Observation Task 1: The Language of Questions

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Observation Task 2.2: "The language of questions" (Wajnryb, 1992, p. 46-48)

Sample of Teacher's Questions

1. What is the most difficult part of the class? (short answer/retrieval)
2. And then? (short answer/retrieval)
3. You guys have a good schedule? (yes/no)
4. Happy with your schedule? (yes/no)
5. Chapter. . . what? (short answer/retrieval)
6. Who are . . . what? (short answer/retrieval)
7. Do you need to write the question? . . . or just the answer? (short answer/retrieval)
8. Are you ready for question 2? (yes/no)
9. Hi ____ (student name). Everything okay? (when they arrived late) (yes/no)
10. What did you learn from the video? (non-retrieval, imaginative)
11. That leaves two answers. Which one do you like? (short answer/retrieval)
12. What is the name of this grammar? (short answer/retrieval)
13. True? Or not true? (short answer/retrieval)
14. What happened? (Open-ended)
15. What do you think about her language? (referential)
16. Do you struggle with your cultural identity? (yes/no, referential)
17. Have you heard of this word before? (yes/no)
18. True or false? (short answer/retrieval)
19. Have you felt trapped between two cultures? (yes/no, referential)
20. Anybody want to share? (referential)
21. Do you know "trapped"? (yes/no)
22. Any questions about culture? (yes/no)
23. Ready for the next part? (yes/no)
24. Do you have to worry about grammar? Spelling? (yes/no)
25. What does this say? (short answer/retrieval)
26. What do you think that means? (short answer/retrieval)
27. Did you know that. . . (reads section from the text about Chinese immigration to U.S.) (yes/no)
28. Don't be afraid to. . . what? (short answer/retrieval)
29. What am I doing here? (shows his copy of the textbook with markings on page) (short answer/retrieval)
30. How long should you spend reading? (open-ended)

Short answer/retrieval-style questions: **13**

Yes/no questions: **10**

Referential questions: **4** (although #16 and #19 were phrased as yes/no questions, they imply a request for more information)

Open-ended questions: **2**

Non-retrieval, imaginative questions: **1**

Context

The classroom observed is a credit course in the English Language Acquisition (ELA) program of a community college. The course is Level 5 Culture and Conversation, a listening/speaking class focused on topics related to U.S. culture. Level 5 is the most advanced level in the ELA program and precedes entry into regular college courses. The class session in which this data was collected was one hour in length.

The instructor observed (referred to throughout as *R*) has been teaching in the ELA program for nine years, primarily in Levels 4 and 5. There are nine students in the class: seven are from Sudan, one from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and one from Japan. The class is comprised of 4 men and 5 women, ranging in age from early 20's to 60's.

Patterns

The 13 short-answer/retrieval-style questions were used to maintain student engagement in the lesson, with the instructor eliciting desired answers from the students rather than providing the answers himself. The 10 yes/no questions recorded were primarily checking for comprehension. The four referential questions were used for the purpose of hearing students' opinions and personal experiences related to the topic being discussed. The two open ended questions encouraged students to offer their opinions on a question with no single correct answer, while the non-retrieval, imaginative question asked students to reflect on their personal take-away from the video they watched.

As he was going over the quiz given at the beginning of class, R used many short answer/retrieval questions to elicit the correct answers. As he transitioned into a discussion of the video students had been assigned as homework, R began using more referential questions to

encourage students to express their opinions. Yes/no questions were utilized throughout the

class, mainly to check comprehension, but were also used to communicate a personal interest in

students' lives (e.g., *You guys have a good schedule?*). Waring (2012) points out that "the same

yes-no questions may be deployed in the service of both checking understanding and closing

down a sequence" (i.e. transitioning to a new part of the lesson) and this was the case for a few

of the yes/no questions in this sampling (e.g., *Any questions about culture?* immediately

followed by, *Ready for the next part?*).

Difficulty

The following sample of questions (taken from the list of 30 questions above) is

organized from least to most difficult based on the factors detailed below:

1. *Do you know [the word] trapped?*

2. *True or false?*

3. *Which [answer] do you like?* (choosing between two options)

4. *What do you think that means?*

5. *What happened [in the video]?*

6. *What did you learn from the video?*

7. *Do you struggle with your cultural identity?*

The following are a few of the factors that influence the level of difficulty of the

questions.

- How many answers are possible (yes/no, true/false, and choosing between two possible

  options are easier than open-ended questions).

- Whether there is a defined correct answer (e.g., the definition of a word is easier to supply than a description of events).

- The complexity of the answer required (e.g., *What happened in the video?* requires a longer, more grammatically complex answer than simply defining a word).

- The degree to which the student is required draw inferences (e.g., *What did you learn from the video?*)

- Whether the student is required to express their own opinion or evaluate their own personal experience (e.g., *Do you struggle with your cultural identity?*)

Question/Answer Sets

The question/answer sets below are transcribed from the same class as the questions above. They have been ranked in order from the question requiring least challenge (#1) to the question requiring the greatest challenge for students (#5). The first exchange presents minimal challenge because 1) students have had time to think about their answers (R is going over answers to a quiz) and 2) the base form of the verb is provided, and students only need to choose the correct form of the verb.

In the second set, R is eliciting the verb for a plane takeoff and landing, a topic introduced only moments earlier. Although this is a simple question requesting only the corresponding verbs, *take off* and *land* may be unfamiliar vocabulary for many of the students.

The third set is a question that requires students to evaluate something they have perhaps never thought of before (the most difficult part of flying an airplane) and formulate a response without time to think about it (Question/Answer set 3 immediately preceded Q/A Set 2 in the order of the class).

In Set 4, R asks a question referring to a video the students watched for homework (*What question does Caroline struggle with?*). Although there is a defined answer from the video, the grammatical construction of the answer is somewhat complex and may be difficult for the students to recall and/or formulate.

The main question in set 5 (*Why do you think that is false?*) is requiring students to evaluate and explain their reasoning for the answer they gave, rather than a simple formulation of a known answer. In general, Why- questions will be more complex for learners than other types of questions because they require them to consider their own opinion and evaluate the topic, rather than supplying an answer previously stated by the teacher or provided in the textbook.

1. R: Anybody have a good answer for #1? What did you write? [name]?

   Student: [unintelligible]

   R: What?

   Student: You haven't stopped talking.

   R: You have?

   Student: Haven't.

   R: Haven't? Okay, let me space that out. [writing on board] You have not stopped. . . that's what you said?

   Student: Yeah.

2. R: So in English we say, What? What's the verb?

   Student A: Take off.

   R: [writing on board] Take off.

   Student B: Landing.

   R: [writing on board] Land. To land.

3. R: The beginning of the semester is like an airplane. What is the most difficult part of flying an airplane? [Student A]? What is the most difficult part of flying an airplane, do you think?

   Student A: [hesitates]

   R: [Student B]?

   Student B: The first moment. . . and the last moment.

   R: The first moment, and the last moment.

4. R: So, Caroline talked a little bit about that. What question does she struggle with in her mind? What question does she have for herself?

   Student: Who am I and. . . where am I from?

   R: Good, so let's talk about that.

5. R: "In Mexico, people enjoy bullfighting." Is this a true statement? Who says no, it's false? Why do you think that's false, [student A]?

   Student A: Because. . . uhh. . . [hesitates]

   Student B: Not all the people. It can be true if, uh, you can say most of the people or many of the people, not all the people.

   R: Very nice. We are not talking about 100% of the people, right? That's false!

Reflection

It was an interesting exercise to observe teacher questions in detail. From the first class I observed, I noticed that the instructor (R) asks many more questions than I do in my classes. On closer inspection, I was surprised to discover that the majority of R's questions were display (retrieval) rather than referential (information) questions. Although Long and Sato (1983) argue that teachers should cut back on display questions in favor of more genuine questions, McCormick and Donato (2000) found that there can be a useful purpose for display questions in providing scaffolding to facilitate comprehension (in Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In my observation of this class, R uses display questions as an effective means to maintain student engagement and turns to referential questions when shifting into class discussion.

References:

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