Asking Effective Referential Questions in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract
Through language interaction in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, the teacher and students co-construct the activity of teacher questioning and student responding as a source for negotiation, construction, and assessment of language knowledge. Referential questions have been referred to as one of the effective language tools to help develop complexity of learner output and the use of the target language for genuine communication. This study aims to critically examine the extent to which the referential questions are actually and pedagogically used in the language classroom. The research applied Conversation Analysis (CA) to analyze interactions recorded from sixteen EFL classroom lessons. The results reveal that the goal of using referential questions to develop genuine communication in English is rarely achieved in this particular EFL classroom context. The characteristics of the teacher's practice which cause deterioration of the effective use of the referential forms of question will be discussed in details. The implications for research into teacher questions and language pedagogy will be provided.

Keyword: Referential Questions, Classroom Research, Conversation Analysis

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Introduction

Research Background

Teachers' questioning is one of the most familiar forms of teacher talk in the language classroom which has been the focus of research attention in language classrooms for many years (Brock, 1986). Most of the previous research has the main focus on the functional categorisation of *English as a second language* (ESL) teachers' questions (Long & Sato, 1983), counting the frequency of use of different question types (White & Lightbown, 1984), and describing the functions of different types of teacher questions (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1987). Particular attention has been paid to the categories of 'display questions' and 'referential questions' (Long & Sato, 1983). Comparing the two categories, a number of previous studies have endeavoured to show which type of question is more conducive, and similar to the communicative characteristics of regular conversation outside classrooms.

These functional categorisation studies have provided some important ideas about teacher questioning which are relevant to the development of language pedagogy. However, the categorisation results are too static. They cannot provide an adequate explanation of the more complex interactional characteristics and the actual functions of teacher questions in the language classroom. Moreover, most of the previous works were conducted from an *etic* perspective which interprets the meanings of the teacher's utterances from the analyst's viewpoint. It does not describe the functions of the questions as products of contingent and intersubjective communication between teacher and students, and fails to uncover the complex functions of questions which contingently change according to the contexts of interaction.

This article presents classroom research which emically study the Thai English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher's use of referential questions. *Emic* analysis is based on an examination of the understandings and orientations of the participants themselves. The sensitivity of an emic approach to what is going on in the interaction makes it more useful in the study of classroom interaction than an etic approach because 'the understandings that matter are those that are incarnate in the interaction being examined' (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In order to examine referential questions used in EFL classroom in a Thai public school without having pre-evaluation or judgement of particular types of classroom behaviour as being of interest, *classroom ethnography* and *conversation analysis* (CA) were applied. Schegloff states that CA is concerned, among other things, with 'the detailed analysis of how talk-in-interaction is conducted as an activity in its own right and as the instrument for the full range of social action and practice…' (Schegloff, 1991, p. 47). In EFL classroom research, it is also important to understand how teacher and students engage in various activities of question and response in order to identify the characteristics of questions which may develop or hamper language development.

The English Language Teaching (ELT) Situation in Thailand

At the present time, the Thai government institutes changes in the education policy to improve the abilities of local people to be more independent and creative. The Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC), Thai Ministry of Education, set out the National Education Curriculum for 2001-2010, adopting globally-disseminated

educational practices such as *school-based management*, *parental involvement* and *cooperative learning* (OBEC, 2002). The purpose of the new educational curriculum is to counteract rote learning and to foster the development of active learners who can think creatively and be responsible for their own learning (Jantrasakul, 2004, p.2).

However, most of the studies on the Thai EFL classroom revealed the patterns of interaction in the classroom to follow the traditional rather than the modern communicative language teaching (CLT) or creative thinking development methods. Littlewood (2000) suggests that, if Asian students do indeed adopt the passive classroom attitudes that are often claimed, this is more likely to be a consequence of the educational contexts that have been or are now provided for them, than of any inherent disposition of the students themselves. One of that educational contexts is the teacher's use of questions which is the basic form of conversation in the classroom. To understand how referential questions is used to develop CLT in the context of Thai EFL classrooms, the researcher developed the main research objective which is to study the different language forms and functions of teacher's referential question in a Thai EFL classroom. The research results, obtained from a detailed analysis of the classroom discourse, will enable us to understand the structure of the interaction in terms of teacher's use of referential question, and will provide a naturalistic basis for the discussion of the significance of referential question in ELT in Thai EFL classrooms.

Literature Review

Questioning is one of the elicitation forms, or the act of initiating a reply. According to Long (1981), question − response is the most dominant interaction used by both non-native speakers (NNSs) and native speakers (NSs) of the target language to develop the topic of a conversation because questions provide the topics for the respondent and imply an obligation to reply. In language classrooms, questioning is one of the methods teachers use to initiate classroom interaction.

As mentioned earlier, the classification of 'display questions' and 'referential questions' was one of the most widely known classifications of teacher questions. *Display questions* seek answers in which the information is already known by the teacher. This type of elicitation has been criticised for its lack of authenticity since it is not commonly used in conversation outside the classroom. Some researchers suggest that extensive use of display questions could be a waste of time (Nunan, 1991; Brown, 1994). However, some authors (Markee, 1995; Lee, 2006) suggests that display questions can potentially be central resources which language teachers and students use to organise language lessons and produce language pedagogy.

Referential questions require answers which contain information unknown by the teacher, and they are frequently used to call for evaluation or judgment (e.g. 'What do you think about this topic?'). They are commonly used in regular conversation outside the classroom, hence are believed to encourage students' higher-order thinking skills and authentic use of the second language in the classroom (Brock, 1986). Many researchers (Brock, 1986; Nunan, 1987; Suter, 2001; Morell, 2007) agree that teachers' use of referential questions could prompt students to provide significantly longer and syntactically more complex responses than the use of display questions.

Although, a number of classifications of different types of teacher question have been developed, it should be noted that no single conclusion has been reached regarding which question type is more effective for language teaching and learning. Every question type has its own pros and cons. As Suter (2001) notes, teachers have choices either to ask simple display questions and keep control of the lesson, or to give up the control and allow referential questions to encourage more complex but less predictable learner responses. The classifications of teacher questions are undoubtedly valuable, in terms of giving pictures of different types of question and suggesting a possible linkage between these and the development of language teaching and learning, and of thinking skills. However, classification cannot provide a moving picture of the process of teacher question and student reply, nor does it allow a close investigation of which types of question and language use actually influence what students do in the classroom. The results from most of the functional categorisation studies are presented in a static form, thus limiting the opportunities to study the complex nature of teachers' and students' practices and the variety of goals and roles to be achieved and established in classrooms.

Teachers' practice of questioning is a much more complex process than a static sequence of a specific type of question coupled with the co-occurrent type of response. For instance, there are cases where teachers use a question to achieve more than one goal, or the teacher's question receives no response from the students and the teacher needs to work until the expected response is achieved. The process by means of which an elicitation is actually used and accomplished has been examined using CA methodologies to analyse the sequential structure and the turn-taking system of the elicitation. The CA approach has been applied to the study of structures and functions of questions across various institutional settings, including CA studies of questioning in media interviews (Clayman, 1992), job interviews (Button, 1992), medical consultations (Heath, 1992) and classroom teaching (Mehan, 1979a, 1979b; Morell, 2007; Lee, 2008). CA views questioning as a contingent activity which is achieved through interaction and which need to be studied in interaction. That means, for CA, the functions of questions can only be interpreted upon the micro-context in which this question occurs (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) and on how it is interpreted and understood by the participants in an interaction. Hence, CA aims to uncover the process through which questions are accomplished in real-time interactions and to demonstrate the characteristics and functions of questions through the participants' orientation to them.

Research Method

Data Collection

Naturally occurring classroom interactions constructed by a Thai teacher and EFL learners at a secondary school in Thailand are the unit of analysis of this research. EFL lessons from this classroom were observed and videotaped for further analysis inductively based on the framework of CA and language classroom ethnographic research. The teacher is a female Thai teacher of English who has an undergraduate degree in Education from a university in Thailand. She has more than ten years' experience in teaching English to students at primary and secondary school levels. During the data collection process, the teacher was asked for permission to record her teaching and asked to teach the classes as she usually does when there is no camera

operating. The students were 37 Thai students in Mattayom 2 (Grade 7). There were 25 female and 12 male students, all around 14-15 years old. Like the teacher, the students were informed of the video recording, and asked to ignore the camera and to perform as usual. The researcher used pseudonyms for the teacher and the students in the data presentation. The corpus of sixteen Thai EFL classroom lessons is analyzed in detail to describe the organization of teacher elicitations and the process through which these organizations were accomplished

Data Analysis

The procedure for the detailed analysis of the classroom interaction, which is shown below, is adapted from Seedhouse's (2004) stages of CA research.

1) Locate the acts of referential questions.
2) Characterize referential questions by looking at the nature of students' responses to the questions.
3) Characterize language form in the question performed.
4) In each sequence of teacher question−student response:
    a) describe it in terms of: (1) turn-taking, (2) sequence of actions or adjacency pairs, (3) preference, (4) use of L1, and wait-time;
    b) uncover the emic logic underlying each turn of interaction by following Sacks et al.'s (1974, p.729) *next-turn proof procedure*; to describe the subsequent turn as an interpretation of the previous turn, and how it creates an action and interpretational template for subsequent actions;
    c) examine the process through which the organizations of teacher questions−student responses are co-constructed through interaction;
    d) examine what teachers try to accomplish through referential questions;
    e) uncover any roles, identities or relationships which are evident in the data.

Results

Referential Questions which Call for Limited Answers

Nunan (1987, 1991) believes that referential questions can develop more complex responses from students. However, not all referential questions require responses in the form of complex sentences. Extract 1 is taken from the teaching of 'can' questions. It shows an example of teacher question which asks for the students' own information with limited choices of answer of either yes or no. It also shows how the use of referential questions can enact the teacher's role of interactional controller and language assessor, and the students' role as followers.

Extract 1

1. T: →   Can you swim?
2. Ss: Ye:s I ca:n
3. T: →   Can you dance? ((dancing))
4. Ss: Ye:s I ca:n=
5. T: →   =Can you play piano?
6. Ss: N[o:↑ I ca:n not
7. T: [No↑ I (1.5) no↑ I cannot *rŭ:* no I can't
                (No, I cannot *or* no I can't.)

In lines 1, 3 and 5 the teacher asks questions in L2 without any L1 translation, followed by the students' responses in lines 2, 4 and 6. Hence, L2 is used by the teacher and perceived by the students as a real language of questioning. The exchange of questions−responses in this extract may not commonly occur in regular conversation in L2. Nunan (1987) suggested that 'genuine communication is characterized by the uneven distribution of information, the negotiation of meaning, topic nomination and negotiation by more than one speaker, and the right of interlocutors to decide whether to contribute to an interaction or not' (p. 135). In this classroom, on the other hand, the teacher holds the monopoly in eliciting a series of responses from the students, and the students perceive their roles as followers who only provide answers to the questions asked. The act of teacher question in L2 accomplishes the aim of initiating yes/no responses from the students, and the possible aims of assessing their L2 comprehension and production skills, rather than encouraging the authentic use of L2 for communication similar to regular L2 interaction. This can be seen from the follow-up turn in line 7 which focuses on the form of the students' response, rather than on its content. This exchange of questions-responses in this extract may not commonly occur in regular conversation in L2.

Other Characteristics of Referential Questions

This sections provide the forms of teacher question which look as though they are calling for information unknown to the teacher, but are actually followed by (1) the teacher's own responses, (2) student choral responses, and (3) the teacher's expected responses. At first sight, the interactions seem like genuine conversation, but as the interaction unfolds, the acts of student choral responses and the act of the teacher's working to achieve expected responses turn the interactions into contextualised drills.

The forms of referential question which are not followed by students' responses

In Extract 2 the teacher is teaching English vocabulary. The point to note here is that the form of referential question which is often used to elicit students' opinions does not always call for students' responses.

Extract 2

1. T: *ma: du: jɔ̂: nâ: tʰî: sɔ̌:ŋ (.) ná kʰá (.) bantʰát ræ̂:k* ((pointing on
             (*Look at the second paragraph, the first line*)
2. →   the board)) *mi: kʰam năj mâj sâ:p máj (.) mâj mi: ná kʰá (.) bantʰát tʰî:*
                     (*Is there any word that you don't know? No. The second line,*
3.   *kʰam ní: lâ kʰá*) ((underlining the word))
             (*What about this word?*)
4.   (2.0)
5. T: →   Do you know? *rú: tɕàk máj kʰá*
                     (*Do you know it?*)
6. S1:   ness=
7. T: =Kind↑ness
8. Ss: Kind↑ness

In lines 2-3 the teacher checks whether there is any word in the first line on the board that the students do not know. She leaves a pause, and receiving no response from the students, assumes that there is no problem and moves to check if there is any word that the students do not know on the next line on the board. This time she leaves two seconds in line 4, but there is no response from the students. The teacher repeats the question in L2 followed by the L1 equivalent meaning in line 5 'Do you know? *rú: tɕàk máj kʰá*'. S1 just begins to respond in line 6, but latches with the teacher's turn in line 7. The teacher rushes to provide the response herself without providing any length of time for the students to reply.

There are two referential questions in this extract which seem to call for an affirmative response from the students. However, in the first question, the teacher makes no attempt to prompt students' replies but assumes that there is no word in the first paragraph that the students do not know. In the second question, the teacher focuses on the word 'kindness' and provides prompts for students' replies. There is no consistency regarding how the questions are accomplished. This depends on how the elicitation is oriented to by the students, how the students respond and how the teacher reacts to the students' actions. The data reveal that, after her attempts to obtain responses, the students start to reply. The students may have interpreted the teacher's attempts to mean that they are really required to participate in order to allow the interaction to move on. If the teacher regularly provides the answer after a pause, the students may learn that they do not have to reply since the teacher will provide the answer. As a result of providing the answer herself, the teacher makes an assumption about what the students know and don't know, from her own judgment.

The forms of referential question which are followed by whole class responses

Extracts 3 demonstrates this type of referential question which is followed by whole class responses.

Extract 3

((The students are preparing their learning materials such as books and pencils))
1. T: Are you exciting? (.) *tùːn tên májkʰá*
                     (*Are you nervous?*)
2. Ss: →   Y::es ((some students are still preparing their learning materials))
3. T: ((laughing)) *mâj tɔ̌ŋ tùːn tênná pen kaːn fùùk…*((Continues talking in
4.   Thai)   (*Don't be nervous. This is practice…*)

In Extract 3 the students are going to present their work from the last lesson. In line 1 the teacher asks 'Are you exciting?' followed by the question in L1 which means 'are you nervous?' in English. The students answer in chorus in line 2. The answer in L2 shows that they understand that the teacher's elicitation in L1 is used as a translation tool, and that they are required to answer in L2. The form of this question inquires about the students' own feelings. The students' answering in chorus implies that the students perceive the elicitation as asking for the feelings of the whole class, rather than those of individuals.

Some forms of referential questions which are used to call for expected responses

The teacher sometimes uses the question as though she is calling for unknown information when she is in fact calling for an answer which she has in mind and leading the students to answer in that way, as shown in Extract 4.

Extract 4

1. T: Are you happy?
2. Ss: Ye::s
3. T: Do you have lunch?
4. Ss: (2.0)
5. T: Do you have lunch?
6. S1:   N[o
7. Ss: [no
8. T: →   No↑ (.) *tʰəːjaŋ mâj tʰaːn aːhǎːn klaːŋ wan rɔ̌ː*
                     (*Haven't you had lunch?*)
9. S2:   [*jaŋ*
              (*I haven't*)
10. S3:   [*jaŋ mâj dâj kin*
              (*I haven't had lunch.*)
11. T: →   Do you have lunch?
12. Ss1:   N[o
13. Ss2:   [Ye[s
14. T: [Yes

Extract 4 comes from an English lesson which took place in the afternoon, and the students are supposed already to have had lunch. The pattern of the teacher's asking 'Are you happy?' followed by the choral answer 'yes' occurring in lines 1-2 is similar to the pattern analysed in Extract 3. The teacher starts the new elicitation 'Do you have lunch?' in line 3. After a two-second pause, the teacher repeats the question in

line 5. S1 begins her reply 'no' in line 6, followed by 'no' answers from the others in line 7. Notice that the individual response to the referential question is again preceded by a delay.

This example provides evidence that the students do not always answer 'yes' in chorus to all Y/N questions in English. The students' replies of 'no' at different paces imply that they perceive the question as asking for real information, that they have not had lunch yet. Her utterance in line 8 indicates that the teacher does not accept the students' 'No' response. The teacher repeats the students' responses with a rising intonation which indicates that the response is unacceptable (Cullen, 2002). She repeats the question, but this time in L1 to re-elicit the students' confirmation of the fact that they have still not had lunch. The question in L1 shows that the teacher actually wants to ask 'Have you had lunch?' rather than 'Do you have lunch?' In line 9 the students confirm their previous answer, but this time they switch to L1. This suggests that the students have understood the meaning of the question asked in L2, and insist on giving the same answer when they are asked the same question in L1. The teacher still does not accept the response, however. In line 11 she repeats the question in L2 'Do you have lunch?' This time some students may realise what the teacher expects, and that she is repeating the question in order to elicit a different response. They answer 'yes' in line 13. The teacher repeats this response in the form of accepting the answer (Hellermann, 2003, p. 92). In this case, the teacher uses questions which seem to ask for personal information, but work to acquire expected answers in a similar way to when she asks display questions.

For the other form of referential question which seems to ask for the students' creative ideas or opinions rather than testing the students' knowledge. In this case there should be no right or wrong answer, and no single answer expected. This can be seen from the way the students provide many answers to one question asked. In Extract 5, the teacher and students are working on answering questions in an English worksheet.

Extract 5

1. T: →   lɔːŋ pʰûːt pen pʰaːsǎː tʰaj sí tʰammaj tʰ ǔŋ rák mɛ̂ː
          (*Tell me in Thai why you love your mom*)
2. Ss: mɛ̂ː pen pʰûː hâj tɕʰiːwít
          (*Mom is the person who gives birth to us.*)
3. T: →   à: [mɛ̂ː duːlæː raw maː tɕʰâj máj
          (*Yes, mom takes care of us, right.*)
4. S1:   [pʰrɔ́ mɛ̂ː rák tɕʰǎn
              (*Because mom loves me.*)
5. T: →   kʰam wâː duːlæː nâː tɕà tɕʰáj kʰam wâː àraj
          (*To take care, what is the English vocabulary for to take care?*)
6. Ss: Take care
7. T: Take care ((writing on the board))

In line 1 the teacher explicitly asks the students to provide answers in L1 to 'why they love their mothers'. The elicitation for reply in L1 infers the teacher's focus on encouraging the students to provide their ideas using the L1, which may be the language that they feel comfortable with. The first response in L1 is produced by S1 in line 2. In line 3 the teacher provides a positive evaluation and adds the answer that

she has in mind '*mɛ̂: duːlɛː raw maː tɕʰâj máj*' (*Yes, mom takes care of us, right.*). S2 understands that the opportunity for responding is still open and shares her idea in line 4. However, the teacher does not give any feedback to S2's idea. Instead, she starts the new elicitation in line 5 to elicit the L2 equivalent meaning of her answer provided in line 3. This shows that the teacher is asking the students to provide answers in Thai before then getting them to translate these answers into English. Instead of using the students' answers, however, the teacher uses and asks the students to provide the translation of her own answer. The data reveal that when the forms of elicitation which call for opinions or ideas are used, the students are encouraged to produce more than one answer. However, after the students' reply, the teacher provides feedback (a form of modification of the student's answer), which shows that although the answer is not incorrect she is trying to lead them to produce the answer she expects. The students' responses show how they interpret the meaning of the elicitation as calling for creative ideas, but the teacher's follow-up move shows that the actual meaning of the elicitation is to call for an expected answer.

Discussion

The data reveal that the goal of using referential elicitations to develop genuine communication in English is rarely achieved in this EFL classroom. There are three main characteristics of the teacher's practice in this classroom which constrain the effectiveness of the use of the referential form of questioning in this respect.

First, the process through which the teacher asks referential questions and moves on to the next action without waiting for the students' reply shows how the meaning of the form of question is not negotiated or made intelligible between the teacher and students. Nunan (1991) listed many advantages of teachers providing enough wait-time, which are significant in the accomplishment of the teacher's question. However, in the Thai EFL classroom context the opportunity for the students to complete the referential question sequence is not provided by the teacher. The teacher often makes assumptions about the students' competences and never asks for the students' clarifications. This is similar to McHoul's (1990) finding, that the teacher rarely provides sufficient wait-time for the students to initiate and correct their own answer.

Second, the referential question followed by the students' answer in chorus is another distinctive feature of the Thai EFL classroom questions, which does not usually occur in regular conversation. The fact that the students answer in chorus may be a result of the way the teacher gazes around the class and addresses the elicitation to the whole class, rather than to individuals or groups of students, as recipients of the elicitation who all have an equal right to reply (Schegloff, 2007). However, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason why the students choose the same answer for the referential question and provide it at the same pace. What can be observed and described from the data is that the students do not always provide choral answers to all referential questions. The students seem to answer individually to those referential questions where it is clear why they are being asked. They perceive these questions as calling for personal information, such as questions about their homework or about activities they have done at the weekend.

Third, the teacher appears to have the answer in mind when asking referential questions and works to accomplish the answer she is expecting by not accepting the

students' reply but rather prompting for students' repairs. One possible reason why the students often provide the same answer in chorus is that they know what the teacher expects. These are characteristics of referential questions which seem genuine, but which are actually negotiated and socially-accomplished by teacher and students as little more than contextualised drilling.

Conclusion

Various structures and functions of referential questions in a Thai EFL classroom were identified from an *emic* perspective based on a micro-analysis of the classroom interaction. Although Morell (2007) suggests that the teacher's use of referential questions in language classrooms can promote the opportunity for negotiation of meaning between teacher and learners, this phenomenon does not occur in the Thai classroom context under study here. The research findings have broadened our knowledge of EFL teacher questions by discovering the forms of questions that are used, presenting a moving picture of the social construction of the teacher elicitation processes, and by providing empirically-based evidence of the meanings or functions which are actually accomplished through the use of questions. However, there are some classroom behaviours which cannot be discovered through the analysis of interaction. Future research may overcome this limitation by using CA in conjunction with other research methods, such as asking subjects to keep journals, interviews with the teacher or students, or showing the video recording of the interaction to the students and asking them to reflect on what they did and why they did it.

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