Questioning practice in the EFL classroom

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Questioning has been identified in the literature as a key teaching and learning activity with the quantity and quality of questions directly linked to language acquisition and a general positive learning experience. The purpose of this empirical study was to explore patterns of questions used by EFL teachers in a classroom environment. Using an observation methodology, four teachers were observed in class and a transcript made of the questions they each asked their learners. The teachers were then asked to attempt a classification of the question types in order to gain an insight into the strategy from the perspective of teacher cognition. The results confirmed that questioning is a major teaching technique that is appreciated by teachers and manipulated for a variety of pedagogical purposes. Questions most valued by teachers as instrumental in achieving quality learning were those which guided learners to the pursuit of meaningful and motivating goals with a high degree of cognitive and linguistic challenge.

KEYWORDS: *questioning, question, EFL, language acquisition, foreign language teaching methodology*

1. INTRODUCTION

There are innovations and fads aplenty in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because without the fetters of external regulation, individual practitioners have remarkable freedom over the curriculum they deliver. On the one hand, this gives a creative license and flexibility which colleagues in mainstream education must envy (Drudy, 2008, p. 315). The downside is a lack of quality control and a very confusing picture of the instructional process. The prime example, and possibly source, of this discord is the central question of methodology. The communicative approach which is in vogue today, despite a weak empirical base (Rimmer, 2009, p. 6), is widely challenged not least by an anti-method movement (cf. Meddings & Thornbury, 2009).

While commentators argue over the basics, teachers have to muddle through and do what they think is appropriate. Naturally, in these circumstances, what they 'do' often looks very different and there is little obvious coherence between different lessons and different teachers. Given this chaotic state of affairs, the search for universals across the EFL spectrum can be frustrating. What do teachers all do? One answer to the question is the question. Teachers ask a lot of questions in class, prompting the celebrated EFL teacher-trainer Ur (2012) to comment that

'questioning is the most common and universally used activation technique in teaching' (p. 228). This is non-contentious but there is a danger in taking questioning for granted and assuming that because it is common it must be good for students and easy for teachers to apply. As Brualdi Timmins (1998) puts it, there cannot be bad answers, they are all part of a process of knowledge discovery, but there can be bad questions, i.e. ones poorly formulated or with little value. The role of questioning and factors which enhance or diminish its effectiveness are clearly of great significance.

The theoretical framework for the study is humanistic, a movement which conceives of second-language acquisition being maximised in an environment where personalisation and affect are high, leading to what Hancock (2010) calls 'intrinsic appeal'. A humanistic approach, as described in the seminal work on the subject in an EFL context (Stevick, 1982), embraces any methodology which values the learner's right to self-expression and opportunities for meaningful engagement. Questioning is fundamental in a humanistic approach because, as demonstrated in the handbook of Morgan and Rinvolucri (2004), skilful questions eliminate barriers and inhibitions and initiate learners as full partners in the collaborative process of learning.

The purpose of this study is to explore patterns of

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questions used by EFL teachers in a classroom environment. There are three aims: (1) to quantify and hence verify questioning as a core tool in the classroom; (2) to elicit from teachers a classification of their questions according to perceived pedagogical function; (3) to compare and interpret teachers' classifications. The first aim is the most obvious in the sense that when any mass phenomena occur, the counting of observations seems informative if not imperative. The emphasis on quantification has been criticised as a tendency to pursue measurement as a goal in itself, concomitant with the *'obsession [with a] medical mode of research'* (Goodwyn, 2010, p. 25). Thus, McCarthy and Carter (2001) take corpus linguistics to task for reducing studies to frequency lists and tables. However, the universal finding of any empirical work on teacher questioning shows that teachers ask a large number of questions, hundreds in a single lesson. For instance, Toni and Parse (2013) observed 322 questions in 135 minutes of teaching. No other classroom intervention could generate anything like this level of occurrences so the confirmation and

documentation of this fact is a valid research direction.

The second and third aims concern the more challenging issue of why questioning is so pervasive and how different patterns and motivations can be accounted for. This necessitates classifying the questions and interpreting them. As discussed in the Literature Review, such is the interest in questioning that categorisation schemes abound but with reliability and validity issues attached.

First, there is no generally-accepted framework that offers an off-the-shelf tool for research. Classification schemes tend to be criticised for being over-simplistic or so elaborate as to be unworkable outside, sometimes even within, their immediate context. Second, similar to the reservations over quantification, the search for the all-embracive framework often becomes more important than the data itself, as Lee (2006) warns in her literature review.

The problem of classification becomes apparent if one attempts what appears the straightforward task of classifying questions formally, i.e. by their syntax. Every schoolchild learns that a question is something which ends in a question mark but the examples of non-canonical questions, ones that are not fully-formed independent interrogative clauses (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 716), show

the category to be mixed:

You hungry? (a reduced clause)
And what about Leeds? (a phrase)
Why? (a single word)
So you like the people around here? (a declarative sentence)
Tell me what time you're arriving again? (indeterminate between an imperative and an indirect question)

In speech and in absence of punctuation, the prime indicator of a question would be the intonation, albeit with a great deal of variation as to the pitch movement according to its pragmatic function (cf. Cruttenden, 2014, p. 294-286). Non-canonical questions are just as valid in the classroom as 'proper' interrogatives but they defy categorisation on grammatical grounds.

Of course, teachers do not use formal criteria for putting questions unless the actual language point is a specific interrogative construction or they feel they need to use a restricted range of language with a less proficient class. They select questions according to pedagogical goals and such is the rate of questioning that they must do this largely automatically and unconsciously. Even for the teacher most punctilious in their preparation, it would be impossible to script such a volume of prompts in advance. A categorisation scheme based on form would not reveal the motivation for

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questions. Only lesson observation and a post-observation reflection process could link language to function through two sets of eyes, those of the researcher and the teacher. The former may be in a privileged position, the observer assuming the mantle of judge and expert, but it is the teacher as the instigator in the classroom process who holds the true key to the question of questions. For this reason, the teachers in the study were invited to present their own categorisations of their own questions and hold these up as points of departure for discussion and analysis.

The significance of the study is that questioning plays a major role in the classroom interaction process and ultimately learning, the goal of any educational process. Questioning is surely one of the strategies referred to in formulations of teacher expertise as in the section on 'sustained enhanced practice' in the *Standard for Chartered Teacher* in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2009, p. 9). While the study does not deal with the relationship between questions and learning outcomes, there is prima facie a case that a deeper

understanding of the role of questions in the classroom puts teachers in a better position to exploit them as pedagogical tools. By way of transition to the next section, the literature on questioning is large but disconcertingly inconsistent in that a preoccupation with categorisation schemes is combined with a reaction against super-imposed frameworks with their limitations and presuppositions. This study highlights the data rather than classification issues so that the questions themselves become the focus.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

No studies dispute the primacy of questioning as a classroom technique. An impressive body of evidence is supplied via Hattie (2003) through the strategy of synthesising some half a million studies as part of an investigation of whether teachers make a difference. Amongst the numerous factors which impact learning, questioning has a high rating with an effect size of 0.41 (feedback tops the list). This massive data collection exercise would seem to include questioning as a repertoire available to *'[e]xpert teachers … proficient in creating optimal classroom climates for learning'* (Hattie, 2003, p. 7).

However, there are issues with a synthesis methodology which should make us cautious in welcoming Hattie's findings as 'proof'. Norris and Ortega (2007), who have almost pioneered

synthesis in studies of second language acquisition, acknowledge that the technical aspects of the exercise, the challenge of analysing vast data sets, can detract from the actual research aims.

With the development of ever more sophisticated techniques to deal with larger sets of data, the concern is that the methodology becomes a goal in itself. There are no grounds for saying that Hattie (2003) falls into this trap but the large-scale design does not allow any individual instances of data to be reported, in this context questions asked during lessons. Hattie has to be taken on trust and there is no recourse to the primary data.

Still, it is generally accepted in the literature that questioning is a universal and non-trivial classroom phenomenon, cf. Tsui's (2001) evaluation as part of an analysis of classroom interaction. As a negative example, Afitska (2016) reports on a project which involved observing science lessons. The weakest lessons with the poorest learning outcomes were the ones where teachers asked students no questions. The literature is chiefly concerned not with justifying questions – their value is self-evident – but categorising them. The most quoted study in an EFL context is Lynch (1991), which makes the distinction between 'display' and 'referential' questions that is still very much in currency (e.g. Ko, 2014) and is examined below.

It is posited that display questions are designed purely to elicit samples of target usage, to 'display' the language, and that the content of the response is largely irrelevant and ignored. Thompson (1997) provides a cringeworthy example:

Teacher: *What does your father do?*
Student 1: *Teacher.*
Teacher: *He's a teacher, good, what does your father do?*
Student 2: *My father dead.*
Teacher: *Good.*

The language point, presumably copula structures and occupations vocabulary, overrides any interest in the students' response. The choice of material used to illustrate, instances are seldom as harrowing as this, demonstrates the prevailing distaste for display questions. The teacher is depicted as unskilled and unfeeling, the questioning strategy as brusque and pointless.

In contrast, referential questions invite meaningful responses that demonstrate engagement. An example approach is taken from the Teacher's Guide to a popular EFL textbook series for teenagers.

'Ask students if they ever tell lies. … Ask students if there are any situations when it is OK to lie. Discuss interesting stories in class, helping with vocabulary as necessary' (Hart, 2010, p. 70).

The first observation is that the content and language of the answers are not predictable, hence the direction to provide lexical support. Second, the topic is stimulating, even controversial in the staid world of EFL (cf. Thornbury's (2005) criticism of materials as bland and conservative), and could encourage teenagers to participate. Third, responses are invited rather than demanded from the group and individual students are not grilled as in the previous example. The atmosphere would be more relaxed and cooperative, attributes fundamental to the humanistic framework championed above. It is unfortunate that studies which adopt the display/referential dichotomy (e.g. Toni & Parse, 2013) show the former to predominate.

However, a good guys/bad guys conceptualisation of referential and display questions is challengeable. There are major problems in even this simple categorisation schema. The formulation of a question is but a poor guide to the linguistic and cognitive response that may be evoked. There is the wider consideration of the social-discoursal context for the question, one which is elusive to an outside observer unfamiliar to the dynamics of the classroom in focus. The most revealing example is the whole category of questions that fall under phatic communication (cf. Yule, 2006) in that they are interrogative in form but serve merely as social formulae with little or no expectations of a prolonged or informative response.

The classic example is *How are you?* Semantically, this is quite a searching question which could evoke a long account of a range of personal phenomena. However, the stock response is *Fine, thank you* or something similarly unrevealing. Indeed, a full answer, reacting to the question honestly, would seem strange in most cases. This is because the exchange enters the provenance of pragmatics, the difference between what it is possible to say and what it is customary to say. Answering *How are you?* as it were a genuine expression of interest would violate the key pragmatic maxim – respond as appropriate according to shared expectations of the speech event (Yule, 1996). Pragmatics acts as a spoiler when it comes to attempts to interpret questions according to their surface semantic meaning.

Clearly, the display/referential framework is flawed. Unfortunately, the search for more comprehensive classification schemes has met little success. For all their elaboration, there is inevitably overlap between categories and arbitrariness in determining the status of the questions within the chosen framework. As an example, Nunn (1999) constructs a tripartite classification which in terms of its data presentation draws on, although this is not explicitly acknowledged, the Birmingham school of discourse analysis laid out in Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). However, the basic distinction between question types is still obscure,

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particularly the claim that questions fall into either a classroom or real-world context, the former reflecting the formal roles of teacher and students, the latter representing them as individuals within larger society. This turns out to be but a more sophisticated reiteration of the display/referential division, complicated by a dubious assumption that the classroom experience is extraneous to reality and interactions based purely on pedagogical concerns are ipso facto non-meaningful. Producing more and finer categories for question types complicates the analysis yet simplifies the issues.

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the work of Bloom (1956), described in Eber and Parker (2007), in developing a taxonomy of learning objectives by increasing cognitive load has not been embraced in the applied linguistics literature on teacher questioning. The original

formulation was of six levels progressing from *Knowledge*, recalling facts, to *Evaluation*, critiquing input according to multiple criteria. Aside from the reliability concerns in operationalising a multi-level system, there would seem a deeper theoretical objection specific to second-language learning. The developmental aspect of Bloom's framework, students being put in a position to handle increased cognitive demands, is difficult to apply because we are so far from establishing an order of language acquisition despite the, partial, empirical research in this direction (e.g. Pienemann, 1998). The display/referential dichotomy for all its rudimentariness avoids such problems because it is a dichotomy, not a calibration. Bloom's framework has been under-utilised because it is not seen to fit into the existing knowledge base of second-language acquisition.

To summarise this literature review, the significance of teacher questioning has not been disputed, so much of the attention has turned to how questions should be categorised, the discussion largely reacting to the traditional display/referential distinction.

This has prompted an alternative approach in this study, that of including teachers in the classification activity, practitioners being most cognisant of the complexities of the interaction in their own classrooms.

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3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The data for this small-scale study, teachers' questions, is relatively easy to collect given its volume in any teaching episode. The means is also readily suggested, namely observing lessons and recording the interaction. More problematic, as brought out in the previous section, is the analysis stage.

Four teachers were randomly chosen to participate in the study. Their nationalities and years of experience are in brackets: Annie (USA, 2), Bart (UK, 3), Curt (USA, 7) and Doris (Italy, 1). The names are pseudonyms. It was arranged to observe a 45-minute segment from an adult general English class of each teacher, the students ranging in proficiency from intermediate to advanced, and record and transcribe the interaction. The intermediate level was set as a minimum benchmark for proficiency because, below this, questions would need to be severely graded to be comprehensible. The teaching context was a UK language school. Following the class, the teachers agreed to discuss the lesson transcript.

Observation is by far the best way of inferring teaching practice: Partridge (2012) favours observation to self-reporting in this regard. The common caveat (e.g. Bell, 2010, p. 191) that the observer can impose their own values on the data remains valid, subjectivity is part of any study involving human interpretation, but is alleviated somewhat by the quantitative dimension of the data collection exercise. An analysis of the data is offered here but this is not the only and definitive account as long as the data remains on record for further attempts at interpretation or even studies in a new direction. Also, the observations are supported by interviews with the teachers concerned, a form of triangulation replicating Baker's (2014) study into teacher cognition, and so there is the opportunity for the subjects to verify the data and supply insights.

A grounded approach was used to deal with the data. The typical environment for a grounded approach, *'small-scale projects using qualitative data for the studying of human interaction'* (Denscombe, 2010, p. 106), applies to this study. More pertinently, the lack of confidence in constructing a reliable and valid categorisation scheme for teachers' questions ruled out any type of pre-set framework.

Findings would have to come from the data. In particular, as teachers supplied the questions, their interpretation of their own contributions was

crucial. The purpose of the post-observation interviews was to construct a joint dialogue between the researcher/observer and the teacher/observed, one where there was unlikely to be a shared interpretation – values and perceptions differ – but which would be instrumental in unlocking the all-important issue of the motivation for questions.

In practice, this involved, uniquely in the literature, asking teachers to provide categories for their own questions in the post-lesson interviews. In a sense, this was unfair because the teachers, although informed of the study (see Appendix A for the information and consent form), were unprepared, and untrained, for an exercise of this type. Also, the observer was in a privileged position of being able to compare lessons in an expanded data set. However, the teachers' input was crucial to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. With questions so plentiful, there is the real danger of getting lost in the data and losing sight of the 'central core category' (Robson, 2011, p. 489) which grounded theory aims at, here a unifying pedagogical principle which underlines questioning practices. Collaboration with teachers facilitated the identification of patterns and trends.

In terms of ethical concerns, the asymmetrical relationship between teachers and a more informed researcher has been mentioned. As Floyd and Arthur (2012) point out, relationships matter in insider-studies such as this one. Knowledge beyond the immediate confines of the project, in this context perhaps preconceptions of a teacher's expertise, may unwittingly be brought into play during the observation and reaffirmed or readjusted to the detriment of someone who is both subject and colleague.

Basic steps such as anonymity do not address these deeper issues, which to some extent remain unresolved despite formal mechanisms to safeguard participants (Appendix B contains the ethical approval form).

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

4.1 Questions quantified and categorised by teachers

Table 1 summarises the coded transcripts in Appendix C. The nomenclature of the categories is that of the teachers. Data from the four teachers is presented in turn. The Discussion section compares the data set and readdresses the research aims.

4.2. Annie

Annie distinguished three categories. Open-ended, the most numerous, were questions which Annie felt enabled her learners to produce extended responses which maximised their language resources and degree of engagement with the content. Examples were:

Table 1

Questions quantified and categorised by teachers

TEACHER	LEVEL OF CLASS	TOTAL NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	CATEGORIES AND NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	
Annie	Upper-intermediate	103	Open-ended (Any other ideas?)	74
			Prompts (No?)	22
			Checking (Did you have any questions?)	7
Bart	Intermediate	99	Specific detail (Why should you be two-faced?)	51
			Clarification (Speculation, deduction and ..?)	41
			Correction (She has a glasses?)	4
			Conversational (Long day?)	3
Curt	Advanced	88	Conceptual (What do you think it means?)	74
			Sequencing (Ready?)	9
			Conversational (How's the weekend?)	5
Doris	Upper-intermediate	46	Eliciting *(When do we use the past simple?)*	20
			Fillers *(Can you read it please?)*	18
			Getting feedback *(Do you all agree?)*	8

How was your weekend?

What do we know about the goddess Venus?

Is that strange?

The first of these could easily be taken for the kind of empty phatic communication discussed earlier. Annie, however, defended this as a genuine enquiry and in class the learners did react accordingly, telling some interesting anecdotes. For Annie, questions like these were essential in building rapport with the students. She placed a high value on her relationship with individual learners, believing that this facilitated the learning process. The second question appears bizarre out of context. It was an ambitious lesson, the most cognitively challenging of the four observed, in

that the learners were required to comment on the aesthetic appeal of artwork, one piece featuring the pantheon. The use of the pronoun *we* is of note and Annie frequently used the first person in questions. Quizzed on this, she confessed that it was an unconscious trait but *'it put students less on the spot'*, presumably by stressing that the task was a shared one. Annie was conscious that such questions were demanding linguistically and content-wise so she found a way to reconcile this with her concern for learners' welfare.

As obvious in the third question, Annie's open-ended questions welcomed a variety of responses. In fact, Annie actively disliked questions with a narrow focus and *'tried not to use yes or no questions too often'*. She was constantly challenging her learners to evaluate the information, largely visual, before them, and express this in language which did justice to the topic. The way that Annie accepted different answers from the learners to the same question suggested that she wanted to develop learners' tolerance of plurality and divergence of opinion. This is a skill which needs developing in the English classroom because too often there is a preoccupation with 'right' and 'wrong' answers, fuelled by a huge literature on error analysis in second language acquisition (see Jones, 1998 for a survey). Accordingly, Annie never dismissed the content of a learner's contribution; she restricted her negative feedback to error correction.

For Annie, her other two categories, *Prompts* and *Checking* were very much subsidiary. Prompts often consisted of one-word vocabulary items like *Oboe?* and *News?* to either supply an unknown word or move the lesson on from a point of communication breakdown. Checking questions resembled traditional teacher-talk, for example, *'Did you do your homework [name]?'*, to get a fixed response. Even here though there are signs of Annie trying to personalise the questioning, for example the appeal to individual learners by name. Annie saw Prompts and Checking as largely functional and routine. They were transition points to the more purposeful open-ended questions.

4.3 Bart

What Bart called *Specific Detail*, the dominant category, was similar to Annie's open-ended questions as he aimed to *'ask a lot of their opinions'* and *'draw out'*, rather than supply answers. The set below is illustrative. Bart was revising modals of deduction (*'It's Sunday, it must be her day off'*) by asking his learners to match photographs of people next to their speculative profession.

What is the logic?
Why did you choose that particular person?
Is there anything about him that looks like an engineer?

Bart's first question calls for the learners to

rationalise their decision. The learners struggle to find words for this so the second question is essentially a recast of the first. This does get a response but Bart is not wholly convinced by it so the third question asks for more detail. This is another task with no definitive answer, success is judged on how accurately and fluently learners argue their case. Bart often used this tactic of reengineering the same question in order to give learners every chance to produce a linguistically rich response. The learners quickly realised that hasty or sloppy responses would not satisfy their teacher.

Bart's second major category, *Clarification*, was concerned with form. Bart had high expectations of the learners' metalinguistic competence as illustrated below.

Remind me, what are the different modal verbs? How do we make speculations?

Many native speakers would struggle with this line of questioning. Obviously, Bart could have just given the language to the learners so it is interesting why he chose this tactic. Bart felt that he needed to make the grammar presentation more interactive, because *'otherwise they will zone out'*. Like Annie, he tried to soften the blow by how he put the questions. *'Remind me'* reassures the learners that they have previous knowledge and suggests that they are doing Bart a

favour by putting him out of his ignorance. The *Correction* category could also be seen as an example of mollification because it allows the learners to self-correct with the accompanying feeling of achievement.

There were only three instances in the *Conversational* category, for example, *'How are you, [name], by the way?'* However, Bart was expansive on the importance of these questions in his commentary. Again, like Annie, he believed that these were more than social formulae and that identifying with the learners was critical. Bart did not allow his learners to divulge as much as Annie's learners, he seemed conscious of an agenda for the lesson, and these questions have the air of fillers, note the *'by the way'*. Perhaps this stage of the lesson with its heavy concentration on form did not lend itself to conversational questions and their potential to sidetrack learners.

4.4 Curt
Curt had the highest-level class and the *Conceptual* category, which makes up the vast majority of questions and reflects the responsibility of challenging very mature and capable learners. This was a vocabulary lesson involving fine semantic distinctions, for example *resilient* vs. *impervious*, and conceptual questions mainly elicited and checked definitions. *'What does it mean?'* occurs a full six times verbatim. Curt always asked for an explanation before he gave a

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definition. He was aware that this was *'tough, they know it [a word] or they don't'* but he considered this approach conducive to helping students organise their mental lexicon. Some items could take several rounds of questioning to clarify, for example *eligible* as in the collocation *eligible bachelor*.

What's an eligible bachelor?
You think it's good?
Would he [example provided by a learner] be an eligible bachelor?
Does he have a girlfriend?
'Eligible' means …?

The first question probes a working definition. The second explores the connotations of the word. This led to an interesting discussion about the different social attitudes towards older single men and women. The third and fourth questions relate to a concrete example proffered by a learner. Finally, Curt asks for a fuller explanation informed by what has gone before. This is an example of very skilful instruction, the definition being teased out and

referenced to the learners' own experiences.

4.5 Doris

The least experienced teacher, Doris executed a lesson which was the closest to the communicative methodology currently most in favour (cf. the teaching manual of Harmer, 2007). There was a great deal more interaction between learners with Doris not directly involved beyond setting the task, hence the total number of questions asked was only half that of the other teachers. It is perhaps unsurprising that this lesson was the most 'classic' methodologically. Less time had elapsed after Doris's training period and she had had less opportunity to form new habits.

Eliciting resembled Bart's *Clarification* category in being form-focused. The elucidation technique and appeal to meta-language ring familiar.

'Has been sailing' – what is it?
When do we use Past Perfect Simple?
When do we use Past Perfect Continuous?

The difference was that Doris's students were more proficient and she could cover more ground this way. It is instructive that the example Doris uses – *'has been sailing'* – was an example from her textbook. Unlike Bart and, to a lesser extent, Curt, she did not take the learners' output as a platform to build the language point. The extent of the learner interaction yielded a great deal of language

and content to fuel Doris's questions, if only out of natural curiosity, but Doris preferred to structure her questions around the text, literally playing it by the book.

Doris was anxious about technique so it is logical that *Fillers*, classroom management questions like *'What do you have to do?'*, were a large category. Curt's lesson with casual directions looked sloppy in contrast. Doris needed to know her learners were on task and questioning was a useful way of ensuring this. *Fillers* is an interesting term as it suggests little regard for this category, like Annie's *Prompts*. Doris explained that they were *'not really questions'*, more like softened imperatives. As Annie and Bart, Doris needed a way to make learners comfortable with taking on tasks.

The third category, *Getting Feedback* – e.g. *'What is the first one [name]?'* – was similarly seen as minor, a mechanism for getting through routine parts of the lesson with minimum fuss. Doris had a strong sense of priorities and timing in the lesson observed. Some questions were worth more to the lesson than others, namely those which related most closely to the disambiguation of form.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Research aim 1

The first aim of the study was to quantify and hence verify questioning as a core tool in the classroom. The most basic finding was that questioning was a well-utilised resource. All four teachers were surprised by how many questions they asked but they gave no indication that these lessons were untypical in this aspect. While they had misgivings about particular questions – Annie for example was sensitive about questions which were not well formed, such as *'Can we think of any other painting that have [sic] animals?'* – no one felt the volume and pattern of questioning was inappropriate. Teachers were very familiar and comfortable with questioning, confirming the earlier reference to Ur (2012) on the centrality of teachers' questions in pedagogy.

5.2 Research aim 2

The second aim of the study was to elicit from teachers a classification of their questions according to perceived pedagogical function. The teachers were unprepared for the task of categorising their own questions but they were surprisingly confident in their judgments. They struggled sometimes to describe and delimit categories and there were always borderline cases with individual questions but there seemed to be an appreciation of questioning as a multilayered phenomenon with different questions playing a different role in the classroom and needing to be appraised separately.

It was left completely open as to what and how many categories teachers devised. Nobody, however, chose form as a criterion, for instance,

the distinction between yes-no questions (Curt, *'Do you like that one?'*) and *wh*-questions (Bart, *'What else do I need to be?'*) which is accentuated in pedagogical grammars, for example, Leech and Svartvik (2002). The teachers classified questions according to their function in the learning process. This meant that one category could contain a syntactical mix. A sequence from Bart's *Specific Detail* category demonstrates:

Do you mean physically?
What sort of things do they need to be good at?
What knowledges?

The first is a yes/no question, the second a *wh*-question, the third a fragment (there is no verb) fronted by a *wh*-element. For Bart, and this applies across all the teachers, the formal characteristics of questions were overridden by their common purpose in eliciting language and content.

5.3 Research aim 3

The third aim of this study was to compare and interpret teachers' classifications. Every teacher nominated a category which aimed at high learner engagement with the task and/or language and this category supplied the most questions individually and in toto. The nomenclature differed – *Open-ended* for Annie, *Specific detail* for Bart, *Conceptual* for Curt, *Eliciting* for Doris – but their function was essentially the same, namely to maximise learning opportunities through an

increased cognitive load. Consider this extract from Annie as the class discuss an abstract painting.

What do you think that the apple means?
What do you think that apples usually mean?
What else do we think of with apples?

The first question relates directly to the artwork. The second turns to art in general, requiring her learners to think beyond the immediate classroom context. The third is yet more challenging as the focus moves beyond the aesthetic (the class responded with biblical allusions). Annie signals this progression in complexity linguistically. The first two questions are almost identical syntactically with *think* complemented by a *that*-clause. In the third question, the pronoun changes (*we* not *you*), a gambit of Annie's commented on earlier, and *think* is complemented by a preposition *of* not a clause. Annie skilfully ramps up the challenge and uses linguistic clues to inform the learners of the new demands.

Not all the questioning of this ilk was so effective. There were examples of poorly-conceived questions (Curt, *'What's the danger of working in a bakery?'*), leading to impoverished responses or just confusion, but the teachers all recognised a higher category which effectively represented a gold standard. The hallmarks of this category would seem to be a genuine information gap, learners needing to supply an answer in order to

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complete the task; affect, learners relating to the content and wanting to express themselves; high cognitive demand, questions which require information to be processed at a deeper level; high language expectations, especially of the target language presented in the lesson.

Not every question in this putative super-category would tick all these boxes. For example, Doris's and Curt's questions concentrated more on language use to the detriment of a personalisation element; conversely, Annie often seemed to put language secondary to content. Nor should including every element be an ideal, for instance affect may be a subsidiary consideration in a primarily form-focused lesson such as Bart's. The skill of the teacher resides in recognising these elements and combining them to optimal effect in the appropriate environment.

To revisit the display/referential distinction which so preoccupies the literature, the teachers did not envisage a binary system in their classifications. They did prefer what Bart called *'real'* questions,

ones where the answer was not predetermined, but they used plenty of questions which seem mechanical, such as Curt, *'What does 'liable' mean?'* However even these questions can be misleading taken out of context. Curt was not expecting pat definitions of words with questions like this, he was inviting the learners to supply competing semantic representations which they would sift through as a class and refine. The formulation of the question often had little relationship with the quality of the classroom interaction, tying into a point made by Lee (2006), that questions have minimal intrinsic value but only serve to construct learning spaces. Certainly, the display/referential dichotomy underrepresents the interplay between questioning and pedagogical context.

5.4 Limitations of the study

External validity is always an issue in small-scale studies. The lesson objectives did seem to influence the questioning style, for example Annie's skills-based lesson was always likely to generate a different set of questions compared to Doris's form-focused lesson. A longitudinal study of different types of lessons with an enlarged pool of teachers would create a larger sample size and even out any disproportionalities.

The methodology could be considered maverick in asking teachers to categorise their own questions. A grounded approach to content analysis is

perfectly acceptable (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 340) but reliability is still important and it demands a lot of teachers to exercise an unfamiliar skill set even on familiar (i.e. their own) data. Eraut (1994) warns that practitioners may not be able to articulate knowledge, hence the problem of defining professionalism, and so a methodology which requires an extraordinary degree of reflection would seem risky and certainly difficult to reduplicate.

Ethically, the involvement of teachers is a positive direction as too often teachers are disenfranchised from research (the motivation for Freeman, 1998). On the negative side, an insider study creates conflicts of interest. Observing lessons reveals issues which are beyond the aims and terms of the study as negotiated and agreed on the consent form. For example, I saw examples of bad teaching practice but I felt constrained from commenting on these in the post-lesson interviews. This worked to the benefit of the research project but the detriment of the learners.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has aimed to explore the significance of EFL teachers' questions with insights grounded on data from lesson observations. It contributes to a considerable body of literature which has been dominated by the classification of questions through rejecting a priori categorisations in favour of an original approach which uses the teachers'

response to their own data as a starting point. The results confirm that questioning is a major teaching technique that is appreciated by teachers and manipulated for a variety of pedagogical purposes. Questions most valued by teachers as instrumental in achieving quality learning are those which guide learners to the pursuit of meaningful and motivating goals with a high degree of cognitive and linguistic challenge.

These findings are in line with the humanistic framework of this study. Questions allow learners to transcend the lesson as a conventionalised ritual that minimises genuine self-expression. To explain, in many ways, the language classroom is a sheltered and artificial environment compared to the outside world. The advantage of this is that the risk of communication breakdown is limited to frustration and embarrassment, the learners run no literal danger. However, the disadvantage of this cosy arrangement is that the classroom becomes an impersonal vehicle for communication with learners lacking the motivation for language use which comes from tasks which have real consequences. Questioning can bring tasks and language alive for learners so that the veil is temporarily lifted and they believe their contributions matter.

The final word should go with the learners for a study of teachers' questions is lopsided in that the learner half of the interaction is not credited.

Questions only work if they evoke quality responses with implications for acquisition. The full relationship between questions, answers and learning needs to be explored. 'Questioning practice' in the title is deliberate word play

because teachers can only improve their questioning technique if they look at the full context in which questions operate. Modifications to behaviour which do not take into account learner response are questionable.

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