

TEACHERS' QUESTIONING STRATEGIES TO ELICIT STUDENTS' VERBAL RESPONSES IN EFL CLASSES AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Abstract: This article reports on a study aimed at exploring and examining English language teachers' skills in questioning to enhance students' verbal responses in EFL (English as a Foreign language) classes. This was a qualitative case study, employing discourse analysis, conducted in one junior high school in a town in Central Java Province, Indonesia. The research participants were two Indonesian teachers of English language. They taught Year Eight students in the academic year of 2015/2016. The data were collected from audio-video recordings, transcripts of the lessons, classroom observations notes, and teachers' interviews. The transcriptions were analysed by using Wu's taxonomy of questioning strategies (1993) as it gave a detailed categorization of teachers' questions to stimulate students' verbal responses. The findings showed that the teachers used mostly four questioning strategies. The first teacher often applied decomposition strategy where the initial question was elaborated into some questions, while the second teacher tended to use repetition strategy. This study has shown that teachers' questioning skills is crucial to successfully make students engaged in the classroom interaction, enhance students' verbal responses, and lead to the comprehension of the lesson. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers should be more aware of their questioning skills to assist students achieve better proficiency in the English language.

Keywords: *Teachers' questioning strategies, students' verbal responses, EFL classes, classroom discourse analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is not only gaining good understanding of the language grammar, but also using the language directly to communicate. Language learners are considered successful learners when they are able to use it communicatively. The common problem happened in schools in EFL context is lack of speaking practices for

students. It might be caused by many factors, including that students have not got adequate exposure in English; they are shy to speak; or, teachers lack providing them a chance to speak English. Furthermore, some teachers focus more on teaching grammar than leading them to practise the language directly. As a result, many students are only good in the theory of grammar, but they cannot apply it appropriately and fluently in

context. This makes many students are passive in speaking English, even in the English language classes.

Many researchers have shown that EFL teachers' questioning highly influence their students' speaking ability. Teachers play a main role to control and manage the class, especially solving the students' passiveness. According to White and Lightbown (as cited in Toni and Parse, 2013), teachers are dominating the class, controlling the topics, speaking turns of the conversation, and giving most of the questions; they provide a lot of questions and help students respond on it as well. Teachers totally can control the class in which they find and use some questioning strategies that are appropriately applied on students. They actually have strategies to solve the students' speaking problems.

In a teaching and learning process, teachers always involve the use of questioning skills for any kinds of teaching goals. Teacher's questions become the main tool to achieve the teaching and learning purposes (Boyd, 2015). To elicit students' responses and encourage their participation in class, questions are frequently used by teachers to stimulate them. Chaudron (as cited in Tan, 2007) urges that teachers' questions dominated the class talk for 20%-40%. Questions potentially make students engaged to speak because questioning produce oral interaction between teacher and students. When a teacher asks, students who know the answer will try to respond. Essberger, Rubin and Thompson (as cited in Haron *et al.*, 2012) state that students can perform and participate in classroom activities by answering teacher's questions. Swain (as cited in Tan, 2007, p. 89) asserts that:

For language students, responding to teacher questioning is a learning opportunity in which they are presumed to devote to thinking and producing comprehensible output, testing their hypotheses about how the language works and modifying their output when

getting negative feedback. (Swain as cited in Tan, 2007, p. 89)

By responding to teachers' questions, students can know and also apply directly how the language really works.

Teachers' questioning is the skill frequently used, more powerful to create the talk move (Boyd, 2015). Questioning is usually found when language teachers apply communicative language teaching method. Questioning influences students' participation and comprehension as well. Through questions, the talk or discussion will be created in the classroom. Talk will be dominating during the teaching and learning process so the discussion is created between teacher and students. Toni and Parse (2013) state that in language education, teachers should direct students to questioning, provide them to think at high level, enhance students' participation, and improve their listening ability. Teachers' questioning also stimulate students to speak because teachers are found to speak more frequent in questions while students will speak in answers (Dillon, 1981). Therefore, students can practice to speak English properly when answering the teachers' questions. In addition, their speaking ability will improve through responding to the questions.

In fact, teachers' questions do not always successfully stimulate all students to respond. This problem might be caused by many factors. One of the factors is that English remains an unfamiliar language for most students in Indonesia, particularly in rural areas, like the site of this present study. Not knowing the meanings of words will be a difficult thing; it makes them difficult to understand the lesson as well. Hence, asking unclear questions will make students more confused and silent. Teachers should find or use strategies to ask the students. However, they must be careful about the techniques used in delivering questions. Ornstein (1987, p. 74) asserts that "teachers should know how well and effective their

questioning strategies and techniques are". This is because how teachers deliver the questions will influence students' understanding.

Strategies in questioning are used to give guidance for teachers in giving questions to students. Kerry (as cited in Tekene, 2006) states that types of questions which are used and formulated by teachers are very important processes for students' achievement and their level of engagement in teaching and learning. Unclear questions will not make them participate well; furthermore, students' verbal responses are not elicited well. Teachers may use other techniques to encourage students to respond to their questions by rephrasing the questions or changing the complex questions into simple and understandable constructions (Cole & Chan, Ekasingh, Wu as cited in Dumteeb, 2009). When students cannot catch the meanings of the initial questions that have been given, teachers must look for another way to express it. Using different types and ways of giving questions is very important to make students understand.

Nisa (2014) focused her study on the classroom interaction analysis in the EFL speaking class. Her findings provided evidence that teachers should promote their students' communicative skills and encourage students to use English during speaking activities by asking questions. According to Wu (1993), there are a range of questioning strategies that can elicit students' speaking practices. Wu's taxonomy of questioning strategies is vital and effective to extend students' verbal responses. As proposed by Wu (1993, pp. 55-56), the five questioning strategies that teachers should use to generate verbal responses from students include: rephrasing (a question is expressed in another way), simplification (this may be regarded as a kind of rephrasing by means of which a situation is simplified so that students can cope with it), repetition (a question is

repeated in the hope that a verbal response will be elicited), decomposition (an initial question is decomposed into two or more parts so that an answer may be obtained), and probing (a question is followed up by one or more other questions so that the teachers can solicit more responses from a student).

Using strategies in giving questions for students is important to help teachers elicit students' verbal responses as questions can make them attentive and engaged in a lesson. Questioning strategies provide ways how to make students clear about teachers' questions. Students are quiet because they probably do not understand what have been asked, how to answer it, or feel shy. By applying questioning strategies, teachers can solve these problems. It can encourage students to answer and help them to arrange utterances, so they are motivated to speak confidently.

Against this backdrop, this present study attempts to examine how English language teachers give questions to their students. Particularly, this study explores teachers' questioning strategies in the classes, and how their questions could enhance the students' oral responses. Following the literature review and the aims of the study, this study has two main research questions: What questioning strategies are used by English language teachers to stimulate students' oral responses in the classes? And, how do the teachers' questioning strategies enhance students' responses? In the following section, the methods of this study will be briefly and clearly explained.

METHOD

This was a classroom discourse study which employed qualitative research methods. This study was conducted in a state secondary school in a suburban in the Province of Central Java, Indonesia. The research participants were two Indonesian female teachers of English, aged 43 (Teacher A)

and Teacher B, 44 years old. In the daily life, the two teachers spoke Indonesian language, the national and official language of the country, along with the Javanese language, their native language. They got a Bachelor's degree in the English language education from local universities. Teacher A taught Class VIII A which consisted of 30 students. Teacher B taught Class VIII H which consisted of 32 students. All the school community members were Javanese.

The data of this study were drawn from audiovideo recordings of four English lessons. Each lesson ran in 80 minutes. Three methods were used to collect the data: 1) *Classroom observations*: In the classroom observations audiovideo recordings were used to capture the teachers' questioning and students' oral responses. The observation sheets were also used to take notes on the teachers and students' behavior during the lessons regarding the teachers' questioning and the students' oral responses. The lessons were audiovideo recorded by a research assistant, while the other researcher sat quietly at the corner of the classroom and took notes. 2) *Interviews*: Interviews were done with the teachers and their students. Interviews were aimed to find and explore their perceptions on the teachers' questioning to engage students' oral responses. The two teachers and ten students (five from each class) were interviewed. The English teachers were interviewed twice: The first interview was held before classroom observation, and the second interview was done after the classroom observation, that is after obtaining initial interpretation of the data. 3) *Questionnaire*: To get complementary data, questionnaire was used to find out the students' perceptions and opinions on their teachers' ways of giving them questions

Then, the audio-video recordings were analyzed in three steps as follows: Transcribing the lessons, identifying and categorizing the teachers' questions as well as the students' responses. The

identification, coding, and categorization were based on Wu's (1993) taxonomy of questioning strategies because the taxonomy particularly aimed at describing teachers' questioning strategies to elicit students' verbal responses. After the teachers' questions were categorized, the identification of questioning strategies frequently used by the teachers were conducted. The transcription of the students' oral responses was important to know to what extent the questioning strategies used by the teachers could stimulate students to give answers. To triangulate the data analysis, the teachers' interview data and observation notes were used to complement the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will start by describing the findings of the first research question: *What questioning strategies are used by the teachers to stimulate students' verbal responses in the classes?*

The findings show that the teachers in this present study used mostly four questioning strategies out of five proposed by Wu (1993). Those are: rephrasing, simplification, repetition, and decomposition. Probing strategy, that is a question is followed up by one or more other questions so that the teachers can solicit more responses from a student, was found very few in the lessons observed. The interview findings indicated that the teachers might think that probing question was difficult for the students as this type of question required students to think deeper. Such a question usually needs long answers containing arguments, opinions, or explanation. The teachers admitted that probing questions had to be prepared and arranged in advance before the lessons; like preparing a scenario of a particular sequence of questions. The interviews also revealed some implicit reasons why the teachers lack using probing questions. According to the teachers, the students were lack of speaking

practice, and they were not accustomed to use English more often. Another problem was that students' limited vocabulary attainment. This resulted in the difficulty for them to respond to the teachers' questions which required deeper and critical thinking. The teachers clarified that if complex questions (like probing) were used, the students often respond hesitantly. Therefore, they mostly used questioning strategies which did not function to probe or ask deeper thinking from the students.

The four strategies that were used by the teachers in this study will be illustrated with some extracts as follows:

1) *Rephrasing*

Rephrasing means that a question is expressed in another way. The following is an example of a rephrasing strategy used by Teacher A:

Extract 1:

T : Then, the next... **How was Nyi Mas Inten character? How was Nyi Mas Inten?**

Ss : Stingy [chorusing]

S : She is stingy [in soft voice/almost inaudible]

The teacher's utterances which are in bold show the rephrasing strategy. Anticipating that the students did not know the meaning of the word 'character', Teacher A omitted it and rephrased it into "How was Nyi Mas Inten?" This question eventually was able to elicit her students' response. Another example of rephrasing is as in Extract 2.

Extract 2:

T : Then, **what happened to the village?**

Ss : [silence]

T : When **there was big flood, what did they do?** What did they do?

S : They run away

T : They run away! Ya, they run away.

In Extract 2, it was evident that there was no response when the teacher asked "What happened to the village?" Then, when she rephrased her initial question into "When

there was big flood, what do they do? What do they do?" a student responded it quickly.

From the whole data, it appeared that rephrasing strategy was frequently used by making the questions shorter where the teachers expected that their students would understand the question easily.

2) *Simplification*

Simplification is a questioning strategy which is similar to rephrasing strategy, but in simplification the teachers simplified the meanings of their questions. In this strategy, teachers would use many methods such as giving examples, clues, and focusing words to make the previous question become more specific, clearer, and understandable for students. The example of simplification strategy can be seen in Extract 2.

Extract 3:

T : **The purpose is?**

S : to make the readers... um...um....
[hesitant]

T : **to make the readers?** Ayo!

Ss : [Silence]

T : Okay... yang pertama **to amuse the...?**

Ss : Readers [chorusing]

T : Yang kedua, **to...? Enter...?**

Entertain the...? [raising intonation]

Ss : Readers [chorusing]

In Extract 3, the simplification strategy was used by the teacher by mixing the question with the Indonesian language, and this seemed to have generated the students' verbal responses. In addition, in the teacher's utterance "Yang kedua, to...? Enter...? Entertain the...? [with raising intonation], she expected the students to continue her unfinished sentence. This type of questioning strategy which is called response slot (Martin, 2005) was also often found in the lessons observed.

3) *Repetition*

Repeating the same question for 2-3 times appeared to be the teachers' favourite strategy to stimulate students' responses.

The example can be seen in the following extracts:

Extract 4:

T : Okay, dan sekarang, **would you like to listen to a short story?**

Ss : [silence]

T : Hello?

Ss : Hi.... [chorusing]

T : **Would you like to listen to a short story?**

Ss : Yes [chorusing]

Extract 5:

T : Question number one is... **where did the story happen?**

T : Iqbal? [pointing to a student, named Iqbal] **Where did the story happen?**

S1 : [silence]

T : Ardian?

S2 : [Silence]

T : Ya? Layla? **Where did the story happen, Layla?**

S3 : West Java

T : in West Java [confirming the student's answer].

In this case, repetition happened because the students who were called by the teachers did not respond to her question, so the teacher might think that she needed to repeat it to make sure that other students understood her question. Below is another extract showing repetition.

Extract 6

T : **What day is it?**

Ss : [Silence]

T : **What day is it?**

Ss : Saturday. [chorusing]

Repetition might be caused by at least two reasons. First, it could be because the teacher's question has not been heard clearly by the students, and second, the students might have low ability in listening skills. They needed much more time to think before answering. My observation also suggests that the teacher gave a little time to think for the students whose names were called. Therefore, in this case, the teacher needed to wisely have a wait time, that is, pauses to wait for responses. The students

needed to take their guts to produce loud and clear answer.

4) *Decomposition*

Decomposition strategy means that the teacher broke down their initial question (which is quite complex) into several simple questions in order to assist the students understand the question's meaning. The evidence can be seen in the Extract 7.

Extract 7:

T : Okay, come on, **what is narrative text?**

S : [raising hand]

T : Ya?

S : Umm... telling a story....

T : And **next? what is the purpose of narrative text?**

Extract 8:

T : and then, **the generic structure?**

Ss : orientation, complication, resolution....

T : orientation, yes....

Ss : complication.

T : complication....

Ss : resolution..

T : resolution, yes.... **what is orientation?**

Ss : tokoh..., tempat....

T : Yes, the characters, the time, the place. **Complication?**

S : conflicts.

S : konflik, permasalahan dalam cerita.

T : okay...and **then the resolution?**

S : solution.

Decomposition strategy was very useful and helpful for the teachers in order to elicit the students' verbal responses. They make different questions based on the initial ones. It could provide enough chances for students to give their own opinions or arguments. Furthermore, there were many students who tried to give responses.

Next, the following discussion will answer the second research question of this study: *How do the teachers' questioning strategies enhance students' responses?*

The findings show that repetition and decomposition were the most used strategies employed by the teachers. Repetition was

very often used by the teachers as this technique seemed to be the easiest strategy to elicit the students' oral responses. It was also helpful for the teachers because the teachers did not have to change, rephrase, or simplify their questions. They simply restate the same question until they got their students' responses. Although this strategy seemed simple but both the teachers and the students got a benefit – the teachers could elicit the students' answers, and the students had an opportunity to hear the teachers' English utterances again as to make them confident to respond. Another good point from repetition strategy was that the students were more active because repetitive questions made them became focus.

In implementing repetition strategy, it was not only about repeating the same question but the teachers also attempted to make it much clearer for students. It would not be able to elicit students' responses if the teachers asked a difficult, long, or complex question for several times. It was because the students still did not understand and were confused about what they had been asked. The teachers tried to make the repetitive questions more meaningful by using non-verbal clues, like using body gestures (nodding, raising hands, pointing at something), facial expressions (smiling), or voice audibility (raising intonation, stress, speak slowly, whispering). These non-verbal clues from the teachers were important as they help students to have better understanding towards the teachers' questions.

The second most frequently used questioning strategy was decomposition. Both of the teachers delivered relatively varied questions through this decomposition strategy because, according to the interview findings, it was easy for the teachers to elicit more responses from the students. Many students raised hands and tried to answer when the teachers decomposed the question into some simple questions related to the initial question. Furthermore, the classroom

observation shows that decomposed questions succeeded in making the students more active in the discussions. Another function of the decomposition strategy used by the teacher was that it could lead to the conclusions of the lesson (Teacher B interview).

As mentioned in the earlier part of this section, the probing strategy was almost not used by the teachers. This strategy seemed quite challenging for the teachers to apply as this needed a skill to make students used their higher level thinking. The illustration below shows one evidence in which probing was not successful:

Extract 9:

- T : What happened then? What happened after the beggar prayed? What happened then? What happened, Raihan?
- S : Yang terjadi... [a student raised his hand. He translated into Indonesian, then silence]
- T : What happened then? [to a student who raised his hand]
- S : She prayed.... [he seemed hesitant and then silence]
- T : No... no... After the beggar prayed? "Oh God, give her punishment..." [the teacher quoted an utterance from the story]
- Ss : Flood...flood... [chorusing]
- T : Yes. There was a big flood. And then, what happened? [pointing to a student, and the class was silent].

This extract provided evidence that the teacher's probing question "What happened after the beggar prayed?" required the students to think critically which demanded their understanding of the topic of discussion.

There was another prominent finding in this study. Some non-verbal supportive techniques were also used, such as: calling the students' names and using body gestures, strong intonation, and facial expression. One teacher often used these non-verbal supportive questioning

techniques, as can be seen in the extract below:

Extract 10:

T : Okay, the last question. **What can you learn from the story? What can you learn from the story?**

Ss : [silence]

T : **What can you learn from the story?** [teacher uttered the word 'learn' with high intonation]

S : Don't be stingy

T : Don't be stingy? Okay!

The emphasis of the word 'learn' by uttering it with high intonation aimed at giving a stress of her question. This could attract her students' attention because it strengthened the meaning of the question. Moreover, the students seemed like having the clue which helped them find the correct answer. As a result, they were brave to raise hands and gave the verbal responses. Turney *et al.* (1983, p. 116) called these features "voice variations" (i.e. raising intonation, falling intonation, changes in the tone, pitch, volume and speed of speech).

The findings discussed above have provided evidence that questioning strategies the teachers used have helped in improving students' engagement in the classes. The ways the teachers structured their questions influenced the students' oral responses. The teachers' varied questioning strategies could eliminate students' passiveness and stimulate them to speak English more frequently. In addition, to prevent the students from being passive in the classroom interaction, the teachers often called their names one by one. This strategy is called "distributing" (Turney *et al.*, 1983, p. 66). Turney *et al.* (1983) also suggest that "teachers should carefully select students to respond to questions, giving as many as possible the chance to contribute, because by increasing the number of responses from each individual student in a lesson, learning is enhanced" (p. 66).

Another finding indicates that both of the teachers tended to ask students to

respond in short answers, such as about the examples, facts, things. This is a display question type (Kayaoglu, 2013). A display question refers to a question which the teacher already knows the answer. The purpose is "to make the students display some previously-learned knowledge" (Wu, 1993, p. 51). This finding is in line with the study conducted by James and Carter (2006) that commonly students in a school actually tend to respond more often through short and literal level of questions.

This study also gave evidence that rephrasing strategy could decrease students' speaking passiveness. First, the teachers summarized the initial question which had long or complex structures. Second, they strengthened particular parts of their sentences that were important to be emphasized. Third, they repeated the same questions in different ways, forms, or structures without changing the purposes of the questions. Fourth, the use of Indonesian language was still used by both of the teachers in their questions. In the teachers' interviews, they considered that Indonesian and Javanese languages were sometimes used because the students had not accustomed to English. Furthermore, they were lack of vocabulary and lack of English pronunciation practice. To solve this problem, besides the four strategies, the teachers used a questioning strategy in the form of codemixing or codeswitching to stimulate students' speaking participation.

In this study, the teachers gave questions to the students for certain purposes; one of the purposes was to encourage students to speaking English. Yet, students' responses could not be obtained easily. This made the teachers aware that they had to change the ways they delivered the questions. Moreover, as the teachers stated in the interviews, many students have different characteristics. There were fast and slow learners, high and low achievers in the classes. Consequently, some students were silent and others were active

in responding to the teachers' questions. Not all of them could respond quickly; they needed to be stimulated and given time to think as well.

The teachers decreased the students' passiveness in the class by using safe talk which dominantly gained students' chorused responses where they answered together towards teachers' questions and cues. Moreover, elongating and raising intonation of the last word of the questions were also employed to trigger the students' responses. This confirms the findings of Fitriati's study (2015).

The teachers also often used the Indonesian language in their questioning. The use of Indonesian was absolutely easy to understand, but the students could not develop their English skills well. Apparently, the teachers sometimes needed to translate their questions into Indonesian to be quickly answered by the students. In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, particularly in the Indonesian educational context, where English is not used for everyday communication, Indonesian teachers who teach the English language should have adequate competence to establish and maintain classroom interaction to extend the students' opportunities to speak and engaged in the lessons (Fitriati, 2015).

With regard to the empirical evidence found in this current study, it could be concluded that teachers' questioning strategies used in the classes were varied. Classroom interaction is a complex phenomenon; therefore, the teachers' questions are also influenced by many factors, including the teachers' English proficiency. The observations indicated that the teacher in this study who performed mostly repetition strategy seemed to show lack of grammatical competence in constructing her questions. She tended to repeat the questions, whereas the other teacher who used more rephrasing and decomposing strategies show more accuracy

in her grammar. Therefore, it is evident that teachers' linguistic competence influence their questioning skills in eliciting students' oral responses.

In addition, the teachers in this study need to develop types of question they posed. Not only did they ask display questions to check the students' comprehension of the learning materials, but they also needed to pose referential questions, that is, a question that the teacher does not already know the answer (Wu, 1993, p. 51). Referential question would usually generate more responses from the students.

Eventually this study shows that the teachers apparently succeeded in encouraging their students to engage and interact actively in the whole class discussion. They used a varied strategies of questioning. However, it is suggested that the teachers develop their questioning skills, particularly in giving probing question, as this strategy will solicit more responses from the students and stimulate student thinking (Davoudi & Sadeghi, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that teachers should be aware that their questioning skills would have an impact on improving students' verbal responses in the classroom interaction. Teachers can apply comfortable and appropriate questioning strategies that are suitable for students and the class' context of situation. Therefore, some pedagogical purposes of questioning can be achieved, including developing students' English proficiency, measuring their abilities, and motivating them to speak the language. This study has shed some light on the importance of teachers' questioning skills. These skills need to be taught explicitly in English language education, particularly for student teachers, i.e. university students majoring in English education and prepared for being future teachers. For further research, it is suggested

that studies on teacher questioning should be broadened, for example, by comparing and contrasting questioning skills between English-native-speaker teachers and non-English-native-speaker teachers to provide complementary evidence and theoretical knowledge about questioning strategies.

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