

The Use of Question Modification Strategies in ESL Class

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Abstract

Questioning is a popular instructional strategy in a language class to encourage learning. However, not all questions are effective in doing so, as some questions sometimes go unanswered. When faced with a situation such as this, teachers must adjust their questions to make it more understandable. This study investigates question modification strategies employed by student teachers in English as a second language (ESL) class. Data for the study was collected through classroom observations. The participants were seven Diploma in Teaching English as a second Language (TESL) students who were undergoing their compulsory 12-week teaching practicum (TP) at various primary schools in Terengganu. The data were analyzed thematically based on the types of strategies used in the process. The finding shows that the most popular modification strategies among the STs are repetition and translation. Besides, the choice of modification strategies is limited to just a few. Many strategies were not fully utilized in class. The findings highlight important pedagogical implications for education providers (EPs) to improve on to produce competent teachers. EPs should expose student teachers to a wide array of question modification strategies to prevent interaction breakdown and to encourage active participation in the class. The ability to modify questions will create a more interactive and communicative environment suitable for learning English in a second language context.

Keywords: class observation, ESL, question modification strategies, student teachers, teaching practicum

Cite as: Jusoh, Z., A Rahman, J., & Salim, H. (2020). The Use of Question Modification Strategies in ESL Class. *Arab World English Journal*, 11 (1) 69 - 78.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no1.6>

Introduction

Questioning is one of the most common yet effective strategies teachers use in the language classrooms. The importance of questions is stressed by Brualdi (1998), who posits that “in order to teach well, it is widely believed that one must be able to question well” (p.1). Through questioning, teachers can make language class more communicative as there is involvement from students. However, since not all questions can be used to enhance learning, teachers have to make sure the questions they ask are appropriate and serve their purposes, failing which, it is considered a futile effort. Owing to this, Wilen and Clegg (1986) believe that teachers should employ the right questioning strategies such as phrasing questions clearly, and probing students' responses to have them clarify ideas, support a point of view, or extend their thinking.

These questioning strategies, as defined by Wu (1993), are “strategies teachers use to elicit verbal responses from students” (p.55). They are used to elicit answers or responses to promote learning. However, the strategies are only useful if they can encourage students to respond. In many instances, questions are not always followed by responses, as some go unanswered. This unresponsiveness or silence could indicate several problems either with the questions or the students. This is, according to Varonis and Gass (1985) due, probably to the fact that “a nonunderstanding has arisen during interaction” (p. 76) or that they misinterpret the question (Tsui, 2001). Similarly, Walsh (2006) thinks that silence or unresponsiveness in the class “may indicate uncertainty or confusion” (p. 53). Others, such as Dumteeb and Kwan, suggest that it could be due to students' inability to express themselves (as cited in AlShenqeeti, 2014), thus preventing them from providing necessary responses to the questions posed. To this, Wu (1993) and Moritoshi (2002), add that students' inability to respond to teachers' questions on their own, warrants additional stimuli/ prompts from teachers.

Hence, teachers must take notice of the above indicators as proper measures can be taken to encourage students to communicate in cases when responses are not forthcoming. Teachers are recommended to use additional questioning strategies or modifications of questions (Mehan, 1979; Wu, 1993; Moritoshi, 2002). These question modification strategies are used to improve the comprehensibility of their questions (Pica & Long, 1986) so that students will have more opportunity to rethink about the response to the questions.

Modification strategies have been classified differently by different researchers. For example, Chaudron (1988) has a very comprehensive analysis of the modification techniques. They include, among others, modified pronunciation, changing rate of speech, using basic vocabulary, self-repetition, pauses, rephrasing, and translation. Moore (2007), on the other hand, divides modification strategies into five, namely redirecting, wait-time, halting, listening, and reinforcement. Another classification is by Wu (1993), who divides the strategies into five types which include rephrasing, simplification, repetition, decomposition, and probing. The description for each strategy is presented in Table 1. As Wu (1993) indicates, the modification strategies are used for different purposes. For example, rephrasing, simplification, repetition, and decomposition are used mostly when the initial question does not elicit any responses from students. Probing, on the other hand, is used to encourage students to elaborate on their answers. Regardless of the different ways of defining what constitutes modification strategies, there is no dispute about the usefulness of the strategy in encouraging and promoting language learning.

However, despite being an essential aspect of learning, not much is done to investigate modification strategies teachers employ (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Wu, 1993) when there is a communication breakdown in class. As Walsh (2006) puts it, “the ability to ask questions, to refine and adjust those questions and to clarify for learners is central to the notion of Classroom Interactional Competence” (p.131). He believes that understanding how teachers change their line of questioning is essential in encouraging student participation in the lesson. Similarly, Moore (2007) argues for the needs of teachers to possess the ability to ask proper questions and modify questions in the absence or lack of responses, thus making questions more comprehensible.

Studies have shown that teachers indeed do employ modification strategies when facing difficulty in getting responses in class. This is confirmed by Hosoda and Aline (2013), who investigate classroom discourse. They found that when students fail to respond to a question, the teacher normally finds other ways to pursue the responses. However, what is not certain is the kind of strategies they employ in such situations. This uncertainty creates a need for studies examining the use of modification strategies at different education levels and in different contexts to be conducted.

At the tertiary level, studies on question modification strategies have been conducted, although the number is somewhat limited. One such study is by Alshenqeeti (2014), who investigated questioning in EFL classes in Saudi universities. One of the aspects that were investigated in his study was the additional questioning strategies of the lecturers. His findings indicate that teachers use various modification strategies such as at the word or sentence level, through student nomination practices, and through question reframing. Among the three, modifying at the word or sentence level, which includes repetition and paraphrasing, is the most popular strategy used by teachers in his research.

Similarly, Yu (2010) investigated both the types of questions and questioning modifications ESL teachers use at a college in China. In terms of modification strategies, she found that three techniques are used frequently namely, repetition, code-switching and pauses are used in the teaching process. Among the three, repetition happened in many more instances compared to others.

Besides, studies at the high school level have also been conducted. Using Chaudron’s (1988) framework, Fitriani, Makhsum, and Samad (2016) investigate strategies used by the English teacher in a high school in Indonesia. Through observations, they found that teachers use a variety of strategies at different degrees, the most frequently used being narrowing utilizing clues, followed by rephrasing with alternative and wait time. Meanwhile, repetition is reported to be the least popular strategy.

Moritoshi (2002) studies modification strategies employed by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in a Japanese junior high school. His study focuses on modifications based on Chaudron (1988). Moritoshi (2002) found that teachers in his study used techniques such as self-repetition, pauses, rephrasing, and translation into Japanese whenever they encountered situations whereby their students could not respond to their questions. Repetition was the single most used technique (82%) of the total number of modification strategies. Moritoshi (2002) argues

that the repetition technique was used not to increase the comprehensibility of the questions but rather to give extra time for students to produce an answer. Translation was also dominant in the study as when teachers rephrase the questions, they did it in Japanese instead of English. Moritoshi (2002), however, recommends teachers to make an effort to provide as much input in the target language as possible.

The studies discussed above investigate question modifications among experienced teachers in various contexts (secondary and tertiary levels). Nonetheless, little is known about how teachers modify their questions at the primary school level. What is even lacking is studies among student teachers (STs), who are undergoing teaching practicum for the first time on how they vary or modify their questioning strategies whenever they do not receive feedback from the students. Studies of this nature are crucial as student teachers often have little formal training in questioning techniques. The lack of training is highlighted by Cotton (2001) who believes that “preservice teachers are given inadequate training in developing questioning strategies” (p.8). Those who ask questions were found to either ask ineffective or inappropriate questions (Gall, 1984). For experienced teachers, Wilen (1991) believes that the practice of questioning comes naturally, as most of the time, they rely on intuition as well as experience. These teachers have undergone numerous training and have vast experience; thus, their practice is shaped by their intuition and experience handling the class. Unfortunately, students who are learning to be teachers (student teachers) do not have these luxuries to fall back on. Being new to the teaching world, they have to rely on whatever knowledge they acquire during their program.

Student teachers’ classroom practice needs to be observed for improvements to be made. The present study, which is part of a more extensive study, focuses on the strategies that student teachers use to frame their questions in the case of unresponsive question and the frequency of each strategy utilized. It is believed that little attention has been paid to investigating this area compared with the prevalent studies of teacher questioning in English classrooms in general. This study adopts Wu’s (1993) framework, as explained in Table 1.

Table 1. *Types of questioning strategies (adapted from Wu, 1993)*

Types	Description
Rephrasing (REPHR)	A question is expressed in a different way
Simplification (SIMPL)	This may be regarded as a kind of rephrasing by means of which a situation is simplified so that students can cope with it
Repetition (REPEA)	A question is repeated in the hope that a verbal response will be elicited.
Decomposition (DECOM)	An initial question is decomposed into two or more parts so that an answer may be obtained.
Probing (PROBE)	A question is followed up by one or more other questions so that the teacher can solicit more responses from a student.
Translation** (TRANS)	A question is asked in two languages, one after another.

** strategy added

Objectives of the Research

This research is part of a more extensive study conducted to investigate the questioning behavior of English as a second language (ESL) student teachers (STs) during their 12-week compulsory teaching practicum. However, this particular paper only focuses on the questioning strategies employed by the STs. Thus, to achieve the objective, the following research question is formulated:

What question modification strategies did student teachers employ in class when teaching ESL class?

Methodology

The following section briefly describes the methodology employed in the study. The discussion includes data collection method, informants, and also the data analysis procedure.

Data Collection Method

The study employed a descriptive research design that uses data from qualitative method. Data was collected through class observation. Class observation technique has several strengths, such as it allows direct information on class practice to be obtained (Weir & Roberts, 1994). Besides, “there is no substitute for direct observation as a way of finding out about language classrooms” (Nunan, 1989, p.76). Seven ESL classes in different primary schools were observed for an hour each. All the observations were conducted by the researchers who happened to be the students’ academic supervisors. All the observations were tape-recorded.

Informants of the study

Seven student teachers (6 females and one male) enrolled in Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program were involved in the study. They were undergoing their compulsory 12-week teaching practicum at different primary schools in the Kuala Nerus area. The student teachers were teaching different classes from Year two to Year five.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from observation were tape recorded and later transcribed to determine the questioning strategies the student teachers employed. The analysis was done thematically based on Wu’s (1993) questioning strategies. Besides, the data were also quantified to determine the frequency of each strategy used in the classes.

Results

The analysis was conducted based mainly on the framework recommended by Wu (1993). The strategies are divided into five, namely repetition (REPEA), rephrasing (REPHR), simplification (SIMPL), decomposition (DECOM), probing (PROBI), and translation (TRANS) based on how the questions are rephrased.

Table 2 presents the types of strategies employed by the STs and frequency of occurrence of the strategy for each ST. Based on the result, it can be seen that the most popular strategy was repetition (REPEA) as it has the highest number of occurrences, with a total number of 22 times. In terms of the total number of occurrences, the next most popular modification strategy is

translation and probing. In total, both strategies were observed to have been used seven times each. On the other hand, the least popular strategies were simplification and decomposition. Each of these strategies was used once.

Apart from being the strategy with the highest number of total occurrences, repetition was also most popular among STs in terms of the number of STs using it. It was used by almost all STs (by six out of seven STs). Nonetheless, the frequencies of occurrence differ from one ST to another. Teacher D (T D) used the most at nine times. Translation (TRANS) and probing (PROB) were used by four out of seven STs each.

When the focus is on the behavior of individual ST, the frequency and type of strategies employed vary from one ST to another. The ST that employed strategy the most was Teacher D (T D), who used strategies 12 times for the whole one-hour lesson. However, in terms of variety, she used less varied strategies (three types of strategies only). Teacher F (T F) and Teacher G (T G), on the other hand, used far smaller number of strategies, but with a greater variety, four types of strategies. Teacher A (T A), used the least strategy in terms of frequency and type with one rephrasing strategy only.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics on observed question modification strategies*

Teacher	REPEA	REPHR	SIMPL	DECOM	PROBI	TRANS	Total occurrence	Total types
T A	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
T B	2	0	0	0	3	3	8	3
T C	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	1
T D	9	2	0	0	0	1	12	3
T E	2	0	0	0	2	2	6	3
T F	3	0	0	1	1	1	6	4
T G	3	2	1	0	1	0	7	4
Total	22	5	1	1	7	7	43	
Total users	6	3	1	1	4	4		

Discussion

The findings from class observation suggest that the student teachers' choice of question modification strategies was limited to just a few dominant strategies, such as repeating and translation. The findings concur with others (Chaudron, 1988; Wu, 1993), who also found that repetition to be the modification strategy most commonly used by teachers during lessons. The findings support the statement made by Moritoshi (2002), who believes that repetition plays a significant role in a language class as it provides students with more opportunity to come out with responses.

Similarly, translation is also rather popular among the STs as it seems to be the most straightforward strategy to modify problematic questions to help students' understanding. In many ESL classrooms, using two languages or code-switching is still one of the most widely used

teaching techniques. This finding corroborates that of Moritoshi (2002), who found translation to be dominant in ESL classes in Japan. This technique is, however, not recommended by Bruck & Schultz (as cited in Chaudron, 1988, p. 172). They caution teachers against using translation, as they believe that “a gradual tendency for a teacher to use her dominant language for instructional tasks (whether the L1 or L2) will result in a similar shift in the learners' preferences for language use” (p. 172). Thus, ideally, teachers should minimize the use of translation as modification strategy since using it defeats the purpose of questioning, which is to give them a platform to practice using English.

Resulting from the use of limited choice of strategies, the STs did not fully utilize other strategies such as simplification and decomposition. These two strategies were least used in this study, although this is hardly surprising, as Wu (1993) also obtains similar findings. There are several explanations that can be offered for this observation. One is that the STs are not aware of other strategies that are available for them to use as they were not exposed to these strategies. Lack of familiarity to the strategies arises because these strategies are not commonly used even by experienced teachers. Hence, STs were not aware of their existence due to a lack of exposure to them.

Another plausible explanation is that the STs know about those strategies, but they avoid using the strategies. This avoidance is because the STs themselves are neither comfortable nor confident enough to use them. This behavior perhaps could be because both strategies, especially decomposition, were not as straightforward as other strategies such as repetition and translation. Using them requires teachers to use some specific techniques such as breaking questions into simpler parts and finding more commonly used vocabulary to express the gist. The observation also indicates that STs were not able to go down to the level of their students, thus preventing them from using simplification and decomposition strategies to modify their questions.

Nonetheless, this is in contradiction with the findings by Alshenqeti (2014), who found that teachers in his research were observed to be using various modification strategies. However, the teachers in his study were highly experienced. Thus, whenever there is a breakdown in communication, they know how to modify and keep the interaction going. The ability to modify the questions is in line with Wilen's (1991) statement regarding this issue. He states that “most of the decisions teachers make about questioning in the classroom are intuitive and are therefore based primarily on experience” (p.8). In this study, being new to the teaching profession, the respondents have no experience to fall back on hence for their lack of variety in modification strategies.

Additionally, not only did the student teachers lack in the use of different varieties of strategies, but they were also found not using sufficient strategies when teaching. This issue is a cause for concern for education providers as it suggests that the STs are not interacting enough with students in class or are lacking the skills to ask and modify questions, thus depriving students of a language-rich environment. This deprivation is what Cotton (2001) laments when she highlights the inadequacy of training given to preservice teachers in developing questioning strategies. Without proper training, the effectiveness of instructions will not be fully optimized.

Conclusion

The study sought to investigate student teachers' employment of question modification strategies when teaching ESL to primary school students. Based on the findings and discussions in the previous sections, student teachers in the study were more comfortable using just a limited number of modification strategies while other strategies were neglected entirely. Focusing on just a selected few means that the student teachers did not utilize a sufficient number of strategies when asking questions in the class. Besides, there seems to be a lack of varieties in the follow-up questions they posed. From these findings, it can be concluded that the student teachers are either not familiar with or not aware of the existence of other strategies that can be used to modify their questions when their initial questions fail to invite responses from the students.

However, as this is a small-scale study involving only a small number of participants who were observed only once, the conclusion derived from it should be viewed in light of those limitations.

Implications of the study

Despite being a small-scale study, the results yielded in this study have several consequences. The first implication concerns the lack of diversity in the strategies employed by the student teachers in this study. It is thus vital that STs be made aware of the different strategies available for them to use while teaching so that they can vary the strategies from time to time. Using the same strategy on all occasions can make the learning process so predictable and monotonous, which will create a dull and uninteresting learning environment.

The issue with a lack of modification strategies should be taken seriously so that education providers (EPs) can produce competent ESL teachers. This can be overcome by giving the STs opportunities to reflect on their classroom practices more frequently and regularly so that awareness can be raised promptly. This responsibility should fall under the purview of both their cooperating teachers (CTs) and university supervisors (SVs). Instead of focusing only on their overall lessons, CTs and SVs should also emphasize on specific areas such as questioning behavior in the classroom.

Another implication is that, the findings from this study regarding question modification strategies among STs provide EPs with the information on areas to improve in the teaching and learning process, especially during teaching practicum. This feedback is essential to ensure that the quality of teacher trainees produced by the university meets the standard set by the Ministry of Education. The information is necessary since proper intervention programs such as in-house workshops and training clinics can be conducted to provide teachers with adequate exposure and opportunity to practice effective questioning strategies. Another option is by embedding this topic in specific subjects such as ELT Methodology and also in the micro-teaching class. This integration is especially important as teaching English to students in a non-supportive environment requires maximum effort from teachers in providing necessary language inputs to create a language-rich environment that can be done through proper questioning techniques.

Acknowledgment:

This research is supported by Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) research grant. (UniSZA/2018/DPU-AQEL/02). The researchers would like to express our appreciation to the university for the financial support provided.

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