"Oke, any questions?" The Questioning Interaction in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This study examined the teacher's questioning interaction for meaning negotiation in an EFL classroom at a junior high school in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Data was collected from an English teacher who was teaching seventh grade students. The instruments used were an observation sheet adapted from Arikan (2004), a set of interview questions adapted from Skilton and Meyer (1992) and Beutel (2010), and recordings. The questioning interaction was analyzed following on the three questioning devices: comprehension check, clarification check and confirmation check (Long, 1983). The findings showed that comprehension check was the most dominant device applied by the teacher (30%), followed by clarification check (14.3%), and confirmation check (12.8%). The dominant use of comprehension check in the classroom reflected the typical interaction in the EFL context, in which there was much more negotiation of meaning going on between the teacher and students to gain understanding. All of these devices were indicators of the students' involvement in the classroom on negotiation and learning with the teacher. The result from the interview with the teacher further revealed that she must ask questions to know the students' understanding of what is being learnt in class. By being aware of this, upcoming directions on her teaching to reach her teaching objectives can be made more effectively.

Key words: Questioning, interaction, teacher, students, EFL classroom.

Introduction

Being successful in acquiring a language is the main purpose of learning a language. The quality of a teacher's interaction with students plays an important factor in determining a teacher's success in his or her teaching. A teacher who fosters positive relationship with the students can create more conducive classroom environment for learning. The classroom interaction includes all of the classroom events, both verbal and non-verbal. The verbal interaction takes place because of the teacher and learners talk, while non-verbal interaction covers gestures or facial expressions by the teacher and learners when they communicate without using words (Tuan & Nguyen, 2010). Parrish (2004) finds that the language that teachers use in class, or "teacher talk," can have a tremendous impact on the success of interactions they have with students. Therefore, the classroom interaction is important, because it determines the learning opportunities the learners get, and how the teachers and learners together manage the classroom interaction and learning opportunities (Allwright & Bailey, 1991).

Additionally, learners also learn a language better through conversation and interaction (Masrizal, 2014). In view of that, Brock (1986) believes that an increase in the amount of classroom interactions will help foreign language learners learn the target language better, or in other words, increasing the language output will improve the language learning. One of the characteristics of teacher to students' interaction is through asking questions. According to Long (1983), there are three types of questions in term of teacher to learner interaction. Those consist of confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and requests for clarification. These devices refers to instances in an interaction in which the speaker and listener work together to determine that they are talking about the same thing (Faroq, 1998, p. 3). In other words, when the speaker carries out comprehension checks ('Know what I mean?') to determine whether he/she has been correctly understood, and when the listener requests clarification ('What do you mean, she's silly?') or confirms that he/she has correctly understood ('You stopped because you didn’t learn anything?') (Nunan, 1989, p. 45).
A teacher’s questioning is one of the manifestations on the merit of teaching. It plays an essential role in promoting students’ knowledge construction and cognitive development. Therefore, it is deemed essential to conduct further investigation on the teacher’s questioning interaction, especially in an EFL classroom. Hence, we would like to study a non-native English teacher’s interactions through asking questions to her EFL students in class. This study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of questioning interactions are used by the teacher in teaching her EFL students?

2. What are the teacher’s views on using questions to negotiate meaning with her students?

**Literature Review**

A number of studies have been conducted on classroom interactions between students and teachers. A study by Suhanna (2013) on senior high school students in an EFL classroom in Aceh, Indonesia, revealed that the teacher used a great amount of clarification request to her students, followed by comprehension check. Moreover, another study by Tsui (1991) on classroom interaction on ESL learners at an English medium school in Hong Kong found that clarification request as the most used interaction than other devices in the classroom, followed by confirmation checks.

Consequently, clarification check indicates learner’s involvement in class because the questions require students to give alternative answers that help increase their understanding. From these studies, for the EFL learners, what follows is comprehension check (Suhanna, 2013), whereas for the ESL learners, it was followed by confirmation check (Tsui, 1991). Apparently, the situation of an ESL classroom did not require the teacher to use much of comprehension check since English is also a part of their lives; this is the contrary to the EFL learners where English is only employed in the classroom.

**Research Method**

From three English teachers of the junior high school that was under study, only one of them consented to participate and be recorded for data of this study. She is coded as SZ in this paper. She has been an English teacher for the past 15 years and has received her teacher’s certification.

The research instruments employed for this study were recordings, an interview and field notes. In this study, we had video recorded three classroom meetings of SZ with the 7th grade class that she was teaching; it consisted of 36 students. These recordings were later transcribed, analyzed and categorized for the three types of questions in term of teacher to students’ interaction: confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and requests for clarification (Long, 1983). To study the most to the least devices employed by the teacher, a simple statistical formula was used to convert the frequency of occurrence into a form of percentage.

We further conducted an interview with SZ to gain additional information on her questioning practice in class. The interview questions were adapted from Skilton and Meyer (1992) and Beutel (2010) that asked about teacher’s perceptions on the use of questions in negotiating meaning in the classroom. Thus, we had modified some of the questions to suit the context of this research. The questions we asked SZ were:

1. Do you think a teacher should ask questions in class? Why or why not?
2. In the classroom, how often do you ask questions?
3. How do these questions with students influence classroom learning?
4. What kind of questions in negotiating meaning do you often ask in the classroom?
5. What kind of questions in negotiating meaning do you rarely ask in the classroom?

The results from the interview were also transcribed. Then they were analyzed and processed by following the steps of data reduction, displays and drawing conclusion or verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Results and Discussion**

The questioning interactions were used by SZ to improve the quality of her meaning negotiation in the classroom. The identified interactions were categorized into comprehension, clarification and confirmation checks. Table 1 displays the most to the least used devices by SZ in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Devices</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Comprehension Check</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Clarification Check</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Confirmation Check</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From Table 1, it can be concluded that comprehension check was the dominant device used by SZ in the classroom as an attempt to negotiate meaning with her students (52.5%), and it was followed by clarification check (25%) and confirmation check (22.5%).

The discussion with previous studies shows different findings obtained from this study. The study by Suhanna (2013) and Tsui (1991) found that clarification checks were the most used in the EFL and ESL classrooms, nonetheless, this study found comprehension check to be the dominant device used in class by the teacher. Most of the negotiation here occurred to help students gain more understanding on the subject being taught. Compared to Suhanna (2013), whose participants were senior high school students, the participant in this study were still in their first year of junior high (7th grade). They have just received the English subject that year; therefore, more negotiation on comprehension was needed compared to Suhanna’s 11th grade senior high school students who have studied English for the past five years of their school education.

The discussion on the process of meaning negotiation in teacher to students questioning interactions in SZ’s classroom is further elaborated below.

**Comprehension Check**

Comprehension check, which occurred 52.5%, was the most employed device by SZ to check students’ understanding. Its use is to avoid breakdown in conversation and as strategy to check whether or not the material presented by the teacher had been understood by the students (Boulima, 1999). In the following example from the recording, “E” refers to extraction, and “SZ” is for the teacher, S is for a student and Ss is for more than one students.

(E1) **SZ:** Sepuluh dari semua ini, boleh dibuat apa-apa saja kan tapi ada bentuk apostrophe-nya. Oke, understand?
**S:** Buat silsilah?
**SZ:** Tidak usah buat silsilah. Tidak usah buat silsilah lagi ya!
**Ss:** (Students continue the exercise).

(E2) **SZ:** Kalau disuruh isi titik-titik, liat kalimatnya. For example, like this, misalnya ya kan ‘she … a doctor’. Ada disini dia kepunyaan ‘doctor’? Kalau ‘she’ tidak bisa dia, dia biasanya singkatnya dengan kata ganti. Tidak ada dengan nama. Kalau nama sudah apostrophe pasti. Kalau dengan ini tidak boleh, dia kan kalau kepunyaan harus ‘her’. Oke, any questions?
**S:** Miss?
**SZ:** Yes?
**S:** What is the meaning of ‘meanwhile’?

From the two examples above, we can see that the comprehension checks are taking place. In E1, ‘understand’ is to know the meaning of what someone is telling you. At the initial stage, the word ‘understand’ is a sense of assured that the message delivered from SZ to the student is understood. That is why ‘understand’ is categorized as comprehension check because SZ needed assurance that the student had received the message correctly. Following her explanation, SZ then checked the students’ comprehension by asking “oke, understand?” This is similar as in E2, where she asked her students “oke, any questions?” to further make sure that her students understood her before she moved on to the next topic.

**Clarification Check**

Clarification check, which occurred 25%, was when SZ asked for clarification from the students’ previous utterances. Following Long’s framework on the definition of clarification check, therefore, it refers to the teacher’s expression to elicit clarification of the students’ preceding utterance (Boulima, 1999). Tsui (1991) informs that clarification check is one of the devices which are a better indicator of the learner’s involvement in the interaction because in clarification check, students are given alternative answers that help boost their understanding. Below is an example taken from the interaction between SZ and her students.

(E3) **SZ:** Oke, Faza ...
**S:** Mention five family!
**SZ:** Family or families?
**S:** Families.
**SZ:** Yes.
(E4) SZ : ‘... the teachers have a lot of friends’. Titik-titik itu, ‘do’ atau ‘does’?
    S : Do.
    SZ : ‘Do’, good! Muhammad Farhan! ‘The teacher’ apa ‘the teachers’?
    S : The teachers.
    SZ : Kalau ‘the teacher’?
    Ss : Does.

From the examples above, we can clearly see that clarification check took place. In E3, SZ wanted to correct the wrong sentence that the student made by asking, “family or families?”. She then asked the students to think of what had just been said in order to get better understanding or answer. Similarly in E4, the question for clarification can be seen in “‘The teacher’ apa ‘the teachers’?” This type of clarification check is done by repeating the two choices of answers to make sure that the student got the point of the answer. The student’s response is considered as clarification.

**Confirmation Check**

Confirmation check, which occurred 22.5%, was the teacher repeating students’ utterances to ensure she had understood them. Based on Long, confirmation check employed by the teacher is in the form of repetitions in which the teacher immediately repeated the students’ utterances to make sure that the utterances had been understood correctly (Boulima, 1999). In this study, the occurrences of such device are pictured in the next interactional events.

(E5) S1 : ‘What time is it?’
    S2 : ‘It is eight fivety three’.
    SZ : ‘Eight fivety three’?
    S2 : Oh... Mmm... ‘Eight fifty three’.

In E5, we can see that SZ wanted a student to ask a question to another student according to the lesson, and the other student must answer the question. It was done by SZ to activate students’ participation in learning. Here, SZ tried to confirm the answer given by the second student that was incorrect. However, she repeated the answer in the form of a question, ‘Eight fivety three”? By doing so, it was expected that the student would be aware of his answer, and provide the correct one. This interaction was also important to point out the mistake made by the student, and SZ would also be more confirmed whether the student made the mistake deliberately (because he did not understand) or accidentally (because slip of the tongue).

(E6) SZ : Yes, good. Now, ‘My house ... a nice garden’. Syahla?
    S : Has.
    SZ : Kenapa ‘my house’ itu dengan ‘has’?
    S : Karena ‘it’.
    SZ : Very good.

In E6, SZ was the one who initiated a confirmation check. It was important for her to stress that the student’s answer was correct and the student knew the reason. The student would gain better understanding by responding to his teacher’s question. These features are in line with Long (Boulima, 1999) that the use of confirmation check is indicated by the use of repetition, which can be responded in simple answers as illustrated in the two interactions above.

**The Teacher’s Views on Using Questioning Interaction in the Classroom**

The interview conducted with SZ revealed several results. Regarding to the importance of asking questions and their frequency of use in the classroom, the result of interview indicated that SZ asked questions to her students about their understanding towards the materials being taught. As explained by SZ below in R1 (R refers to response), questions are needed to know whether the students are on the right track of learning or not. This is so that comprehension problems can be identified and reduced.

(R1) Yes, absolutely yes. I ask my students questions of their understanding about the material being taught and how much they have understood from what I have explained. So, if I don’t ask about their understanding, I don’t know how much they know, I don’t know whether they understand my explanations...I, myself, should also know my way of teaching if there are students who still have trouble in understanding me.
Oh, I always ask questions in class because this is to know the depth of their understanding towards my explanation...about the material that I teach to them in the classroom. I can know their difficulties and this helps me find ways to overcome them.

From R1, SZ’s comment, “I, myself, should also know my way of teaching...” also reflected that she would find another approach if the students were still facing comprehension problems with her current way of teaching. As of frequency in R2, she always asked questions to recognize students’ difficulties, and by realizing them, she could seek ways of solving them.

In relation to the influence of the questions on classroom learning, SZ asserted that:

Em...I can get feedback from the student about the material that I teach in every meeting. So it is important that I obtain feedback from the class, and the point from the student herself.

By asking questions, SZ emphasized in R3 that she can gain also feedback directly from the students about their knowledge. Consequently, these feedbacks were valuable for her to make a reflection on her teaching and find other ways that could help her improve her teaching.

Additionally, SZ informed that the common questions in negotiating meaning she often asked in the classroom were those that can determine whether she has been correctly understood (i.e. comprehension checks), and she did not use those that determined her to correctly understood her students (i.e. confirmation checks). Her reasons are as follows:

Mm...there are general questions that I ask in the classroom, such as those that helps me know whether my students know what I am saying. By doing so, I can make sure that they achieve the goal of learning.

In R4, SZ stated that she asked questions related to comprehension check to ascertain that they can accomplish the purpose of learning on a certain topic in the classroom. This is also confirmed from the data transcription that comprehension check was the most used by this teacher. It can be assumed that questions in comprehension can expose students’ profundity towards the subject, and further enlighten the teacher that her goal of teaching has been reached for the day or not. That is why this type of questioning was the most used in her questioning interaction.

Sometimes I forgot to ask questions such as those that help me reconfirm the students’ answers because in my teaching and learning process, sometimes the class runs smoothly. I don’t really ask questions such as “What do you mean?”. Those questions are mostly asked by my students to me.

Finally, R5 displays that SZ did not really ask questions that were related to clarifications, for example “What do you mean?” This is in line with the data transcription that confirmation and clarification checks were used lesser in the classroom. Presumably, it is SZ who provides clarification to the students instead of the other way around in her EFL classroom. This habit then caused her to reduce clarification checks in her questioning interaction.

Conclusions
From the three types of questions in interactional modification devices (Long, 1983), comprehension check appeared to be the most dominant devices applied by the teacher (52.5%) in this study, which was followed by clarification check (25%) and confirmation check (22.5%). The dominant use of comprehension check in the classroom reflected the typical interaction in the EFL context, in which there was much more negotiation of meaning going on between the teacher and students to gain understanding. The result from the interview with the teacher further revealed that she must ask questions to know the students’ understanding of what is being learnt in class. Yet again, questioning plays an important role in many instructional purposes because they elicit students’ reflections and challenge students’ understanding and engagement in the classroom (Adedoyin, 2010). By being aware of question types, teachers can prepare for upcoming directions in her teaching to reach her teaching objectives more effectively.

The limitation of this study is that we had only focused on the three types of questioning interactions by the teacher in a classroom. Therefore, the researcher suggests for future researchers to conduct further studies on this topic by investigating deeper into the other devices and obtain more data from teachers and students in various EFL classrooms.
References