

# Exploring Teachers' Questions and Feedback

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## Module One Assessment Task

LT/00/05

Observe an EFL class to which you have access and, employing a suitable observation technique, observe both of the following questions:

- a. What types of questions does the teacher use? Is there a preponderance of any particular type(s)? What modification techniques does s/he employ when questions are not understood? How much /what sort(s) of L2 production do questions generate from learners?
- b. What type of feedback does the teacher provide? When and how does s/he provide it? Are there times when learners have problems/make errors but the teacher does not intervene? If so, what are the apparent reasons for non-intervention? Discuss this with the teacher. Does s/he have a policy on when and how to provide (or not provide) feedback?

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## 1 Introduction

In the first part of this paper I will consider different approaches to classifying questions, from either a pedagogical or linguistic point of view, and discuss their usefulness for action research.

In the second part I will analyse data collected from classes of different levels of age and proficiency. I will compare the lessons basing on tally sheet data and provide an analysis of one of the lessons by transcript. In this part I will also examine the feedback provided by the teacher and compare it to her feedback policy discussed with her after the lesson.

## 2 Question types

### 2.1 „Socratic“ or „Elicitation“ questions

A methodological approach often found in language as well as in content classrooms is to structure a lesson by, so to speak, hopping from a question to the next one, using the learners' answers as point of departure for the next question. To follow his or her plan, the teacher can not proceed with the lesson until the expected answer is given by a learner. This approach can be referred to as the „Socratic method“ (Chaudron 1988, 129) or „Elicitation method“ (Nunan 1991, 195). While Chaudron offers a positive view of the teacher as a guide for „the learner toward particular bits of knowledge“, this methodological approach is more often discredited. Nunan for example accuses it for wasting time in holding back information which could easily be given by the teacher, and Grell & Grell (1983, 49) reserve a whole chapter of more than fifty pages to prove the deficiencies of the method. Over and above that, questions teachers are led to ask by this method can be found in negative catalogues of teachers' questions (Meyer 1987, 208 „nose picking questions“<sup>1</sup> ; Brown 1994, 167).

### 2.2 Convergent questions vs. divergent questions; procedural questions

Richards and Lockheart (1996, 185) propose to classify questions into either „convergent“ or „divergent“ ones. The first of these two types will most likely be found in lessons following a methodology described under 2.1 as they „encourage similar student responses, or responses which focus on a central theme“.

The alternative type, divergent questions, are not designed to determine the ongoing of the planned lesson but to give the learners the possibility to establish real personal involvement in the course of the lesson and thus to address the learners' potential as an individual and to strengthen intrinsic motivation. Richards and Lockheart (1996, 165) call this „affective activities“.

This type of questions can be expected to lead to more communicative use of language but makes les-

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<sup>1</sup> translation by Suter

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son planning difficult because the learners' utterances can not be predicted and designed for a certain lesson topic or goal (in fact the same is true for the method examined under 2.1 and hence can lead the teacher to unnecessary detours until the expected answer is coming).

A third question type is introduced by Richards and Lockheart (1996,185) under the term of „procedural questions“. Willis (1987) describes this type of language as „outer structure“. Such questions are used in sequences of classroom organisation and management.

### **2.3 Questions which provide opportunities for practice**

Another use of questions by teachers can be observed during sequences of controlled practice, usually regarding a certain topic or goal of the lesson. These questions are always characterised by belonging to Willis'(1987) „inner language“ and they can be asked by the teacher as well as by learners, which is also partly true for the questions discussed under 2.2, but not for those under 2.1. As Nunan (1991, 155) points out, contemporary teaching materials try to give a „meaningful dimension“ to such sequences.

### **2.4 Display questions vs. referential questions**

This classification categorises a question by considering whether the teacher already knows the answer to it : Is the learner expected to display information or knowledge previously acquired or is genuine information to be communicated?

This terminology seems to have been introduced in a study by Long and Sato (cited in Chaudron 1988, 127 and Nunan 1991, 194). Brown (1994, 166) proposes a more differentiated scale of seven types ranging from „knowledge questions“ (display end of the scale) to „evaluation questions“.

## **3 Implications for action research**

If we want to operationalize what is known about question types for action research, we will have to consider which question type(s) can encourage learners' oral language production and improve their communication skills. But there are, in my opinion, more points to consider if we want to initiate positive effects on an experienced teacher: action research should give him or her positive feedback (i.e. provide dos and not don'ts), and should also be able to give a simpler version of feedback as well as a more sophisticated interpretation of the matter(s) in question, depending on the teacher's needs.

However, the goal to keep in mind is to put a simple and effective tool to evaluate and improve their questioning habits at the teachers' disposal.

Recent research has been able to show that referential questions as opposed to display questions en-

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courage learners' oral language production (Brown 1994, 167. Chaudron 1988, 173. Nunan 1991, 194). Thus, an effective feedback to the teacher could simply consist of the number of display and referential questions he or she has asked during a lesson.

In addition, transcribed sequences can show a teacher what effects his or her questions may have on the learners' language production in more detail.

#### **4 Comparing classes**

Because EFL is soon going to be introduced as a compulsory subject in our (i.e. Swiss) secondary schools and an introduction of the subject in primary education is discussed at present, I decided to observe a class of each of these age levels, comparing the respective results to a class of adult learners. Over and above that, the learners' age does not seem to have played a role in the research on question types yet, but there is a chance that the facts to be found can be linked to the age level characteristics mentioned by Brown (1994, 90/95). To collect the data needed I therefore observed three lessons by four teachers in three different classes and counted the number of display and referential questions using a tally sheet:

- a. a class of children of 8 to 9 years experiencing their 7th lesson of EFL taught by two teachers. Topics included names, colours and numbers.
- b. a class of teenagers of 17 years. Topic: defining and non-defining relative clauses.
- c. a class of adults working with „Headway pre-intermediate“, Chapter 10.

In class a. the teachers asked 31 display questions and no referential questions, but gave a large number of instructions to whom the learners responded physically (72). This fits almost perfectly with Brown's advice to avoid talking about abstract issues but rather activate the children with the help of different (physical/non-verbal) activities (Brown 1994, 92). In addition to this, more complex verbal communication can only play a very limited role with beginners. This may lead to the conclusion that for this proficiency level a more traditional approach to language teaching following a PPP model as described by Skehan (1996, 17) may be appropriate, proceeding to more communicative teaching forms with the development of the learners' basic skills. Consequently, the collected data on display and referential questions has been of limited value to provide feedback to the teachers.

In class b. the teacher asked 19 display questions and 5 referential questions. As implied by the lesson's topic, the teacher's approach was the grammar translation method, and the small number of referential questions shows that this question type had no importance in the lesson's methodology. According to the teacher, the facts that the teachers in the school of the class observed base their EFL

Exploring teachers' questions and feedback instruction on the learners' knowledge of Latin and that working with English literature is the core activity in classes of higher proficiency justifies this teaching approach. This matches perfectly with the facts about the grammar translation method pointed out by Richards and Rogers (1986,4). In this case, the providing of feedback on question forms may help to raise the teacher's consciousness of the methodological approach he is following and the implications this may have for the development of the learners' skills.

In class c. the teacher asked 67 display questions and 41 referential questions. Display questions often belonged to an exercise from a worksheet or the textbook, and as the reader will be able to see in the next part, referential questions resulted indeed in greater involvement from the learners' side, although they were not necessarily linked to the textbook's topics.

Although there are apparent reasons for these strikingly different results in the three classes, some questions remain answered unsatisfactorily:

- Is the concept of display/referential questions, which is to be linked to a communicative approach to language teaching, helpful for all age/proficiency levels?
- (How) can a topic as in lesson b. be treated with a communicative approach?
- (How) can sequences with referential questions be embedded in certain topics prescribed by a textbook or curriculum?

I have attempted to give an answer to the first question in the text above while I think the second question must be answered by the negative, the topic seems utterly incompatible to teaching forms associated to communicative language teaching. Finally, the problem of the teacher's control over the lesson's topic while working with referential questions shall be highlighted below with the help of the transcribed material.

## 5 Analysing a teacher's questions and feedback

### 5.1 The transcribed lesson

The present transcripts are taken from the lesson in class c. introduced in the previous chapter. The teacher initiates the lesson by asking a question designed to lead the learners to the topic of the worksheet she has decided to work with in the lesson's first part. She then introduces the three tasks on the worksheet and makes sure the learners are able to work independently. The transcript ends as she organises the class for pair work. Transcript I. shows 7'20'' of classroom discourse.

Transcript II. takes up as pair work is presented and the word „snoring“ comes up in one part of the worksheet. The teacher uses this as an opportunity to leave the task discussion and asks the class a personal question. The transcript shows the whole conversation about snoring and ends just before the teacher gives the explanation she heard for the matter in question and continues discussing the worksheet. Transcript II. shows 3'15'' of classroom discourse.

### 5.2 Questions

The transcript shows considerable correlation with the studies by Brock and Nunan (both cited in Nunan 1991, 194) mentioned above: there are utterances of more complex language to be found in answers to referential questions than in display ones, although the few examples present do not permit to speak of significance.

Transcript I. begins with a referential question which is almost immediately modified into a display question and the whole sequence contains just one more referential question (v.), which is to be answered in the learners' L1. It can not surprise, according to the research on display and referential questions, that the learners' utterances are of very low complexity. There are only three which are not just repetitions or texts read from the worksheet: „I can't explain“ (ii.), „i“ (xxii.) and „I think a bottle of ink“ (xxviii.). The teacher is clearly focussing her questions on the topic of this part of the lesson. In my view, this can be compared to the presentation phase in a PPP lesson planning approach. Transcript II., by contrast, contains 15 verbal and non-verbal reactions to the teacher's questions in less than half of the time. They are not repetitions and, by nature, not read from any source. All of them are basically elicited by the initial referential question „who snores in here?“. Apparently, there is no cunningly elaborate question to initiate interaction, but a learner really wants to communicate personal information and this leads to natural conversation. The situation is exploited very well by the teacher, especially from ix. to xix. where her focus is clearly on fluency and not accuracy. And, finally, even a learner who apparently has some difficulty to formulate takes part in the conversation giving a non-verbal answer (xxvii.).

### 5.3 Feedback

When I asked the teacher about her feedback policy after having observed and recorded the lesson, she told me that she tried to avoid negative feedback whenever possible. However, if she considered a correction to be necessary, her policy was simply to repeat the learner's incorrect utterance correctly. She based this policy on the fact that the learners attended the course voluntarily in their free time and that it seemed to her that, as she put it, „a lot of people in the east of Switzerland seem to have experienced the language teacher as a person with a stick to hit on your head if you make an error“<sup>2</sup>. Thus, it was very important to her to encourage the learners to speak out freely without being corrected all the time.

The transcripts illustrate a remarkably strict following of her own feedback policy by the teacher. In my opinion we see here an experienced professional at work, as she is perfectly aware of the contradictory effects corrective feedback may have on classroom interaction: As pointed out by Chaudron (1988, 152), it is dangerous to assume that learning does automatically take place when a learner's utterance is corrected, even though there is a potential that it will.

## 6 Discussion

What we know about asking questions in the classroom can be described exaggeratedly as a dilemma for the teacher: He or she can either ask types of questions which will presumably generate language of poor complexity by the learner and keep control of the lesson or give up the steering of teaching by asking questions which are more likely to encourage more complex but less predictable learner language.

The inherent tension of this situation can hardly be decreased if we consider the teacher to be the centre and motor of learning in the classroom (which is self-evident for followers of the „Socratic“ method). This forces us to adopt a more learner-centred view of what is going on in a classroom and to accept that learning also takes place without the teacher forever supervising the learners.

But still the problem of topic control and curriculum fulfilment remains the teacher's responsibility. Hence, referential or divergent question can not simply replace the dominant role of display questioning in elicitation techniques as teaching momentum. So it may be the teacher question itself which is to be replaced by an alternative methodological approach. At this point task-based approaches as described by Willis (1990) and Grell&Grell (1983, by the term „Lernaufgaben“) seem to have the

<sup>2</sup> This may be due to the fact that French as a foreign language is a compulsory subject in all schools and has had a strong tradition of being taught following strictly the grammar translation method through to the 1980s. This tradition has now been weakened, but grammar is still an important issue in our curricula and textbooks.



Exploring teachers' questions and feedback potential to fill the gap as motor of classroom instruction, while teachers' divergent/referential questions will still play an important role in foreign language classrooms if the aim is to provide possibilities for real interaction (and display questions are indicated in practice lessons as well as in situations in which the learner is in fact supposed to display language skills and knowledge such as tests and examinations).

Even so, these approaches may have their limitations if beginners are to be taught. Then, in my opinion, there has to be an emphasis on language input prior to task-based instruction. Brown (1994, 106) gives a good overview of adequate teaching techniques for this proficiency level, mentioning also „a good many teacher-initiated questions“, supposedly of the display type. But then, the challenge for the teacher is to give up these techniques step by step as soon as allowed by the learners' progress. In fact, the problem inherent in the PPP model criticised by Lewis (1996), Skehan (1996) and others may just be that it is only adequate for complete beginners but still used when not matching the learners' needs any longer.

Talking about feedback, I believe that experience is the most important basis for the teacher to be effective. To be able to react adequately on the affective as well as the cognitive level he or she must have a deeper knowledge of the learners' culture and personality and should reflect the effects of either corrective or non-corrective feedback provided rather than try to follow any guidelines, always keeping in mind the ambivalence of possible effects on the learner.

## **7 Conclusion**

The observations made for this paper have shown that feedback provided to a teacher on his questioning habits can indeed give her or him a clue to the importance of the role communication plays in her or his classroom. Referential questions have showed to be far more effective in initiating interaction.

Feedback, on the other hand, seems to be an issue more challenging for the researcher but at the same time more easily accessible to the teacher who can build on her or his professional experience.

The conclusion I have come to personally is that asking questions is neither the only nor the best stimulus to set classroom interaction in motion, but still I am to establish a clearer view of how to provide learners with clearly focussed opportunities to communicate in my own classroom as well as in other teaching contexts. It seems clear to me, though, that different teaching contexts (e.g. the learners' age, proficiency level or cultural background) may require methodological approaches adapted to the respective situation.

As EFL is to be newly introduced in Swiss schools as a compulsory subject for all pupils, it will be the

Exploring teachers' questions and feedback challenge to help establishing a methodological approach to the subject based on current research findings rather than on so-called „tried-and-tested“ traditional methods (i.e. grammar translation, PPP).

## Appendix I

### Transcript I.

- i. T Why don't you give me what you think about Murphy's law ... (writes on blackboard) Murphy's law ... What do you know about Murphy's law, did you hear this before? Murphy's law? What's that? What's the idea behind Murphy's law? Who heard about Murphy's law before ... only Evie? Yeah, Evie?
- ii. L I can't explain
- iii. T Is it? Can you trade it in German? You know ... it sounds familiar, you heard this before, but what it is, we're not clear ... ok ... (writes on blackboard) If anything can possibly go wrong, it will. You can translate it into German ... If anything can possibly go wrong, it will. Yeah?
- iv. L (translates) Wänn's ä möglicheit git as es falsch lauft, dänn lauft's falsch
- v. T ... dänn lauft's au falsch, yeah. Do you have something similar in German? ... A similar saying? Yes, George?
- vi. L Wänn's zweitelet so drittelets (laughter)
- vii. T Yeah, that's good. Ok, this is the idea and I have a little review page with me today... on the right side we have variations of Murphy's law ... different situations. Ok, have a look on the right hand side... more logical laws ... and read me the beginning there. Marlis, can you start, please ... on the right hand side in puzzle 18.
- viii. L (reads) It always starts raining as soon as you decide to leave your umbrella at home. In the (inaudible) below there are ten more logical (pronounced wrongly) laws.
- ix. T Logical laws.
- x. L ... logical laws. But the first part of each one is with a wrong second part. For example „You always think of something else to write in a letter as soon as the mecha...
- xi. T Mechanic
- xii. L ... mechanic arrives to repair it“ doesn't make sense. And for each first part find the correct second part. Write the numbers with the correct letters.
- xiii. T Ok, that's right... Frederick! (L comes in) I think it's a parking problem tonight, isn't it, with Santa Clause outside ... ok, let's do one together ... do one together ... read me the first part there, Evie ... „a“ on the left side ...
- xiv. L (reads) You always think of something else to write in a letter...
- xv. T Ok, who can find the correct ending for that sentence on the right side? Have a look down the list on the right side and what goes with that beginning ... What end goes with the beginning ... have it? Hans, what do you say?
- xvi. L ... as soon as you have sealed the envelope
- xvii. T Yeah, can you give me a good translation for „seal“?... the envelope is what ... and when you seal it, when you lick, the envelope ... close it ... it's sealed. Ok, that's your job on the right hand side, you connect the beginning and the end of these situations. On the left side you have a shopping list. Can you read me the instructions for the shopping list, George please?
- xviii. L (reads) First put the missing letters into the words in these pictures, all the missing letters are vowels, a, e, a, o, ooh...

- xix. T u, yeah, a, e, i, o and u. Who can find me one in that group that you can complete? We're missing only the vowels ... yeah? Can you find one, George?
- xx. L Ink
- xxi. T Ink. So we're missing an...
- xxii. L i
- xxiii. T An i, right. All right, now we go to the bottom half on the left side ... the bottom half of the left side... and Walti read me that part in the box, it starts „those ten words“
- xxiv. L (reads) Those ten words are in this shopping list, but they are hidden because the list has been folded in half.
- xxv. T Folded in half, can you show me that? Folded ... yeah ... folded in half ... and the box on the right side ... just to the right of that ... right ...
- xxvi. L (reads) Write the complete shopping list here.
- xxvii. T Ok, so we have ink, George said correctly number one is ink, and when we look at the shopping ... oops... on the left side ... what is the correct container for the ink? A carton, a tube, a tin, a bottle, a jar etcetera ... yeah?
- xxviii. L I think a bottle of ink.
- xxix. T That's right, so you write a bottle of, and on the right side you enter ink. Ok? All right, so find a nice partner ... ( pair work is organised)

### Transcript analysis: Transcript I.

- i. The lesson's opening question is a referential one never to be answered neither by the learners nor the teacher herself. First of all, it is interesting to see how the question is modified from a divergent referential question to a convergent display question. In addition to this, the recording shows that the wait time between the modified questions is less than one second, a factor which can not be discussed furthermore in this paper, but has also been recognised as an important one to language teaching (Chaudron 1988, 127 and Nunan 1991, 193). Hence, the T apparently reacts to non-verbal signals given by the learners.
- ii. L picks neither the first nor the last from the T's series of questions to answer but one from the middle: „What's (the idea behind) Murphy's law?“ A display question.
- iii. T now insists on the question the L reacted on, writes the answer on the blackboard and asks for translation.
- iv. L translates into Swiss German Dialect<sup>3</sup>
- v. Referential question
- vi. This answer surprises the T as well as the other Ls (and myself)
- ix. Correlates with T's feedback policy.
- xv. display question
- xvi. L reads the answer from the worksheet
- xvii. As in i. the T's question is not answered and she reacts to non-verbal answers. The end of this utterance is of course a direction in question form.
- xix. Correlates with T's feedback policy: T repeats wrong pronunciation correctly. Followed by a display question.

<sup>3</sup> Standard German: Wenn es eine Möglichkeit gibt, dass es falsch läuft, dann läuft es falsch.

- xx. One word is enough to answer the display question
- xxi. Another display question ...
- xxii. ... to be answered this time only by one letter.
- xv. A display question. This time, the T herself asks for non-verbal signs to make sure the I has understood.
- xvii. Another display question

## Appendix II

### Transcript II.

- i. T Who snores in here? Who snores? Anybody?
- ii. L I don't know...
- iii. T You never had any complaints at home? Nobody snores? Do you snore, Frederick?
- iv. L Yes, I snore.
- v. T Do you snore?
- vi. L Yes.
- vii. T Yeah? Ok. Do you snore, George?
- viii. L I never heard me.
- ix. T Walti, you?
- x. L Er, seldom.
- xi. T Seldom.
- xii. L When I lie in a ... in a special, er, position then it could be I snore.
- xiii. T Do you know what the position is, when...?
- xiv. L Yeah, on the, er, when I'm on the back and the ... and the head a little bit, er...
- xv. T (laughs) What? What's your head? Your head's up? What's your head doing up?
- xvi. L With, er, with the pillow... with the pillow and the pillow...(laughter) the pillow not in the correct position.
- xvii. T Your head is ... is like this only your lying on your back
- xviii. L Like this, yeah.
- xix. T It's a surprise you can breathe ... without snoring. Ok. It's very special. Do you snore Louis?
- xx. L I don't believe but my wife she say I do
- xxi. T She says you do, yeah. Ok. I'm only asking the men, I assume no... no woman snores. Do you, Hans, do you snore?
- xxii. L No.
- xxiii. T No. For sure not.
- xxiv. L Yeah. No.
- xxv. T For sure not. Are you...
- xxvi. L I'm sure.
- xxvii. T Does anybody have an answer for snoring? Do you have a trick to stop a person from snoring?

- xxviii. L (clicks his tongue twice)  
xxix. T Yeah, what does this do, Frederick? I heard this the first time this year. (clicks her tongue several times)  
xxx. L I don't... I don't now (sic) ...  
xxx. T The reason behind ...  
xxxii. L Because, er, but it work...  
xxxiii. T Mm hm, mm hm.

**Transcript analysis: Transcript II.**

- i. A referential question, although a convergent one.  
iii. A rhetorical question followed by the same question as in i.  
viii. An interesting effect: the L does not seem to want to answer the same question with a simple yes or no, hence the answer becomes more complex.  
ix. to xix. The very same question generates here real communication between the T and a L who successfully explains an apparently rather complicated matter. According to the feedback policy mentioned above, the teacher does not correct the L's language errors.  
xxi. Correlates with T's feedback policy.  
xxii. This L answers in the simplest possible way. I suppose the potential of the T's initial question may now have been exhausted.  
xxvii. This referential question is modified in an interesting way: The second version contains three words that exist in the L's L1 as well (trick, stop, person), a sign of the important role the native language plays in foreign language learning as pointed out by Swan (1985).  
xxviii. to xxxiii. The T's feedback policy is illustrated once more: She shows no reaction to the learner's difficulties in pronouncing and formulating but tries to keep the communication flowing.

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