



# Effectiveness of Referential and Display Questions in Classroom Interactions

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**ABSTRACT-** Classroom discourse is taken as separate domains owing to its specific social role which learners and instructors have in classrooms and the activities that they carry out. Questioning provides necessary stepping stones to communication" (Brown, 1994a: 165) moreover, gives authority over the discourse of the classroom (Walsh, 2006). This study aimed to examine the most frequently used types of questions by teachers in BS English classrooms. For data collection, the audio recording of 8 classes of BS English program of Air University, Islamabad was the subject of this study. Audios were later on transcribed and utilized for analysis. For analysis, the function of teacher questions by Long and Sato (1983) was used. The results of the study showed that teachers used display questions more persistently than referential questions, which helped to facilitate more of the classroom discourse.

**Key words:** Type of question, Referential questions, Display questions, Classroom discourse

## I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis is "the study of language in use" (Gee & Handford, 2013, p.1). Discourse analysis is the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. In other words, it is "the analysis of language in use" (Brown and Yule, 1983, p.1). This involves the examination of both the language form and function and the study of spoken and written texts. Discourse Analysis analyses utterances in their social life (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1). Considering the above-given statement, Discourse analysis is the talk between two people that can be the teacher and a student.

Cook (1989) discusses discourse analysis as examining 'how stretches of language, considered in their social, textual and psychological context, become meaningful and consolidated for their users' and at the same time, it gives 'insight into the complexities and processes of use and learning a language (as cited in Dailey, 2010). Classroom discourse is a special discourse that happens in classrooms. Classroom speech is a complex socio-cultural process that involves techniques of meaning-making in the creation of the social identity of the students. According to Behnam and Pouriran (2009), some of the features of classroom discourse incorporate "unequal power relationships, turn-taking and speaking, patterns of interaction, etc." (p. 118). There are some distinctive characteristics of discourse classrooms that make it distinguished from other discourses.

Second Language Classroom Research (SLCR): SLCR is the research that is conducted in second language classrooms to answer queries regarding the learning and/or teaching of SLCR. The research collects data from SL classrooms or from tentative settings that are formed to mimic what happens in the actual second language classrooms. The classroom research emphasizes either the teachers or the learners or it can even consider the communication between them (Nunan, 1990).

Teacher talk in a classroom mostly consists of the questioning done by the teacher and it has been the center of research attention in language classrooms. Most of the past research mainly focused on teachers' questions, by frequencies of different types of questions asked and describing their functions. Specific attention has been paid to the classifications of 'display' and 'referential' questions. Questions can serve as a device for initiating the interactions and several other functions.

Studies reveal that display questions are used more than referential questions in classrooms. Long and Sato (1983) classified teachers' questions into two types: echoic questions and epistemic questions. Echoic questions include 3 sub-categories: comprehension check, clarification request and confirmation check. On the other hand, epistemic questions have 4 sub-categories including referential, display, expressive and rhetorical questions. Echoic questions seek confirmation or repetition of the statement, while epistemic questions are meant for information gathering. Questions are important as they demand response from the other person. It is not only used by native speakers of the target language (Long, 1981).

Abhakorn (2014) says among other questions, display and referential questions are the most common classification of teacher questions. Display questions demand answers from the student in which teachers

are ready to know the answers. These are not entertained due to their lack of authenticity because we do not use these types of questions outside the class conversation. Nunan (1991) considers this type of question as a waste of time (as cited in Abhakorn, 2014). On the contrary, some researchers (Markee, 1995; Lee, 2006) consider play questions as a vital tool for teachers in Planning language lessons and developing language pedagogy. Most Scholars believe the teachers use of referential questions could lead to considerably longer syntactically complex answer than display questions by students (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1987; Suter, 2001; Morell, year) while a variety of classification of questions has been established, no inference was drawn about which question type is more appropriate for language teaching and learning (as cited in Abhakorn, 2014).

Researches (Chodron,1988; Cullen,1998; Ho, 2005; Nunan, 1987; Seedhouse,1996; Tsui,1985; Walsh,2006; Yu,2010 as cited in Jiang,2012) show that display or closed questions are more common than referential or open questions. The study by Cauldron (1988) found that L2 teachers posed more display questions than referential questions. Likewise, in Yu (2010) study display questions are used more than referential questions.

Although display and referential questions are frequently asked, there are other kinds as well. Guan Eng Ho (2005) says that we cannot simply categorize questions into the categories of display and referential or open and close. She, rather, suggested a third category naming 'general knowledge, vocabulary and language proficiency question', which lies In between referential and display questions. Questions can either be asked to seek clarification or to check the comprehension level of the students.

Utilizing referential elicitation to create veritable communication in English is seldom accomplished in EFL classrooms. In EFL classrooms opportunities for the student to answer referential questions are not given by teachers. Students' competence was presupposed and were not asked for their clarification. McHoul (1990) argues that the instructor seldomly gives authority to students to start and rectify their answers. In Thai EFL classrooms, teachers moving on to a further step without holding up for the student's answer demonstrates how the purpose of the question is not recognized by the instructor (Abhakorn, 2014).

However, the EFL Thai classroom answer was given in chorus which does not normally take place in daily conversation. (Schegloff, 2007) suggests that the teacher giving the same opportunity to the whole class as compared to an individual and demanding their attention and elicitation on the question may result in chorus answers. The recent study conducted on communication and study skills (CSS) classes by Galegane in 2018 reveals that CSS lecturers prefer individual responses over chorus responses. Results of the previous researches are considered to be reliable (Nunan, 1987; Chaudron, 1988; Seedhouse, 1996; Ho, 2005; Walsh, 2006) in the study of Maftoon and Rezaie (2013), which shows that more than half of the questions were display questions. In total, 79% of all questions were of epistemic category.

In Pakistani bilingual classrooms, teachers ask different questions to demonstrate authority and control their interaction with students. It has also been found the teachers use these methods even when teaching. Previous studies say that almost all teachers held a dominant position throughout the lecture. Teachers' decisive position in the class restricts student's interaction by limiting thought processes. Controlled discourse reduces critical thinking and increases student's reliance on cramming instead of developing concepts. Therefore, lecture-based methods are not recommended in classrooms (Gulzar, 2009). Findings indicate that teachers talk more in classrooms and make twice as many utterances as students. It is also noted that in half of the teacher-student interaction students do not produce any language, and when students respond they usually provide basic statements or recall of the lecture. In this way, it restricts the capacity of the learner to construct and interpret knowledge on their own and to engage in more rigorous learning.

Classroom discourse between students and teachers has an inherent structure. In most of the classes, teachers' talk consists of questioning students and this traditional mode has become the center of language classes in Pakistan. Most classroom interaction studies cover primary schools and very little research is done at university level classroom discourse and specifically BS program at university level classroom discourse.

Research Objectives:

Objectives of the research conducted were as follows:

1. To find out the nature of questions in classroom discourse of BS English
2. To find out the usefulness of display and referential questions in determining classroom' interactions.

## II. RESEARCH METHODS:

### Data collection:

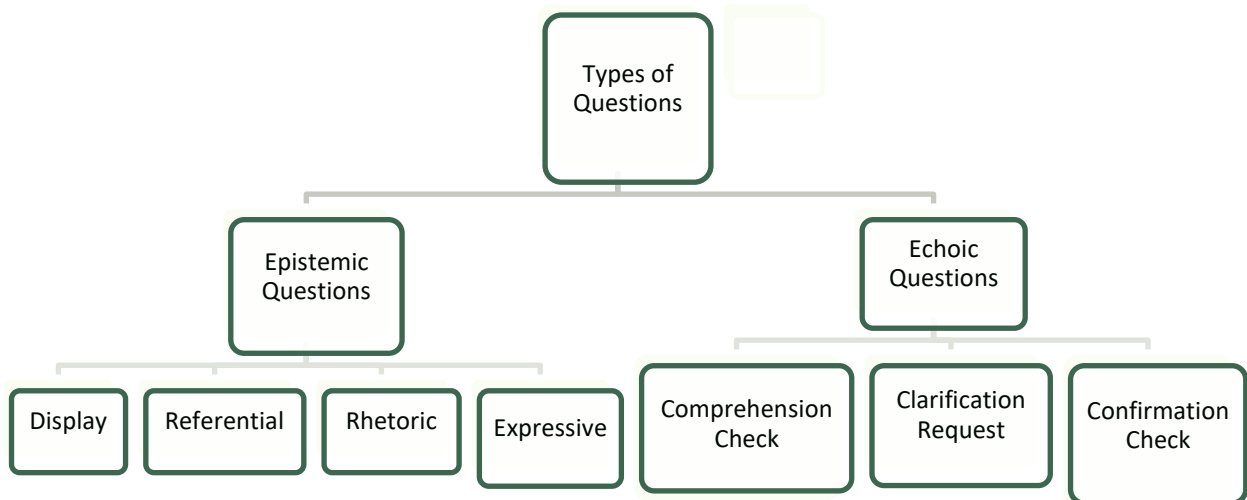
To conduct the research, the audio recording was conducted in 8 classes of bachelors of English for two consecutive weeks. Approximately 20 minutes for each class were observed and recorded, and later on, transcribed and used for analysis. Therefore, to collect quantitative and qualitative data necessary for the analysis, the method of audio recording was applied. During the research the main focus was on the teacher's style of interactions and student's responses. Although all the sessions were audio taped to record the classroom discourse, the researcher attended and observed the classes to guarantee the genuineness and unwavering quality of the data. Nunan (1989, p.76) said that "there is no substitute for direct observation as a way of finding out about language classrooms", therefore, the researcher decided to sit in the classroom to examine teacher student interactions and classroom discourse was observed while recording. Afterwards, transcribed data was analysed using a framework proposed by Long and Sato (1983).

### Theoretical framework:

Long and Sato (1983) believe that through questions, dominant members exercise power and dominance of interaction in conversation. However, in the classroom, questions help in engaging the class in meaningful interaction. Long and Sato (1983) have categorized teachers' questions into two major categories: echoic questions and epistemic questions. Echoic questions seek confirmation or repetition by the teacher, whereas epistemic questions are aimed to gather information. Echoic and Epistemic questions are further divided into seven sub-categories. Echoic questions comprise comprehension checks, clarification requests, and confirmation checks. On the other hand, epistemic questions include referential, display, expressive, and rhetorical questions.

The structures Teachers' questions by Long & Sato (1983) are mentioned below;

(Taken from Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992, p.26-28)



Due to time constraints, the research will focus on referential and display questions specifically. Referential questions are used for evaluation and appraisal as it contains information which is unknown to the teacher and thereby considered to express opinion, to facilitate learning, and skills of the students. Display questions, on the contrary, are guiding questions in which teachers already know the answers. These questions demand short answers which are used for 'comprehension checks, confirmation checks or clarification requests' (Long & Sato, 1983).

Since it was a non-random selection of participants, it falls under the category of non-probability sampling. Purposive and availability sampling in which readily available classes, meeting required criteria were recorded. The study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research studies non-numerical and categorical scale. (Hayes et al., 2013).

Before taking classroom audios, teachers were informed briefly about the nature of the study and their full consensus was obtained. In order to protect anonymity, the names of the teachers were changed to numbers (T1-T8) in analysis.

### III. ANALYSIS

Questioning is considered one of the elicitation techniques because through it we initiate a response or a reply. Long (1981) says question-response is one of the important interactions to develop the topic of conversation. Display questions are used to keep students' attention focused during the class. On the other hand, in referential questions, the teacher does not know the answer in advance.

Display questions with short and restricted responses are more likely to be closed. Inquirer are already aware of the answers. Display questions are more frequent than referential questions. Instances taken from T1, T2, T3, T3, T5, T7, and 78 are given below.

T1

T: page number, what is the page number? Please number Can anyone tell the page number I don't have that page number.

S: 216, something 60. somewhere 16. Right?

T: So okay

T2

T: What does the judge say if he wants the audience to be quiet?

S: Order, Order!

T: Order, Order, right.

T3

T: What are the indications of present continuous tense?

S: Is/am/are +ing

T: Ing. Right

T3

T: When there is specific time, you use?

S: Since.

T: And when there is no specific time?

S: For.

T5

T: And who were the actors?

S: Priest

T7

T: I hope you know what sonnet is.

S: Octet

T: Yes, octet and sestet, because there are 8 lines then they have, is there is a variation we can find.

T8

T: Okay, how many monophthongs in total are there in British English?

S: 12

T: 12, eight are diphthongs. now out of 12 monophthongs how many short monophthongs are?

S: seven

T: Seven and how many long monophthongs are?

S: Five

T: Five.

T8:

T(continued): You know, when you have midterm exams? Maybe in the third week of this month

S: 24th, 24th march

T: Okay

In exchange below by T5, a display question was asked at the start of the class in the first exchange. it elicited short incorrect responses from the students. Teacher accepts responses but does not evaluate until receiving a positive response in exchange 12.

T5

T: Whose influence was this? Okay, when was drama introduced in English literature for the first time, which century? I

S: 13th? R

T: 13th? good guess. can we move a little bit? F/I

S:12th R

T: 12th F

S: 11th R

T: 11th F

S: 10th R

T: 10TH F

S: 14th R

T: 14th F

S: Medieval period? R

T: Medieval period. Drama was introduced in English literature in Medieval period after 10th century after 10th century. E

According to Long & Sato (1983), display questions are asked in order to check comprehension. As in T2, the teacher asked a display question and later on checked the comprehension level of the student by asking another question.

T: One of it is agency pair. Remember that? I

S: Yes, ma'am R

T: What was that? I

S: Sequence of pattern R

T: Yeah, like one statement and the other statement they have sequence. E

A similar example can also be taken from T3, the teacher asks a display question in initiation and receives a relevant answer to it in the next move. In a feedback move, he accepts the response as 'Okay' but does not provide evaluation to it. In line 4, is a re-initiative exchange, in which when the teacher does not receive a relevant response, she asks it again by revising it. Here, the teacher has particularized her question for students' understanding. In the second response by another student, a next question is construed by the

teacher 'Tempus means?' which is bound to the previous response move. By getting response, in move 8 responses are evaluated.

T: Okay, so, if we talk about tenses, this is what it is right? Any definition from you guys what is a tense, tense? I

S: tense, tense times. R

T: Okay? Anyone else. F

T: Yeah. What is it tense? What is this present, past tense? I

S: Tempus R

T: Tempus means? I

S: Tempus mean time R

T: Yes, tempus, temporal means time. E

Referential questions offer more than one possible answer to the question and encourage more complex responses. In the instance below, the teacher asks referential questions to make classroom discourse more communicative.

T1

T: Why did he choose Shakespeare? What Why did he say that? I'm going to say something about Shakespeare. For that he has given a rationale. What was that rationale?

S1: That Shakespeare wrote for the sake of pleasure.

T: For the sake of pleasure.

S2: And also, he outlived his century.

T: Ah... Right?

S3: Imitated real life.

T: Imitated legal life. That is the basic thing here.

Referential questions are used to express opinion and encourage more thoughtful and complex responses. Referential questions are widely used in conversation outside of classes, and are thus considered to facilitate learning, skills of the students and proper use of the second language in the classroom (Broke, 1986 as cited in Abhakorn, 2014). Referential questions answer that contain information are unknown to the teachers and therefore used for appraisal or evaluation.

T2

T: All right. So why don't we need interactions, interviews for conversation analysis?

S: Because, we are reading that conversation in our ways, so in an interview, we are asking a question and then other person will respond. So, it will be somehow ....

There are no right or wrong answers to referential questions. These are less predictable and are used to test creativity and inventiveness of students. For instance, in T7 the teacher asks for the student's general view or understanding about the poem. Here, students' opinions would vary from one student to another.

T7

T: So, what is your general study or opinion about that?

S: It's a limitation that we've lost contact with nature.

Before starting the lesson, teachers ask different questions to warm up students for the class. These questions are either about the last lecture they have discussed or about any other random activity they had

before the class. Questions also differ in terms of display or referential questions. In T1, T2 teachers ask about the previous lecture discoursed in display questions;

T1

T: Okay, let's start. Can anyone tell me that what did we discussed in last class?

S: Preface to Shakespeare by Samuel Johnson

T2

T: So, what were we talking about earlier?

S: Communication analyses.

On the contrary, in T7 and T8, teachers ask referential questions which demand more thoughtful and conceptual answers in T7. Whereas, referential question brings one-word chorus response in T8;

T7

T: I hope you've gone through this one before coming to the class. So, what is your general study or opinion about that?

S: It's a limitation that We've lost contact with nature.

T8

T: How is everybody?

S: Fine.

In any classroom discourse, a teacher is the autonomous figure either to ask simple display questions and control the lesson or asking referential questions to facilitate conceptual responses to make discourse more communicative. For example;

T1

T: Who is the big point of nature by the way? I

S: Wordsworth R

T: Wordsworth. That we are saying that Wordsworth was the the great poet of nature. F

T: What does he mean by nature here? I

S: Human nature. R

T: Humanity, Human nature, right! That nature, human values, that nature, he is talking about this thing. He is talking about humanity matters, right? So, he is talking about all this and further he is saying, and since particular manners can be known to very few... F

In the given sequence, in the initial statement, the teacher asks a display question restricting to one correct answer. Initiation [I] as elicitation in head move causes the student's reaction [R] on line 2. On line 3, we see how the instructor offers comments (F) by elaborating one-word responses to a sentence. In this way, in feedback, response is recognized. In line 4, the cycle starts again, with the next initiation of referential question ('what does he mean by nature here?') entailing to the previous response.

Referential questions as in line 3 of T1 offer more than one possible answer to the question and encourage more complex responses.

T: Why did he choose Shakespeare? What Why did he say that? I'm going to say something about Shakespeare. For that he has given a rationale. What was that rationale?

S: That Shakespeare wrote for the sake of pleasure.

T: For the sake of pleasure.

S: And also, he outlived his century.

T: Ah... Right?

S: Imitated real life.

T: Imitated legal life. That is the basic thing here. Okay, so let's discuss that when we talk about Pleasure...

In T4 given below, Teachers have a great control over classroom interactions. She has led class, spoken more than students, controlled subjects; asked close ended questions and judged the appropriateness of the responses of the students. Teacher initiates by asking a display or close ended question ('Do you follow that same style for next lines?') in line 1. Teacher's question causes the student to respond to it in one word 'No' in line 2. In line 3, the teacher repeated the word 'No', which evaluates student response.

T4

T: Do you follow that same style for next lines? I

S: No R

T: No: E/F

In the instance below from T1, the teacher elicits a question in move 1, which did not receive any response by the class. In the move 2, the teacher nominated the student and repeated his question, 'Okay, Sawera, did you read it?' Nominated student(sawera) answers 'No' in the response move. Teacher acknowledges her response with discourse marker 'Okay' and continues toward the second exchange with a display question, 'So, what was the last point that we discussed before?'. Second instance also follows the same pattern.

T1

T: Preface to Shakespeare. That we discussed. What was the last point there? How many of you have read this I have told you to read? I

(No response)

T: Okay, Sawera, did you read it? Ib

S(SAWERA): NO R

T: NO? Okay. So, what was the last point that we discussed before? E/F

T1

T: That we are saying that Wordsworth was the great point of nature? I

(no response) R

T: What does he mean by nature? Ib

S: Human nature? Humanity Rb

T: Humanity, human nature that nature, human nature, humanity, manner matters, right? E

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A large number of display questions were used in these classes by teachers. It is in concordance with Cauldron (1988) and Yu (2010), who found that teachers posed more display questions than referential questions. Referential questions were less frequent and whenever asked, resulted in meaningful interaction in the class. At the start of the lecture, teachers asked display questions to warm up students for the class. These questions are either about the last lecture they have discussed or about any other random activity or event happened. Furthermore, questions are aimed to interact with the class than to obtain information. These findings are in harmony with Thomas (1988), who says that functions of



questions differ in different disciplines. In social sciences, art and humanities, these are aimed to gear up the class for the lecture, whereas in engineering and technology classes, they are asked to obtain information.

The findings are not in concurrence with previous studies conducted in Pakistan, which say that teachers held a dominant position throughout the lecture. It is due to the teachers' decisive position, which restricts student's interaction by limiting thought processes. Findings of the analysis show that although teachers talked more than the students in these classes and dominated most of the classroom discussions, they encouraged students' input.

Nevertheless, every question type has its own advantages and drawbacks. Teachers have the option of asking simple display questions and controlling the lesson or asking referential questions to facilitate more complex and conceptual responses from the learners. Under CA (conversational analysis) approach, structures and function of question has been studied in various institutions, including job interviews (Button, 1992), media interviews (Clayman, 1992), medical consultation (Heath, 1992) and classroom teaching (Mehan, 1992a, 1992b; Lee, 2008). Asking the right kind of question type is a complicated process. There are instances wherein a teacher uses a single question to contain multiple goals or when teacher's question gets no response from the student and needs to ask multiple questions until the desired answer is achieved.

This study focused on teachers' questions, an interesting similar study on students' questions and their acknowledgement in feedback move could be done to check students' perspective. Finally, data triangulation, by integrating qualitative and quantitative data such as recordings, interviews and questionnaires could be used to enhance the validity and reliability of the research. Therefore, this research paper paves a way for young and future linguists in South Asia to use this framework on not just posters but on other contemporary mediums of entertainment.

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