

An Observation-Based Analysis: Focusing on the Intentions of Second Language Teachers' in-class Questions

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Abstract

This paper is intended to conduct a classification-based analysis of the authentic questions English teachers raise in class according to the outcome of real-time observations, focusing particularly on the exact intentions of the questions. By attentively observing the teaching processes and faithfully recording the questions, the paper comes to a conclusion that teachers are, without exception, conscious of raising their questions which distinctively fall into three categories: interpersonal relationship-, class contents- and further thoughts-oriented. Moreover, we also find the three categories are sharing different proportions with the class contents-oriented ones enjoying a lion share, and further thoughts-oriented ones, the next, in most cases. This is, we assume, because teachers are required to be subject to the teaching materials by the school authorities, thus they are not allowed much freedom to detach from the textbooks so as to draw the students' attentions to the practical use of the language and to provide students the authentic situation-based methods of language learning.

Keywords

Class observation, authentic questions, intentions, effects.

1. Introduction

In English classes, the act of raising questions is a time-honored routine. Many teachers find it an effective method to facilitate the delivery of knowledge while enabling students to be engrossed in classes[1]. Richard and McCormick (1994) have put forth a convincing summary of the functions of in-class questions as follows: to evoke students' interest in and encourage them to reflect on what is being taught, to check to what degree students have understood the important knowledge points and to motivate them to participate in in-class activities[2]. Owing to the long-held significance of the raising of questions, particularly in the teaching and learning of vocabulary and grammar, the following experiment of class observation is of practical importance in terms of its concentration on the authentic in-class questions. More precisely, we are to focus our efforts on the intentions of the questions in particular, trying to figure out for what specific purposes teacher raise their questions, an small-scale experiment guided by the studies of Ellis, etc.(2006) in an attempt to enhance the awareness of raising better questions in class[3].

2. Design of Class Observations and Major Findings

2.1 Attending Authentic Classes

We observed two classes which last 135 minutes in all. The first is about 90 minutes, and the students are undergraduates who are in their second year at Southwest Minzu University. While the second, 45 minutes, is for graduates who are freshmen. The details are as follows:

2.2 Major Findings

We requested to be provided the teaching materials the two teachers were to use in class in advance and managed to understand the lecture content by reading and analyzing them. And in observing the classes, we were concentrated on the recording of the authentic questions, whatever they might be, in an exhaustive manner. The following was what we observed : There are altogether 90 questions asked by the two teachers in the 135 minutes. The first teacher asked 63 questions in 90 minutes, while the

second teacher asked 27 questions in 45 minutes. We analyzed the questions and found that these questions can mainly be divided into three categories, namely interpersonal relationship-oriented questions, class content-oriented questions, further thoughts-oriented questions in terms of the teachers' exact intentions (With regard to the classification of in-class questions, several different methods are used in line with different criterion. Campell and Barnes(1969) held that all in-class questions fall into two categories: closed questions and open-ended ones, defining the former as the questions that have fixed answers while the latter more than one[4]; Long and Sato(1983) argued all the questions are no complex than display questions and referential ones in terms of classification, with the formal conveying the answers to students by the teacher and the latter arriving at possible answers by the cooperation between students and teachers[5]. This paper, owing to its focus on the intentions of teachers, revises these previous approaches and adopts such a three-branched one.)

Table 1 The details are as follows

Table 4 The details are as follows						
No.	Time		Place	Content	Teacher	Students
i	Dec.5, 2017	Friday 8:00~9:40 a.m.	Rm. 306, No. 8 Teaching Building1	A Day of a Salesman	Mr. Dai	Sophomore (undergraduates)
ii	Dec.8, 2017	Monday 10:00~10:45 a.m.	Rm. 205, Teaching Building1	Science News: Hubble Space Telescope	Miss Zhang	Freshman (graduates)

Table 2. We can see that there are 8 interpersonal

No.	Total	interpersonal relationship-oriented questions	class content-oriented questions	further thoughts-oriented questions
i	63	8	36	19
ii	27	0	19	8

From Table 2, we can see that there are 8 interpersonal relationship-oriented questions among 63 questions in class i, taking up 12.7%; 36 class content-oriented questions, taking up 57.1%; and 19 further thoughts-oriented questions that take up 30.2%. While in class ii, there is no interpersonal question raised; however, there are 19 class content-oriented questions that take up 70.4%; 8 further thoughts-oriented questions that take up 29.6%. So the class content-oriented questions are the main questions the teachers asked in the classes. The statistics can be clearly seen in the following graph:

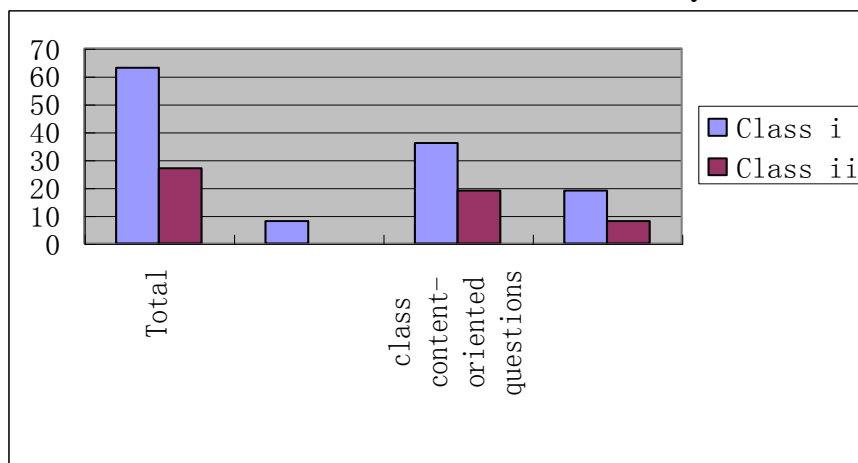


Fig 1 The statistics can be clearly seen in the following graph

3. Discussions

The statistics we obtain from the real-time observations shed a light on our common understandings of teachers' in-class questions. More specifically, these figures provide us with an insight into this focus: What are the functions the three categories of questions play respectively? More over, why, as is shown clearly by these figures, do teachers grant such great attentions to the class content-oriented questions? And finally, is there any better arrangement of in-class questions that is likely to be suggested?

As to the functions of the three categories of questions, we can draw a comparatively safe conclusion from our observation, that is, interpersonal relationship-oriented questions serve as initiators, transistors and ending signals in class. In another word, these questions help to establish the readiness for the further acts of raising question and to provoke the students' attentions to a certain lectured point. And class content-oriented questions are deliberately designed to figure out the point at which students have actually understood about the text-content, language points and so forth, all being supposed to be central to the classes. And further thoughts-oriented ones function as a driving force that leads the students' attentions to their self-reasoning, the actual use of language points in authentic situations and their-own-word expression of what they are thinking of.

With the convincing figures presented by our observation, our first concern is how to explain the overwhelming proportion of class content-oriented questions. Taking the daily chatting with the two teachers involved in our experiment and some other colleagues into consideration, we assume that this phenomenon reflects a long-standing attitude towards in-class questions among teachers that questions are by nature a means to test how well students have absorbed class content. This concept is so far-reaching that no class, be it of physics or of English or of whatever, takes a blind eye to it because teachers believe classes should be where knowledge is conveyed to students and English classes should be no exception. Apart from the ideological factor, we also attribute this phenomenon to the obligation imposed on the teachers to strictly follow the teaching syllables, which confined them to the textbooks and allows them little freedom to further inspire the students, let alone the down-to-earth drills for the improvement of students' practical abilities of using English.

Coming next is the further thoughts-oriented questions, accounting for a somewhat small percentage indeed. We are impressed by our observation that teachers are far less ready to present this kind of questions than to raise the class content-oriented ones, that is, they seem not have made sufficient preparation to raise these questions and therefore these questions appear sporadic and less systematic. Thus we may conclude that the teachers do not attach enough importance to raising these questions. This phenomenon is closely associated with the lion share of the class content-oriented questions, indicating the teachers are more sticking to the knowledge to be conveyed than caring about the cultivation of students' abilities of using English in practical situations. Another fact observed adds to our conviction upon such an understanding that students were seldom allowed time to make any language practice and the teachers, on the other hand, grabbed most of the class-time to plod along the texts. In this regard, the concept "what to learn" dwarfs that of "how to learn".

Last but not least, the category of interpersonal relationship-oriented questions is well worth mentioning as well. We find that teachers have not reached an agreement on the issue whether they should raise these questions and to what degree the amount of these question remains proper. But in general, we can see these questions are actually employed, on a small scale, of course. As to whether the use of these questions is beneficial, it is another experiment that can serve to explain, but according to our impression, this can be a good method.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the phenomenon that class content-oriented questions dominate in class while the further thoughts-oriented ones are to some degree ignored impressed us deeply. And according to the discussions above this is actually not really desirable since it reflects that the students' mechanism of

how to learn English autonomously and effectively is not activated, which can possibly hinder their future learning although they may achieve high scores in examinations now.

Therefore, we can arrive at a tentative conclusion (because in our observation involved only to cases, which makes our conclusion somewhat questionable) that teachers should make better preparations to raise further-thoughts questions so as to inspire the students to think, to reason, to summarize and to consciously put what they learned into use. This motion doesn't mean we can absolutely deny the importance of text-centered patterns of teaching. What teachers are supposed to do is to take the two categories of questions and the respective intentions they bear into account and strike a dynamic balance between them. And the most important thing the English teachers have to keep in mind is that the ultimate purpose of English classes is to enable the students to learn and master the English language and they must cling to this goal by whatever means they may adopt.

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