to which the questioner does not know the answer and is genuinely seeking information.	
Procedural	relate to classroom, lesson and student control processes such as "Who is absent today ?"	Richards and Lockhart (1994: 186-7)
Convergent	often have short answers which "encourage similar student responses" and require low level thought processing, for example "Can you ski ? ---- "Yes, I can", "No, I can't".	
Divergent	necessitate more wide-ranging, longer responses with higher level thought processing for example "Why is the Beatles' music so popular in Japan ?"	
Rhetorical	those which the questioner answers him/herself.	-----
Interaction	Comprehension checks : " <i>elicits assurance from the listener that a message has been received correctly.</i> "	Chaudron (1988: 130-1)
	Confirmation checks : assume a positive response and " <i>allow the speaker to correctly interpret reactions by the listener.</i> "	
	Clarification requests : similar to confirmation requests but with a more open answer.	
Instructional	Any question presented in the classroom. Presupposes that the question is intended to solicit learner production.	Van Lier (1988: 223)
Conversational	Any question asked outside the classroom.	

\_Cited by  
Chaudron  
(1988: 126-7)

\_Cited by  
Nunan (1989:  
30)

## 2.2 Modification techniques

Among others, Krashen (1982a: 33) quoted in Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 224) has coined the term *comprehensible input* and teachers often modify their speech on the assumption that this enhances comprehensibility. Chaudron (1988: 55) argues that this heightened comprehensibility maintains communication, although research reviewed here suggests that may not always be the case.

The chief work available which reviews and collates research on modification techniques is Chaudron (1988: 54-86). Since other writers (Nunan, 1991: 190-1, Richards Lockhart, 1994: 182-4 and Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991: 134-9) have based their own discussions on his extensive analysis, only Chaudron's analysis is reviewed here. Table 2 gives a taxonomy of modification techniques. Though not all of those listed modify questions, they are included for completeness.

One technique not classified is perhaps the most obvious: translation of questions into L1. Unfortunately, as Chaudron (1988: 172) citing Bruck and Schultz, (1977) notes:

a gradual tendency for a teacher to use her dominant language for instructional tasks (whether the L1 or L2) will result in a similar shift in the learners' preferences for language use.

Nunan (1991: 190) citing Zilm (1989) concurs.

Use of dissimilar measures or methods has often led to contradictory findings on the efficacy of modifications and has also made direct comparison between studies problematic.

For example, it is unclear whether modified length of utterance aids comprehension because utterances have been variously measured as words per utterance, sentence or T-unit (Holland and Shortall, 1998: 68 and Chaudron, 1988: 73).

Studies on the effects of syntactic simplification noted by Chaudron, (1988: 155-7) also claim conflicting results.

Research on repetition and rephrasing, the most commonly employed modifications (Chaudron, 1988:127), also appears to give little consensus. The former was found to aid immediate recall (Cervantes, 1983 cited by Chaudron, 1988: 156), though immediate recall may not equate to comprehension. There are also doubts as to the efficacy of the latter (Chaudron, 1988: 128).

**Table 2 A taxonomy of speech modifications.**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Technique</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Phonology	Modified pronunciation.	Use of a simplified, standard or even exaggerated pronunciation with fewer contractions and reductions, reducing the attentive and cognitive loads <sup>1</sup> for learners. For example, "Tomorrow is a holiday. What will you do tomorrow ?", rather than "Tomorrow's a holiday. What ya gonna do tomorrow ?"
Timing	Rate of speech.	Measured in words per minute (wpm), reduced rate of speech is assumed to enhance comprehensibility by reducing cognitive load, giving learners more time to process the teacher's input. It has also been suggested that it gives clearer segmentation of structures <sup>2</sup> .
	Pauses	Both length and frequency of pauses influence speech rate but may also act independently to highlight specific (usually more difficult) words, reducing not only cognitive but also attentive load. For example, "The government.....in the UK changes every four or five years".
	Prosody	Peculiar to storytelling or poetry reading, these alter the beat or rhythm of input. This may not necessarily improve comprehension and may actually have the opposite effect from reduced rate of speech.
Lexis	Preferred use of basic vocabulary items.	Avoidance of more advanced language types such as idioms, colloquialisms ("tired" rather than "dead beat") and abstract nouns ("Mitsubishi" instead of "the company"). This is thought to enhance comprehensibility by reducing the quantity and degree of difficulty of input to which learners must attend.
	Preferred use of high frequency vocabulary items.	Use of words that are more common (and therefore, presumably more familiar to students), so reducing cognitive load. For example, "What time do you go home ?", instead of "What time do you return home ?"
Syntax	Length of utterance	Measured variously as words per utterance, sentence or T-unit. Shorter utterances are, not surprisingly, considered to be easier for learners to comprehend. For example, "I visited Osaka on Sunday." is less taxing than "Well, on Sunday I had nothing to do so I thought I'd go to Osaka."
	Subordination	A reduced use of subordinate clauses, making each T-unit shorter (so presumably more comprehensible).

**Table 2 A taxonomy of speech modifications (continued).**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Technique</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Syntax (cont.)	Markedness	The degree to which unmarked (i.e. conspicuous or frequently occurring) elements are used as opposed to marked (inconspicuous or infrequently occurring) elements. Predominant use of unmarked elements may aid comprehension as learners acquire these more easily <sup>2</sup> . For example, "I come from England." may be more comprehensible to Japanese L2 English learners than "I am from England." because the verb <i>come</i> is conspicuous by virtue of its tense (Japanese use the past tense).
	Grammaticality	The use of (usually) grammatically correct sentence fragments rather than well formed sentences, aiding comprehension. For example, "I take my friend for dinner tonight", avoiding the more advanced use of 'will'.
	Sentence type distribution	The differential use of declarative, interrogative and imperative statements is listed as a syntactical modification <sup>3</sup> but it is unclear whether this technique is a deliberate strategy on the part of the teacher to aid comprehension or whether the comparative frequencies of these sentence types are more a function of the context or pedagogical aims of the lesson.
Discourse	Framing moves	Using learners' understanding of a known experience or situation to assist in the comprehension of something new <sup>4</sup> . Effective use of this technique would require knowledge of the learners' experiential base. For example, if teaching 'the best' one might use video footage of the winner of the annual sumo championships.
	Self- repetition	Repetition of an utterance (either unchanged or rephrased) is assumed to give learners more chance to process the input by providing another opportunity to catch words they didn't comprehend the first time. It may also aid comprehension by giving the learner more time to process the input.

adapted from Chaudron (1988: 54-86).

<sup>1</sup> Attentive (linguistic) load is the volume of input to which the learner must attend. Cognitive load is the mental effort required by the learner to understand the input, (from Nunan, 1991: 191).

<sup>2</sup> Hatch (1983:183) in Chaudron (1988: 154).

<sup>3</sup> From Edwards et al (1999: 74-76)

<sup>4</sup> Chaudron (1988: 82-4).

<sup>5</sup> Based on Minsky's 'frame' theory or Widdowson's (1983) use of 'schema' , both cited by Nunan (1991: 67-9).



Chaudron (1988: 157) concludes from his analysis that:

Although more research is clearly called for, with more explicit tests of syntactic complexity in L2 listening comprehension, the current results do not look promising. The other factors involved in simplification of input, namely, elaborations by the way of redundancy - restatements, repetition, synonyms, and so on - need to be more extensively examined.

Wait time is a type of pause in the teacher's discourse and research has found that increased wait time can be beneficial. Firstly, learners have more time to process the question and to formulate a response (Chaudron, 1988: 128). Secondly, more learners attempt to respond (Richards and Lockhart, 1994: 188). Also, "the length and complexity of the response [increases]" (quoted from Nunan, 1991: 193 citing Holley and King, 1971). Counter-claims exist (Brock, 1986 cited by Chaudron, 1988: 174), but are scarce and may have dubious methodologies (Long and Crookes, 1986 cited by Nunan, 1991: 193).

Study of speech rate also shows slightly more consensus. Hatch (1983: 183) cited by Chaudron (1988: 154) says that:

[slower speech] should allow more processing time and clearer segmentation of the structures in the input.

Chaudron (1988: 154-5) also cautiously cited Dahl (1981) as finding increased comprehensibility due to reduced speech rate. However, Chaudron's use of qualifiers shows that he was undecided at the time of writing.

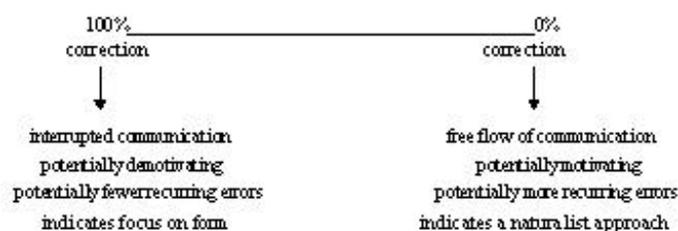
### 2.3 Feedback

Much research exists to suggest that feedback promotes learning (Lysakowski and Walberg, 1982 cited by Chaudron: 175-6). While some writers equate feedback specifically with error correction (Larsen-Freeman and Long), others include reinforcing and motivating behaviours (Brown 1994a, 1994b). For this review, the author employs the wider interpretation. Although each type has specific functions, they all assist learners in assessing their linguistic performance.

Regarding corrective feedback, there is an ongoing debate as to whether errors should be corrected (for Hendrickson, 1978 cited by Chaudron 1988: 135, against Krashen, 1981 cited by Nunan, 1989: 31).

Debate on when to correct is also ongoing. Most EF/SL practitioners would agree that minimising error rates is a desirable goal but, as figure 1 illustrates, finding a balance between intervention and non-intervention is problematic.

Figure 1 - The error correction paradigm.



partially compiled from Chaudron (1988: 134-5).

As Holland and Shortall (1998: 65) point out, teachers "give considerable feedback to answers" as part of the solicit-response-evaluate cycle. However, figure 1 also shows why many teachers may sometimes prefer not to correct some erroneous utterances.

The types of errors teachers correct is also an open issue. Cited by Brown (1994a: 263) Hendrickson (1980) differentiates between local and global errors while Brown (1994b: 205) distinguishes between mistakes and errors. The proponents in each case suggest that it is more important to correct the latter type of error than the former because it is these which greatly inhibit communication.

Brown (1994a: 264) summarises the problem concisely:

The bottom line is that we simply must not stifle our students' attempts at production by smothering them with corrective feedback.

When students make erroneous utterances, how do teachers indicate the error to students? One common strategy is repetition of the erroneous response with a range of modifications including altered emphasis, reduction, addition, substitution, lengthening of a segment (Chaudron 1988: 176) or rising intonation (Nunan, 1991: 197). These attempt to localise the error. However, Chaudron (1988: 145-9) argues that such strategies are often ineffective because learners also associate repetition with reinforcement of correct responses and their L2 competency may not be sufficient to avoid confusion between the two intentions. Alternatively, Brown (1994b: 218) suggests various "kinaesthetic mechanisms" such as facial and gestural cues.

As Richards and Lockhart (1994: 188) point out, positively reinforcing feedback serves three purposes:

- a). to show the student's response to be correct,
- b). to praise (and therefore motivate) the respondent and
- c). to create an atmosphere conducive to learning.

While reinforcement may also be negative, Nunan (1991: 195) demonstrates that positive feedback is more efficacious. This feedback type has overlaps motivational feedback

The author defines motivational feedback as *teacher's utterances intended to motivate a learner to continue active participation*, for example if a student answers incorrectly, the teacher might reply "It's OK. That was a difficult question". This is distinct from reinforcement feedback in that it need not make comment on the correctness of the student's response. While teachers' comments can be demotivating,

("Don't be stupid") the above definition assumes a teacher's intention to positively motivate. This area stems directly from behavioural psychology and is well documented (see Brown, 1994a: 33-46).

### **3 Method**

#### **3.1 Subjects**

A Japanese junior high school class of 35 students (19 male, 16 female), aged 14-15 years, approaching the end of their third academic year of formal EFL study.

Also one female, Japanese teacher of English as a foreign language (JTE), aged 31, with 9 years teaching experience, of which 4 years have been at her present school.

The JTE evaluated the class as low level ability with respect to spoken discourse, compared with the other four third grade classes in the school. Based on his recent experiences teaching at this school over a 15 month period, the author concurs with this evaluation.

The purpose for the researcher's visit to the class was explained to the students several days prior to the lesson, in order to gain their informed participation.

#### **3.2 Situation**

The 50 minute lesson was one of four scheduled per week as part of the school's state EFL program and focused on basic transactional vocabulary and phrases using materials prescribed by Japan's Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, *Monbusho* (Morimizu, 1996: 60-61).

The teacher's aims for this lesson were to review, teach and promote spoken discourse in the practice of these transactional items.

The suburban school's staff generally consider the students to be from low disposable income families. The school has some attendance, behavioural and disciplinary problems which as Giddens (1993: 436) points out may have implications for students' academic attainment.

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

Data were collected in three stages; a pre-observation, semi-structured interview with the teacher, observation of the class and separate stimulated response sessions with students and teacher.

During the pre-observation interview with the teacher the non-evaluative nature of the project was emphasised, (as recommended by Holland and Shortall, 1998: 44) and the teacher's personal data were recorded. The meeting was audio-taped and notes were taken for later reference.

The observation was conducted over the lesson's full 50 minutes duration to allow as many patterns of behaviour and inconsistencies as possible to emerge. A concomitant audio recording was made using a very small tape recorder, positioned inconspicuously at the front of the classroom and set to record prior to the start of the lesson.

As recommended by Nunan (1989: 6) and others, concurrent video footage was also recorded using a small, relatively unobtrusive, tripod-mounted video camera, located at the rear of the classroom during formal instruction and which was dismounted and carried around the room during practice. The video display included a time-frame counter which served as a reference marker. As points of interest arose, they were coded on a comment sheet (appendix 1) along with the corresponding time-frame reference for use in the subsequent stimulated response sessions and analysis. The audio and video recordings were later analysed and data was coded on previously field-tested (though non-validated) observation tools (tables 3-7).

Finally, two semi-structured stimulated response interviews were conducted using the video footage in conjunction with the time-frame encoded comments sheet. Notes were taken and the interviews were audio-taped.

The first was with four students (2 male, 2 female) selected by the teacher on the basis of her perception of their higher English ability. Questions were asked in English and the teacher acted as a translator (her translations were later verified as accurate by a bilingual colleague). The second session, with the teacher was conducted in English. Transcripts of the salient points from these interviews are given in appendix 2.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Questions.**

Questions were multiple coded. For example, "Who is absent today" can be both procedural and referential.

Data for teacher's behaviour during instruction and practice are presented separately where appropriate, to maximise the data's indicative power.

Table 3 Frequency and allocation of question types during review and teaching.

<b>Question type</b>	<b>Frequency of use</b>	<b>Equivalent percentage</b>
Open	1	1.45%
Closed	19	27.53%
Display	28	40.58%

Referential	5	7.25%
Convergent	14	20.29%
Divergent	0	0%
Rhetorical	0	0%
Procedural	2	2.9%
Interaction	0	0%

**Table 4 Frequency and allocation of question types during one-to-one practice.**

Questions were coded from the viewpoint of the teacher's role, i.e. customer.

Question type	To individual students					Total	Equivalent percentage
	# 1	# 2	# 3	# 4	# 5		
Open	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Closed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Display	0	1	0	1	0	2	8%
Referential	2	2	3	3	1	11	44%
Convergent	2	2	3	4	1	12	48%
Divergent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Rhetorical	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Procedural	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Interaction	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%

## 4.2 Modifications.

**Table 5 Frequency of question repetitions.**

	Number of repetitions			
	None	1	2	3
Frequency of repetitions	6	17	6	4

Repetitions were used with 27 questions (82%).

**Table 6 Mean wait time by question type.**

Question type	Wait time raw data (seconds)	Mean wait time (seconds)
Closed	8, 8, 4, 17, 9, 8, 11, 6, 9, 6, 6, 8, 7, 14, 15, 9	9.06
Display	8, 8, 4, 17, 8, 9, 8, 11, 6, 9, 6, 6, 8, 7, 8, 7, 9, 9, 7, 11, 7, 1, 13, 14, 15, 9	8.65
Referential	10, 8, 8, 7, 8	8.2
Convergent	8, 10, 8, 8, 7, 8, 8, 7, 9, 8, 11, 7, 1, 13	8.07
Mean wait time across all question types		8.59

Other types had no associated wait times.

**Table 7 Code switching.**

**Of the 33 questions presented during the teaching phase:**

Domain	%age
those presented in Japanese.....	60.6%
those presented in English.....	39.4%
those soliciting translations from Japanese to English.....	9%
those soliciting translations from English to Japanese.....	30%
those presented in English and which where answered in English.....	100%
those presented in Japanese and which where answered in Japanese.....	75%
those presented in Japanese and which where answered in English.....	25%

Rephrasing and translations.

- a). Five questions (15%) were rephrased.
- b). Teacher's English speech rate<sup>1</sup> to students during 'normal' discourse = 115wpm  
During repetitions of questions = 109wpm.

<sup>1</sup> These rates are extrapolations from several utterances which lasted 5-10 seconds and so are to be viewed with caution.

**4.3 Feedback.**

- a). There were two student errors during instruction (one spelling and one

translation).

- b). Reinforcement through overt acceptance (usually with "Yes." or "That's right.") of 94% of student's responses, Japanese being the preferred language of presentation.
- c). Reinforcement through repetition of 91% of students' responses.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Question types employed and associated learner production.

During instruction the teacher used procedural, open, closed, display, convergent and referential questions (table 3). Transcript 1 gives examples of procedural, open and convergent use (lines 1, 5-6 and 15 respectively). Lines 8 and 11 exemplify questions which are both closed and display. Note that for all transcripts, utterances in Japanese are italicised and examples are highlighted.

#### ***Transcript 1. Examples of procedural, open, convergent, closed and display questions.***

The lesson has just started and the teacher is taking the register.

- 1 Teacher : *Please tell me **which students are absent today ?***
- 2 Student 1: *Miss Yamane, Miss Miyoshi...*
- 3 Teacher : *Wait, wait, wait.*
- 4 Student 1: *and Shingo Watanabe.*
- 5 Teacher : OK. Thank you. Good afternoon everyone. [To the class]**How are you today ?**
- 6
- 7 All students : I'm fine thank you, and you ?
- 8 Teacher : I'm fine too thank you. **What day is it today ?** [Pause] **What day....is it today ?** [Pause] Mr Miyano.
- 9
- 10 Mr Miyano : It's Monday.
- 11 Teacher : That's right. **Please spell Monday.** [Pause] Please spell Monday.
- 12 [Pause] Mr Miyake.
- 13 Mr Miyake : M-O-N-D-A-Y
- 14 Teacher : *Yes, M-O-N-D-A-Y.*
- 15 [To the class] **How's the weather today ? How's the weather.....**
- 16 **today ?**
- 17 All students : It's cloudy.

That the procedural exchange (lines 1-4) was entirely in Japanese is understandable, since procedural questions assist in the smooth operation of the classroom or lesson and miscomprehension through use of English would be counter-productive.

The only open question presented has a variety of possible, potentially diverse answers. However, lines 5-8 illustrate a highly ritualised, predictable 'greeting'

common in Japanese EFL classes and as such this is not really an open question soliciting an informative response. Neither can it be considered truly referential since the teacher could confidently predict the answer. For these reasons students were not expected to give original, syntactically complex responses, nor did they do so.

The questions "What day is it today ?" and "Please spell Monday." are closed (there being only one correct response) and are also display because the teacher knew the answers.

Several such questions formed the 'warm-up' period but in line with Chaudron (1988, 173) generated only the briefest and simplest of possible responses, of which those seen in lines 10 and 13 are highly typical.

The convergent question 'How's the weather today ?' was also standard. That 40 students all gave the same answer implies either that it was prearranged (unlikely) or that they have a very limited range of lexical items from which to choose (sunny, cloudy, rainy, windy), making selection of the most appropriate response relatively easy. Students were not expected to reply with an expansive, complex answer but with a fixed, formulaic response.

The only truly referential question is given in transcript 2.

### **Transcript 2. Examples of referential question use.**

The teacher is introducing the theme of shopping prior to teaching the transactional items.

- 1 Teacher : *One more question. Please give your own original answer.*  
2 **Did you go shopping yesterday ?** [Pause] Did you go shopping  
3 yesterday ? **Did you....go shopping.....yesterday ?** *Yes, Mr*  
*Yamamoto.*  
4 Mr Yamamoto No, I didn't  
:  
5 Teacher : *Yes, no I didn't. Shopping, shopping. Did you go shopping*  
6 *yesterday ? and Mr Yamamoto answered "No, I didn't", no, I didn't.*  
7 *Please answer the same question. Did you go shopping yesterday ?*  
8 [Pause] Did you go shopping yesterday ? [Pause] *Miss Harada.*  
9 Miss Harada : Yes, I did.  
1 Teacher : *Yes, yes, I did. Did you go shopping yesterday ?* [Pause] Did you go  
0 shopping yesterday ? [Pause] *Miss Yoshida.*  
1  
1 Miss Yoshida : No, I didn't.  
2  
1 Teacher : No, I didn't. **Did you go shopping yesterday ?** [Pause] Did you go  
3 shopping yesterday ? [Pause] *Mr Miyasashi.*  
1  
4

1 Mr Yamasaki : No, I didn't.

5

1 Teacher : No, I didn't. **Did you go shopping yesterday ?** Yes, [Pause] *Mr Ishii.*

6

1 Mr Ishii : No, I didn't.

7

1 Teacher : No, I didn't.

8

Although referential questions may encourage students to try harder to respond (Nunan, 1989: 30), counter to Chaudron (1988: 127), this additional effort does not necessarily lead to higher quality communication if, as in this case, the question is also convergent in nature, yielding highly similar, brief, relatively undemanding responses. This finding also illustrates how the multiple coding of questions can provide additional information and may be a useful tool in future research.

Why students minimise responses when they may be capable of lexically or syntactically more complex answers (for example, "No, I didn't go shopping. I went fishing until 7pm.") is unclear. One clue came from the stimulated response interview with the students which revealed their desire to provide responses incorporating as much acquired language (presumably lexical and syntactic) as possible (appendix 2, transcript 1). They conceded however that this was not always possible due to a perceived time pressure [*writer's words*]. Teachers' practice may benefit from an awareness of such psycho-social factors.

During the practice phase, type range narrowed exclusively to display and referential / convergent combinations such as "Do you have any sweaters ?" and "What sizes / colours do you have ?", with correspondingly brief responses. From the stimulated response interview with the teacher, the writer found that students tended to deliberately minimise their original, spontaneous production (i.e. that production not read verbatim from the worksheet) in order to maintain the flow of communication (appendix 2, transcript 2).

## **5.2 Comparative frequency of question types.**

In line with Long and Sato (1983) cited by Nunan (1991: 194), this teacher employed predominately display / closed and convergent questions during instruction (table 3). However, during practice of transactional discourse, convergent / referential questions predominated (table 4).

The difference may be largely accounted for by the questions' purpose. During the instructional phase questions were used to warm-up and to review, teach and check learners' understanding of the linguistic items they would need to complete the

practice successfully. A systematic sequence of short answer questions achieved this relatively quickly and effectively and the teacher perceived no need to enter into extended discourse to achieve this goal. (appendix 2, transcript 3).

Conversely, questions during practice mimicked those of a 'communicative' scenario, giving some credence to Thornbury's (1996: 281) proposal that referential questions dominate 'real-life' situations.

This teacher is attempting to fulfil two apparently mutually exclusive objectives, namely:

- a). the need to teach the prescribed materials in preparation for written exams and
- b). a desire to create 'realistic' situations in which students can practice speaking,  
(from previous experience of working with this teacher).

The implication here is that when selecting the range and differential use of questions, teachers may need to compromise their personally held beliefs regarding language use with the objectives of the EF/SL program.

### **5.3 Teacher's modification of questions.**

Techniques employed during instruction to modify non-comprehended questions included self-repetition, pauses, rephrasing and translation into Japanese.

Examples of single self-repetition are given in transcript 1 and multiple self-repetition in transcript 2, while table 5 gives a breakdown of the frequency of question repetitions. The copious repetitions of "Did you go shopping yesterday ?" were intended not only to increase comprehensibility but also to maximise the opportunities for students to produce English. With 82% of questions being repeated, this was the predominant modification technique, as noted by Chaudron (1988:127). A point of interest here is that the teacher also repeated questions initially presented in Japanese. This may have been a way of avoiding unwanted silence while students processed the original presentation and / or habitual behaviour.

Examples of segmentation resulting from pauses can be found in transcripts 1 (lines 8-9 and 15-16) and 2 (line 3). These examples illustrate the teacher's intention to give students more processing time for more difficult words, for example "day" (as opposed to "date"). Table 6 shows that mean wait time pauses were very similar between question types, possibly suggesting that the teacher does not feel the need to give some question types used longer processing time than others.

Wait times here were perhaps longer than in other teaching contexts (Holley and King, 1971 cited in Chaudron, 1988: 128 proposed 5 seconds or more) because of the students' lower level. However, many students volunteered to answer each question, perhaps due to this extended wait time (in line with Richards and Lockhart,

1994: 188), though contrary to Holley and King (1971) this did not encourage greater learner production.

Transcript 3 exemplifies the use of rephrasing (lines 1,4-5, 7-8) and translation into Japanese to aid comprehension of questions.

*Transcript 3.* Use of rephrasing and translation as modifications.

The class has just listened to a comprehension practice tape.

- 1 Teacher : **What were the purchased items ? [Pause] What did he buy ?**  
2 [Pause] Mr Yoshihara.  
3 Mr Yoshihara : Scarf.  
4 Teacher : Yes, he bought a scarf. **That scarf, who is it for ? [Pause] Who's**  
5 **present is it ? [Pause] Miss Masamoto.**  
6 Miss Masamoto Mother.  
:  
7 Teacher : Yes, "for my mother". **How much is the price ? [Pause] How much**  
8 **is the scarf ? [Pause] Miss Kimura.**  
9 Miss Kimura : Three thousand yen.  
1 Teacher : That's right, three thousand yen, three thousand yen.  
0  
1 **What colour muffler did he buy ? [Long pause] What colour was**  
1  
1 **the scarf ? [Pause] Miss Numoto.**  
2  
1 Miss Numoto : Blue  
3

Paradoxically, all five occasions when questions were rephrased were when the question was initially presented in Japanese. Since there can be little doubt that students understood the initial presentation, why did the teacher rephrase the question ? As with repetitions, it may be avoidance of silence and / or habitual behaviour.

The teacher's translation of so many questions into Japanese (table 7) certainly aids comprehension, but at what cost ? A disadvantage is that it seems to sanction use of L1 from learners (Bruck and Schultz, (1977) cited by Chaudron, 1988: 172 and Zilm, 1989 cited by Nunan, 1991: 190), line 13 being a case in point. The student replied in Japanese, even though she was almost certainly capable of the English equivalent. The implication for teachers is that they should attempt to maximise input in the target language wherever possible.

Another occasion for code switching is solicitation of translations of items from Japanese to English or vice versa (table 7). Such tasks were common in this lesson, though the effects of such questions on learning outcomes is unclear.

A rudimentary comparison of English speech rates to students during 'normal'

discourse and repetitions showed very little difference (section 4.2), though these values are dubious. Comparison between this and rate of speech to the author during interview is invalid due to differing contexts (the latter involving more complex subject matter, native speaker addressee and a need for reflection). A direct comparison of the teacher's speech rate to students in English and Japanese might also be considered invalid, as different languages may have different norms in this respect (Henzl, 1979 cited by Chaudron, 1988: 69). Therefore, it cannot be shown that the teacher used reduced speech rate as a modification technique in speech to students.

Modification was less evident during practice, perhaps because all the required elements had been thoroughly drilled and students could use a worksheet which included the pedagogical items in script form. However, repetitions were occasionally requested by students either because of the high volume of sound in the room or to provide longer processing time.

The utilisation of a narrow range of relatively simple modifications is no indicator as to this teacher's ability in this area but may be a selective use from a larger repertoire.

#### **5.4 Teacher's policy on and provision of feedback**

The teacher's policy on feedback provision (appendix 2, transcript 4) may seem simplistic but close observation and rudimentary analysis of her lesson not only confirmed it to be true but also revealed the relaxed, friendly (but controlled) atmosphere that this approach created and which Chaudron (1988: 134) points out, several articles have identified as an important aspect of feedback and error correction. Transcript 4 gives a good example.

*Transcript 4.* An example of corrective feedback provision.

As part of the warm-up, the teacher is asking about the weather.

- 1 Teacher : [To the class] **How's the weather today ? How's the weather.....**  
 2 **today ?**  
 3 All students : It's cloudy.  
 4 Teacher : Please spell cloudy. [Pause] Please spell cloudy.....Cloudy. *It's a*  
 5 *little difficult. Miss Miyura.*  
 6 Miss Miyura C-L..... eh ? [Uncertain pause during which the student looks to the  
 :  
 7 teacher for help and the teacher mouths the letter 'O']  
 8 Miss Miyura C-L-U [The student has misread the mimed letter so the teacher  
 :  
 9 inclines her head and looks uncertain. The student self-corrects with..]  
 10 C-L-O-U....  
 11 Teacher : [the teacher accepts this with a nod and a smile] Mmm.  
 12 Miss Miyura D-A-Y.

- :  
 13 Teacher : [Teacher looks uncertain again.]  
 14 Miss Miyura D-Y.  
 :  
 15 Teacher : [Big smile] **Yes [reinforcement]**, D-Y. *It's OK. You*  
 16 **did well [motivational]. C-L-O-U-D-Y [reinforcement].**

This example is typical of the way in which the teacher gave corrective, reinforcement and motivational feedback. Rather than correct the student overtly, the teacher consistently avoided negative feedback, patiently giving mainly non-verbal, covert cues when necessary, encouraging the student to self-correct when possible. She also attempted to reduce the stigma associated with error by adding consolatory, motivational feedback (line 15). This interaction also showed the student's willingness to seek help from the teacher (line 6), further suggesting an environment conducive to learning.

Provision of reinforcing feedback was limited to repetition and overt acceptance of students' responses (see transcripts 1-4 for copious examples of both, specifically transcript 4, line 15). Various non-verbal cues were also employed. These methods were used systematically (McDonough and Shaw, 1993: 272) *after almost every student utterance* (in line with Holland and Shortall, 1998: 165)

One important point which transcription perhaps doesn't highlight is the high reliance of Japanese on non-verbal feedback during spoken discourse. Any foreigner teaching in Japan and wishing to conform to cultural norms may need to employ (or even expand their use of) such non-verbal feedback strategies.

Observation suggests another (unstated) component of the teacher's feedback policy: that prevention is better than cure. She went to great lengths to reduce the rate of errors, employing several of the strategies suggested by Richards and Lockhard (1994: 192). For example:

- a). suggested use of the wordlist in the textbook for spelling,
- b). writing lexical and syntactical items on the board *before* asking questions relating to those items,
- c). placing questions in context (Chaudron, 1988: 69) and
- d). presenting comprehension check questions both before and after listening to the tape.

That few errors were made during formal instruction speaks tentatively in favour of this preventative approach, though it may also be concluded that the material used was not sufficiently challenging (counter to Krashen's Monitor Theory cited by Brown, 1994b: 280). The low error rate also makes comment on the teacher's treatment of local or global errors (Brown 1994b: 221) or preferred focus on content

or form (Richards and Lockhart 1994: 189-192) problematic.

Of the errors that the teacher witnessed, none were left untreated and during stimulated response (appendix 2, transcript 4) the teacher claimed that she would correct all spoken discourse errors. For these reasons, it is not possible to discuss non-intervention behaviour here. However, as figure 1 shows, correcting all learner errors has its own inherent problems.

## **6 Conclusion**

The subject used various question types, of which referential questions gave the most unexpected results. Counter to several prior studies, referential questions do not appear to increase the length or complexity of learner production if the question is inherently limiting or if learners make a conscious decision to minimise their responses due to psycho-social factors.

The latter may be an area worthy of further investigation. It was also shown that multiple coding of questions may be a potentially useful tool in future research. The shift from mainly display questions during instruction to predominantly referential questions during practice highlights the need for teachers to use types appropriate to the purpose and context.

The teacher also systematically employed the more common modification techniques, though these were often used for purposes other than improving comprehension. There is some concern over the quantity of Japanese used and its effect(s) on students' English production and learning outcomes, though further study is required to show whether this concern is justified.

With respect to feedback, if one accepts that students were sufficiently challenged by the material presented, the low error rate observed suggests the subject's feedback policy of affirmation and prevention may be quite effective. Error correction and copious reinforcing and motivational feedback were provided, often through non-verbal cues. As no cases of non-intervention occurred during observation, the subject's behaviour in this regard could only be inferred from discussion with the subject during the stimulated response interview.

If, as suggested, questions, modifications and feedback influence student participation, motivation, production and therefore, indirectly, learning outcomes, well-informed practice is highly desirable. The author concedes however, that such practice may not always be practicable within the constraints of a (particularly state) EF/SL language program and that some degree of compromise may be necessary.

## Appendix 1: Comment sheet sample.

Coding key : **m** = teacher's speech modifications  
**q** = questions (teacher's or students')  
**f** = feedback  
**lp** = learner L2 production  
**o** = other

Time Fra me mins : secs		Code (m, q, f, lp, o)	Comment
1	44	q	"Please spell December". A closed / display question in L2.
11	02	lp	In response to a question presented in Japanese, the student replied in Japanese, even though the answer ("red" was well within his vocabulary base.
2	35	f	Covert, patient feedback when a student misspelt "cloudy". She preferred to encourage self-correction.
---	---	o	There's a generally friendly, relaxed atmosphere in the class.
48	20	m	3 repetitions and 1 modification, even though the question was presented in Japanese.

## **Appendix 2: Selective transcripts from the stimulated response interviews.**

This transcript is taken from the discussion with the four selected students. Students utterances are verified translations from Japanese.

### **Transcript 1. Relates to students' preferred use of short answers.**

- 1 Author : I was interested in the answers you gave in the lesson. Many students  
2 use very short answers, for example here [shows a section of video  
3 tape] "Yes, I did", "No, I didn't". Can you give longer answers than  
4 that, more information ? [Teacher translates]  
5 Student 1 I think I can use more English. I'd like to use more English but normally  
6 :  
7 we use short answers, so I don't like to give my opinion.  
8 Author : OK, thank you. How about you ?  
9 Student 2 I think we can't take so much time. The teacher is very busy and has lots to  
10 :  
11 teach.  
12 Author : All right. What about you, can you give more information when you  
13 answer a question ? [Teacher translates]  
14 :  
15 Student 3 I think sometimes I can use more English but it would take longer.  
16 :  
17 Author : How about you ?  
18 :  
19 Student 4 I think so too.  
20 :  
21 Author : Could you give me a longer answer now ? Did you go shopping yesterday  
22 ?  
23 Student 4 [Student smiles and pauses for thought and replies in English] Yes, I did. I  
24 :  
25 went to Tenmaya Happy Town. I didn't buy.  
26  
27

Transcript 2-4 are taken from the interview with the teacher which was conducted in English.

### **Transcript 2. On the brevity of a student's answers during practice.**

- 1 Author : So how did you feel about her English overall ? Is that her normal level or  
2 does she normally speak longer, more complicated sentences ?  
3 Teacher : I think she is very smart, so she tried to make longer sentences but she  
4 chose the good speed, the good conversation. If she tried to make long  
5 sentences, it spends a long time.  
6 Author : Yeah.

- 7 Teacher : So she chose the short answer, the short question.  
8 Author : Oh that's a good idea.

**Transcript 3. Regarding the systematic sequence of short answer questions.**

- 1 Author : I was very interested in the questions you asked. When you were teaching the  
2 new English you asked many questions in the first 25 minutes. Is that  
3 normal for you ?  
4 Teacher Mmmm. [Pause] I want to teach the English properly but quickly as possible.  
:  
5 I like students to practice speaking. So I ask many questions to check  
students  
6 understand. Mmm, it's normal, I think.  
7 Author : Do you like students to use short or long answers.  
8 Teacher Of course long answers are good but it takes much time.  
:

**Transcript 4. Relates to the teacher's policy on feedback provision.**

- 1 Author : For my assignment I need to know if you have a policy on when and how  
2 you provide feedback. Do you have a policy ?  
3 Teacher : Well, I think it's important to give feedback.  
4 Author : [Thinks that the teacher is unsure what is meant by 'feedback', so  
expands]  
5 Do you correct students' mistakes ?  
6 Teacher : I try to help students if they make a mistake but I don't like to say "no".  
7 Author : Are there times when you wouldn't correct a student's mistake ?  
8 Teacher : No, I try to correct every mistake.  
9 Author : OK. How about motivation. Do you give comments to motivate students ?  
10 Teacher : Yes, as much as possible.  
11 Author : Can you give me an example ?  
12 Teacher : Mmm. I say "Yes" or "That's right" or "Very good".<sup>1</sup>  
13 Author : I see.

Author's note: These are reinforcers rather than motivators. The issue of reinforcement feedback was not discussed to lack of subject's available time.

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