

## **TEACHER/ LEARNER INTERACTIONS IN SUDANESE EFL TASK BASED CLASSROOMS (A CASE STUDY OF TWO SUDANESE UNIVERSITIES)**

**Dr. Ishag Adam Hassan Ahmed**

Assistant Professor, College of Languages, University of Bahri, Sudan- Khartoum

**Dr. Najla Alhadi Adam Idres,**

Assistant Professor, College of Languages, University of Bahri, Sudan- Khartoum

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**ABSTRACT:** *Teaching and learning English in an EFL context includes some difficulties, such as how to prepare learners to use English language so as to be able to participate in conversations inside and outside the class. Two Universities were chosen in this study. One of them is University of Bahri, college of Languages, Fourth Year English language department and the other is University of Alneelein (comparative study). Six classrooms were chosen, three of them University of Bahri and other three in University of Alneelein, to interact through both video and audio-tapes. The study explores recurring patterns of questioning behavior and their interactive effects were observed through nonparticipant observation. The findings of this study indicate that display questions were used by the teachers more frequently than referential questions. Also, it was concluded that not all referential questions could create the adequate interaction.*

**KEYWORDS:** classroom observation, display questions, interaction, interactive effect, and referential questions

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Conversation is an extension of idea. It helps in the process of arranging thought, linking one idea to another. Conversation includes both verbal and non-verbal forms. One of the principal means through which patterns of interaction are constructed is language. Language, in relationship to the social construction of life in classrooms, refers to the oral and written discourse norms, expectations, and strategies that members establish through their daily interactions. Conversation is called for when the language user recognizes a situation which requires the conveyance of information to establish a convergence of knowledge, so that this situation can be changed in some way. This transaction requires the negotiation of meaning through interaction. I refer to this negotiation as discourse ( Widdowson, 1984: 100) . The use of language in any classroom is interesting from an educational point of view because education itself is conducted fundamentally through the medium of language. The term language classroom is used here to refer to a classroom in which the primary concern is the development of a language which is not the first language of the learners. Classroom Discourse is a special type of discourse that occurs in classrooms. Special features of classroom discourse include: unequal power relationships, turn-taking at speaking, patterns of interaction, etc. Classroom discourse is often different in form and function from language used in other situations because of particular social roles which learners and teachers

have in classrooms and the kind of activities they usually carry out there. Researchers and language teachers focus on classroom discourse in order to know what actually happens in the classroom that really matters, that makes a difference to the learners' progress in language acquisition.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### An Overview of language classroom Discourse

Language classroom discourse has undergone various interpretations. Nunan (1993) views classroom discourse as the distinctive type of discourse that occurs in classrooms. Discourse in the language classroom is a matter of the oral use of language in the classrooms. At least 35 years ago, an important direction in applied linguistics and education research sought to understand the nature and implications of classroom interactions, or what is commonly referred to as classroom discourse. One influential approach to the study of spoken discourse, as acknowledged by (McCarthy, 1991), was carried out by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) at the University of Birmingham. Sinclair and Coulthard suggested a three tier approach, beginning-middle-end, to focus on the distinct moves that take place in discourse, which can be considered as question-answer-comment in the classroom environment, or command-acknowledgement-polite formality, as occurs in a shop between the client and the shopkeeper. Broadly speaking, classroom studies can be viewed from three different perspectives (Johnson and Johnson, 1998): 1. The process of interaction

2. The process of the effects of instruction on language improvement.

3 The process of whether different methods of instruction have different effects on language development.

According to (Chang, 1999: 2-3), discourse in a classroom can be divided into three structures as follows:

1. Initiation-Response-Feedback.

2. Instruction

3. Investigating Questions

### Investigating Questions

The investigating question is another discourse structure. The teacher asks referential questions and the students are encouraged to give longer answers through their thinking. Their answers may challenge the teacher's position. However, evaluation does not come immediately after the students' responses.

Argumentation: Argumentation can be regarded as investigating questions where the teacher involves the students in a challenging situation in order to make them to justify their reasons. The questions asked are commonly **Referential questions**, which try to elicit predictions, explanations and clarification from the students. The argumentation may be in question or statement forms.

Mehan (1979, as cited in Ellis, 1990: 88) offered three structural components of a pedagogic discourse:

1. An opening part where the participants inform each other that they are in fact going to conduct a lesson as opposed to some other activity.
2. An instructional part where information is exchanged between teacher and students.
3. A closing part where participants are reminded of what went on in the core of a lesson.

Relevant to McTear's argument here about the types of language use is Ellis's (1990: 86) distinction that (pedagogical discourse is believed to be a product of mechanical and meaningful types of language use, whereas natural discourse is believed to result from real communication type of language use) (Ellis, 1990: 86). However, Kramsch (1985, as cited in Ellis, 1990: 86) considers classroom discourse as composed of "a continuum extending from pedagogic to natural discourse poles".

### **Classroom observation**

Doing the actual research is a matter of data collection and analysis. You need some sort of a record of what happens in a particular classroom or classrooms, so that you can analyze the record (your data) and describe the classroom processes in whatever topics interest you. Classroom data have their own unique characteristics. Some important characteristics are as follows (van Lier, 1988: 9-10):

1. Actions occur in the context of a classroom. Actions are related to each other. What is said and done is influenced by what happened before, and influences what happens next.
2. Most of the teacher's actions are preplanned.
3. When actions are done in a similar way, they change into routines in which all participants know what is going to happen next.
4. The teacher makes learners do a lot of thinking by asking questions.

The teacher hopes that language used in cognitive work results in language development. Observation is one of the oldest research instruments. It can be meant to discover and learn new things about our world. From the baby staring at his hand, to the scientists watching over their experiments. The situation is not so simple; we have to discriminate between observation as daily routine and as a research tool.

### **Classroom interaction**

In one study of classroom talk, (Allwright and Bailey, 1991), Long and Sato compared the teachers' and native speakers' use of Display and Referential questions, comprehension checks, clarification checks, and confirmation checks. A number of striking differences emerged:

1. ESL teachers used significantly more Display than Referential questions in the classroom, so there was less real communication going on in classrooms.

2. The teacher used more imperatives, more statements and fewer questions.

3. The teachers' speech was significantly more oriented to the here and now.

### **Definition of the term Question:**

The Longman Dictionary of English Language provides the following definition for a question: (a command or interrogative expression used to elicit information or a response or to test knowledge). Lynch (1991, cited in Shomoossi, 2004) characterizes a question as an utterance with a particular illocutionary force; and Quirk et al., (1970, cited in Shomoossi, 2004) define a question as a semantic class used to seek information on a specific subject. Questioning is the single most influential teaching act and the trend has hardly changed over the years. In the realm of teaching and learning, questions have been cited as not only the most often used, but also the single most important strategy used by instructors. In order to teach well, a teacher must be able to question well. Asking good questions smooths the interaction between the teacher and his or her students. Rosenshine (1971, as cited in Brualdi, 1998) found that large amounts of student-teacher interaction promote student achievement. Teachers spend most of their time asking low-level cognitive questions (Wilén, 1991, cited in Brualdi, 1998). These type of interactions focus on factual information that can be memorized; for example, «When did the First World War start? » or «Who wrote *Gone with the Wind*? ». It shows that these types of questions limit students; they do not help them to think deeply about the subjects. High-level cognitive questions, in contrast, help students to use higher order thinking or reasoning skills. By using these skills, the students are not forced to memorize only factual knowledge, instead, they use their skills and knowledge to analyze, evaluate and solve the problem. Ellis (1993, cited in Hussain, 2003) claims that many teachers do rely on low-level cognitive questions in order to avoid a slow-paced lesson, keep the attention of the students, and maintain control of the classroom. Many of the findings show the effects of using lower-level cognitive versus higher-level cognitive questions in most classrooms.

### **Effective questioning**

Questions and answers form a high percentage of classroom activities that are supposed to get the learners involved in creation or recreation of meaning through language. (Chastain, 1988: 142). However not all Q and A's are of communicative value. To be effective, Q And A should be designed to ask for information. That means in every Q and A activity there must be a communicative purpose and an information gap to be filled. Questions that do not serve that purpose will be little value in language teaching since in reality questions are not asked in vacuums. As language teachers, our motive in questioning is usually to get our students to engage with the language material activity through speech; so an effective questioning technique is one that elicits fairly prompt, motivated, relevant and full responses. (Ur, 1996: 230).

### **Types of Questions**

Suter (2001) has proposed the following question types:

**Socratic Elicitation Question:** A methodological approach which can be found in classrooms is to structure a lesson by 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 cannot 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 unacceptable. Nunan, for example, accuses it of wasting time in holding back information which could easily be given by the teacher.

### **Convergent Questions vs. Divergent Questions:**

Richards and Lockheart (1996, cited in Suter, 2001) propose to classify questions into either (Convergent) or (Divergent) ones. Richards et al., state that (Convergent is a question that encourages students' responses to focus on a central theme such as convergent questions require a single correct answer and elicit short responses from students) (Richards et al., 1992: 85). Convergent questions are useful when the teacher focuses on certain skills or information, such as when the teacher tries to find out whether learners can focus on specific information in a reading part. Convergent questions can be divided into closed (yes/no answers) and open questions. Divergent questions allow the learners to establish real personal involvement in the course of the lesson.

### **Display Questions vs. Referential Questions:**

Display refers to questions for which the teacher knows the answer and which demand a single or short response of the low-level thinking kind. Referential questions, by contrast, demand more thought and generate a longer response and for which the teacher does not know the answer in advance (Brown, 2001: 171). Display Questions: Suppose you ask your students something you already know. The answer will not satisfy the criterion of providing information. For instance, if you hold up your marker and ask students «What is this?» the answer will not solve a problem. Even less valuable are those questions to which the answers are provided beforehand. Some teachers give their students the information and then try to ask them questions. For example, «This is a marker. What is this?»; such questions can test the students' memory, not their comprehension. In addition such questions are not in harmony with conversational maxims (unwritten rules about conversation which people know and which influence the form of conversational exchanges) which is agreed by many researchers (Widdowson, 1990). Referential Questions: Real language does not consist only of questions from one party and answers from another. Real language circles around referents or world knowledge in order to create messages and therefore is not form-based but meaning-based.

### **The following examples are meaning-based questions:**

Examples (1): 1. What would you do if you saw a burglar in your house late at night?

2. How do you spend your holiday?

## **METHOD**

### **Research question and hypothesis**

The major purpose of this study was to examine teacher/learner interactions in task based settings, to find out what was going on in different contexts of classrooms, and to examine which factors could increase or motivate meaningful teacher/learner interactions. Specifically, the following research question is posed: “Is there more negotiation of meaning when the teacher switches from asking Display to Referential questions in teaching English to Sudanese EFL learners?”

### **Participants**

Participants in a classroom discourse are usually a teacher and the students. In this research, the learners from six English classrooms of the third Year in Awael Secondary School in Sudan served as convenient samples for the study. The EFL learners were at different ages, between 16 and 28, female and Sudanese. The number of learners in each classroom was between 12 and 18. 6 teachers (of both sexes) were chosen. The teachers had adequate experience of teaching English as a foreign language in Sudan.

### **Instrumentation**

To meet the purpose of the study, the following instruments were used:

1. A T.V. set for observing the classrooms
2. Small cameras which were fixed in the corner of the ceiling of the classrooms
3. A headphone for receiving the voice of the teachers and the learners
4. A video set for recording
5. The required textbook was SMILE, Book 3. Each unit consisted of different sections: Snapshot, Conversation, Grammar, Word power and Reading.

### **Procedure**

The following steps were followed to accomplish the purpose of the study during the research process: First, the researchers chose six classrooms and the recordings were conducted in the researchers' room. In order to obtain authentic data, the teachers were not informed about recording of their classrooms. After recording, the researchers let them know and asked permission for working on their video-taped classrooms (The audio and video recordings were conducted simultaneously). There was no instruction to the teachers on using different types of questions (Display and Referential) by the researchers in order to obtain authentic data record. Then, the video and audio-recorded data was viewed and listened to by the researchers several times at home. Next, the data was transcribed (those parts which related to using Display and Referential questions). The final stage was analyzing the data in order to find a reasonable answer to the research question. By following a four-part process of Record-View-Transcribe-Analyze (R-V-T-A), foreign language teachers can use discourse analytic techniques to investigate the interaction patterns in their classrooms and to see how these patterns promote or hinder opportunities for learners to practice the target language. This process allows language teachers to study their own

teaching behavior- the frequency, distribution, and types of questions they use and their effects on the learners' responses.

### **Classroom setting**

The arrangements of the chairs in all of the classrooms were in a U shape. The shape opened toward the whiteboard. This arrangement allows easy communication and encourages interaction while facilitating teacher access to all learners. The classrooms times were constrained to the lesson period of an hour and a half. Each session was conducted by the teachers according to the term program which had been designed for each level by the supervisor.

## **RESULTS**

To answer the research question, the researcher implemented the (R-V-T-A) method in order to observe the frequency use of two types of questions (Display and Referential) which were used by the teachers. After collecting the data, a transcribing technique was employed. Transcribing is a tool commonly used by researchers, both those concerned with the study of language and those concerned with exploring other dimensions of everyday life through language. We should consider that a transcript is a text that re-presents an event; it is not the event itself. After data collection, the observed patterns were analyzed with reference to earlier studies, first, to find and reveal noticeable generalizations and patterns in teachers' questioning behavior and EFL classroom interaction and second, to verify the hypothesis. There were no experimental subjects in the sense that we have in experimental research, neither control treatment groups. Because the two types of questions were concerned, the researchers used the «t-test» which was capable of comparing two types of questions in a given measure. The «t-test» was used to compare the means of the two types of questions. It helped to determine how confident the researchers could be, that the differences between the two types were not due to chance.

### **Quantitative results**

In order to find a distribution balance for teacher's Display and Referential questions, their corresponding numbers in each session were added up. It was found that out of a total of 186 questions, 96 were Display (51.61%) and 90 Referential questions (48.38% ).

**Table 1. Frequency of questions in percentage**

<b>Room</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>RQ</b>	<b>DQ</b>	
<b>Room A</b>	46	11= 23.91	35= 76.09	University of Al Neeleain
<b>Room B</b>	34	16=47.05	18=52.95	University of Bahri
<b>Room C</b>	21	17=80.95	4=19.05	University of Al Neeleain
<b>Room D</b>	36	20=55.55	16=44.45	University of Bahri
<b>Room E</b>	30	20=67.77	10=32.23	University of Al Neeleain
<b>Room F</b>	18	5=27.77	13=72.23	University of Bahri

According to the above table, it's clearly to observe that, 96 students out of 185 students are interested in interacting using Display Questions. On the other hand, 89 students are less interested in DQ. Thus, they prefer interacting in the Referential Questions. According to this study, DQ is best method for classroom interaction in teaching English Language in Sudanese high secondary schools.

**T= Total Number of Questions**

**RQ= Referential Questions**

**DQ= Display Questions**

**Sample of Referential Questions used in the statistical analysis**

Example 1:

T: What can be done to reduce unemployment?

L: I think the best way... about young people.... We know about their interests ....

Which fields they are interested and help them to increase their talents about that and after that ..... make a ..... if for example we give a little money for them. They can open their own business and be very successful at their business.

1. What are the reasons people eat so much fast food?

2. Have you ever lost anything? If yes, could you tell us the story? Therefore, it is better to modify the hypothesis as follows: Most, not all, Referential questions create more interaction in the classroom than Display questions do.



## **Qualitative results**

The study was not confined to answering the research question; rather, during the data collection procedure, a number of patterns of classroom interaction and questioning were explored, which will be presented here.

1. Teachers ask a number of questions -- mostly Referential -- before they start to work directly on Snapshot, Conversation, Listening, and Reading parts. These questions usually help the learners warm up for the task, and get familiar with the topic of different parts in the textbook.
2. Contrary to what is commonly thought about Display questions, said to elicit short or even one-word answers (e.g. Brock, 1986, cited in Nunan, 1989), sometimes a Display question may cause learners to give, for instance, a two/three-minute answer, though we may not consider it as interaction.
3. Almost all the questions asked by teachers while working on the exercises were Display. Perhaps due to the accuracy-focused nature of grammar exercises, they do not seem to have led to interaction or speaking practice.
4. Not all of the teachers made equal use of Display or Referential questions. This seems to be a natural incidence since not all teachers think alike, or teach in the same way.
5. Most of the Display questions asked by teachers concerned textual information, e.g. comprehension checks, meaning of words, idioms, re-telling of the story book; while most of the Referential questions concerned personal information or experiences -like feeling, family, ideas, e.g. on society, crime, occupation, future, education, etc.
6. In observed classes, in some cases, interaction was seen without the teachers asking any question. In other words, wherever the topic was interesting, learners tended to speak more.
7. Not all answers given by the learners for Referential questions were long and complex; on the contrary, it was observed that lots of grammatical mistakes were made by the learners and simple answers were given.
8. The question asking was not just from the teachers, the questions asked by the learners made an interaction between learner-teacher or between learner-learner.
9. Learners who were less willing to participate were usually encouraged, or forced, to speak when asked to speak. Some learners are less confident or are shy but they also participate when the teacher gives them a turn.
10. It was observed that personality type of the learners played a main role in classroom interactions. Talkative learners took most of the class time in answering the two types of the questions.

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## CONCLUSION

The study focused on what is going on in the classroom, especially on teachers' questioning behavior – what kind of questions they ask, for what purposes, and so on in the context of Sudanese language learners learn (EFL). Classroom processes are extremely complex; it would be simplistic to think that an observer can fully understand what is going on in the classroom by observing and analyzing a number of lessons. Through observation, it was found that Display questions outnumbered Referential ones. It was observed that Referential questions made more classroom interaction. Johnson and Johnson (1998) cite Swain (1985), who argues that output may be an important factor in successful second language learning /acquisition. She suggests that output creates the necessity for the learner to perform a syntactic analysis of the language. She notes that comprehending the input or getting the message is possible without such an analysis. Producing one's own message, on the other hand, may force the learner to pay attention to the means of expression in order to convey his/her intended meaning. If it is true that such questions increase the amount of learner output, and if output leads to better learning, then questions can be an important tool in the language classrooms, especially in those EFL contexts where the classroom provides the only opportunity to produce the target language. On the other hand, according to Skehan, cited in Candlin and Mercer (2001), we have to accept that speaking does not come «for free» simply through listening to comprehensible input. So teacher/learner interaction occupies a continuum between Display and Referential questions, and the role of a teacher in question asking is a crucial matter. Question asking must be done purposefully, so teachers should switch from closed discourse to more open discourse in order to create autonomous learner discourse in the classrooms. Moreover, teachers can increase the amount of interaction in their classes by applying two factors: humor and interest. A learner will be more eager when s/he finds the teacher paying attention and interested in the answer. Also, when the teacher incorporates a piece of humor into the classroom, learners are encouraged to participate more than when the teacher is the sole speaker. However, it seems that the use of Display questions can encourage language learners, especially beginners, to get interested. It may also help teachers provide comprehensible input for learners. It would be dangerous to generalize that Referential questions are most useful for language learning or Display are useless. Each context requires an appropriate strategy for itself. Allwright and Bailey (1991) maintain that it is a dangerous simplification to suggest that verbal interaction in the classroom is just a case of «the more, the merrier». They add that: «there may be times when teacher's desire to get students to interact verbally can be counterproductive. Rather, it is important for teachers to adjust their teaching styles to learners' strategies». Language classroom discourse is a very spontaneously evolving, dynamic, and complicated phenomenon. Pedagogic discourse is characterized by transmission, reception and practice of teaching/ learning points where the focus is on knowledge as a product and on accuracy. As we know, different types of questions play a central role in learning English. The present researchers collected the data (focusing on Display and Referential questions used by the teachers) from six classes using a video-taping system.

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