

A Research on the Effective Questioning Strategies in Class

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Abstract: As a second language, it is difficult for students to use English well, while classroom questioning is one of the most fundamental methods to promote the communication between teachers and students, so it becomes more and more important in classroom teaching. In the paper, to begin with, the author introduces the background and purpose of this paper. Next, the author studies and analyzes the related theories of Constructivism and Krashen's Input Hypothesis. Then, this paper analyzes the problems of classroom questioning, including distribution of questions, lack of wait-time and corresponding feedbacks. And then the author put forward the following strategies for English classroom questioning, including preparing questions before questioning, controlling while questioning and giving feedbacks after questioning. Lastly, this paper gives four suggestions to English teachers for the effective classroom questioning: firstly, teachers should ask more diverse and reference questions. Secondly, teachers should control waiting time according to specific circumstances. Thirdly, teachers should encourage all students to answer questions actively. Fourthly, teachers should give feedbacks after students' answering.

Keywords: Classroom Questioning, Question Strategies, Effectiveness, Suggestions

1. Introduction

Classroom questioning plays a key role in teaching process, an effective questioning can help students join in classroom activities quickly. An effective English class should contain the interaction between teachers and students, students and students. The core of this interaction is teachers' classroom questioning, that's to say classroom questioning plays a significant role in English teaching. Questioning can enhance the communication between teachers and students and activate classroom atmosphere. Questioning can draw the attention of students' and motivate their interests in class. Questioning is able to widen students' thoughts. Questioning can help teachers achieve feedbacks in time which will help them enhance the quality of teaching. That is the reason why classroom questioning is important in English teaching.

The main aim of English curriculum in compulsory education is to develop students' comprehensive abilities, mental development and the comprehensive cultural literacy by learning English. The fulfillment of this aim depends on

teachers' classroom questioning during classroom teaching, therefore, teachers should adopt effective questioning skills to create a necessary atmosphere for students' language acquisition and let questions maximize its multiple functions [3-6]. At present, however, teachers' questioning in the classroom teaching doesn't play its proper role. In daily teaching, there still exist some problems, such as: asking with no answers, asking questions is just for asking questions. These will affect the quality of classroom teaching. So we must solve the problems existing in the process of English classroom questioning and put forward effective strategies for classroom teaching.

Questioning in class is an important means which can increase two-side activities of teaching and learning. It is considered as an important means to organize teaching, inspire students' thinking and enhance students' comprehension. It has been commonly used in English classroom teaching, however, there are many problems during the process of teaching. Some teachers do not use right strategies and their questions lacking effectiveness. This paper will do a preliminary research about these problems. In

other words, this paper aims to answer the questions as follows:

- (1) What are the problems in classroom questioning in English?
- (2) What are the strategies to solve the problems in questioning?
- (3) How to increase the effectiveness of the questioning?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Constructivism

Teachers should create real events or real scenes for students in teaching so that the students can understand events and construct meaning independently in the process of exploring or solving problems and they can really learn knowledge eventually. Therefore, teachers can guide students to take part in classroom teaching actively through effective methods. Effective classroom questioning can effectively stimulate students' thinking, inspire the students' interests in learning, and also enhance the interaction of students and teachers, which brings teachers' leading role and students' main body effect into full play. Just as the constructivist theory believes:

The constructivist theory believed that education is used to develop the mind, not just to rote recall what is learned. Teaching should be built based on what learners already knew and engage learners in learning activities. Teachers need to design environments and interact with learners to foster inventive, creative, critical learners.

2.2. Krashen's Input Hypothesis

Teachers are required that they should take receptivity into consideration during the teaching process [7-10], as well as prepare different classroom questions and adopt different teaching strategies to arouse the learning enthusiasm of students. So teachers who want to increase comprehensible input should make full use of classroom questioning. They can increase students' comprehensible input by adopting different questioning strategies and promote students' comprehensible output through the interaction of students, which correspond with the Krashen's Input Hypothesis:

According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, learners acquire language as a result of comprehending input addressed to them. Krashen brought forward the concept of "i+1" principle, i.e. the language that learners are exposed to should be just far enough beyond their current competence so that they can understand most of it but still be challenged to make progress. Input should neither be so far beyond their reach that they are overwhelmed, nor so close to their current stage that they are not challenged at all.

3. Analyses of the Problems in Classroom Questioning

3.1. Distribution of Questions

Distribution of questions is considered as one of the most

important questioning strategies, which means that teachers should offer equal chances of thinking and answering questions to each student. Teachers' distribution of questions affects students' learning interests and learning participation. From the author's observations, many teachers have the same higher stress with students so they are reluctant to spend time in questioning in a 45-minute class, they just ask few top or active students to answer questions rather than give equal chances to every student. Some teachers would like to choose the way of students' collective answering for questioning so that students can keep what they have taught in heart. In fact, this unequal distribution of questions is not only does harm for students to memorize what they have learned, but also let some student lose confidence and interest in English learning.

3.2. Lack of Wait-Time

According to Nunan [2], it is of great importance for students' learning if teachers extend waiting time properly. During waiting time, students' not only can comprehend the question, but also organize the target language to answer questions. So we can see, wait-time plays an important role in classroom questioning. In author's observation, some teachers pay attention to this factor in classroom questioning. However, few teachers cannot control the time interval among questions. They ask a question, and then pose another without enough time for students' to think about the answers. Some teachers also do not have enough patience to wait for students' answers after their questioning. Moreover, some teachers often choose a certain student to answer before they give the questions so that the student must answer questions without time to think about. This lacking in wait time will put students in a state of high tension. Students cannot think about teachers' questions effectively and give related answers properly, which will make them feel nervous and reduce their learning interests in English.

3.3. Lack of Corresponding Feedbacks

According to Littlewood: teachers' feedback is an important act in English teaching because it "provide learners with knowledge of how successful their performance has been and has a great influence on students' interests in learning English" [11-13]. That is, after students' answering, teachers should give students corresponding evaluations. Students can be affected by teachers' different feedbacks; teachers' positive feedback will increase students' learning interests in English while negative feedback will make it inversely. In fact, some teachers lack of feedback in real classes. The reasons are the following:

Firstly, there is no need to give evaluation that the questions which posed easily are answered by students together. Secondly, there are no necessities for teachers to evaluate some inefficient questions. For example: the teacher asked the question "Do you know the subject and objective of this sentence?" It's no value to give feedback to this kind of questioning. Thirdly, teachers lack of the awareness of

evaluation. Although most of teachers give encouragement and judgment to students' answering, the language, however, are lacking in pertinence. Mostly teachers always reuse the simple sentences: "Good!" or "Well done!" It's ambiguous and can't increase students' learning motivation and enthusiasm.

4. Strategies of English Classroom Questioning

The effectiveness of questioning is connected with the strategies of questioning. Norton [1], Orstein [3] and other researchers put forward the strategies of sequence of questions, including directing, probing, increasing waiting-time, encouraging students' questions and others. According to these, strategies of classroom questioning can be separated into the following three aspects: preparing questions before questioning, controlling while questioning, and giving feedbacks after questioning.

4.1. Preparing Questions Before Questioning

Effective classroom questioning requires teachers to prepare in advance. Although some teachers can ask questions extemporaneously, they still have some problems in linguistic organization, the degree of difficulty and the logic of language; therefore, teachers should prepare questions before questioning.

a. Deciding goals

The goal of asking questions should correspond to different classes within different teaching objectives. Teachers in preparing lessons should decide the purposes which required in classroom questioning. Different aims have different types of questions, levels of questions, as well as different asking skills. Setting goals is the premise of asking questions. Thus, deciding on the goal of asking questions is a key point which teachers should prepare before lessons.

Take the reading class as an example, teachers would better plan well what types of questions they should ask during the teaching procedures (e.g. before-reading, while-reading and after-reading).

b. Selecting questions

Students' learning is based on the emphasis of teachers' questioning in classroom teaching. As we know, a lesson has 45 minutes generally, to fully accomplish the teaching objectives during the limited time, teachers should focus on asking important questions rather than choose to ask the questions which students can answer easily. The unimportant details which teachers asked will mislead students in English learning. So teachers had better to select content for questions before classes.

For example, in exercises lesson, teachers' questioning ought to where do you get your answers, how can you find it, why do you choose this choice and so on, rather than just ask students the answer is A, B, C, or D.

c. Phrasing questions

Teachers should take multiple answers into consideration

when they are phrasing the questions before class and they ought to avoid asking "yes/no" questions. Questions would better to be specific which motivate students' deep thinking even heated discussions. In addition, a teacher who cannot master the questioning strategies well, he or she had better to write down the questions before which he or she will ask in class so that he or she may make mistakes in class. So it is important for teachers to phrase the questions before having lessons.

d. Timing questions

Teachers should set aside enough time according to the degree of difficulty of the questions not only for students' discussion and answering but also for students' adequate thinking. Questioning and answering can promote the real communication and use language creatively between teachers and students, oversimplified questions, however, cost too much time, which will make students feel the course is going too slowly and let them lose interests in English learning. Moreover, it will make students misunderstand the difficult questions without enough time to explain them. Thus, teachers should design proper time of each question in class whether it is easy or difficult.

4.2. Controlling While Questioning

Controlling while questioning means teachers should adjust the ways of asking consciously during the process of questioning.

a. Sequencing questions

Teachers' questions are supposed to be stratified, which should be arranged from easy ones to difficult ones, from closed questions to open questions, from lower-level ones to higher-level ones.

For example, when a teacher teaches Grade 5 students a fable, he or she can ask a 'yes/no question' firstly (e.g. Do you know this fable? Who is the writer?), then while reading the story, the teacher can ask students what information can they get from the story, and finally the teacher can ask students open questions (e.g. What do you think of the characters of the fable? What can you learn from the fable?), and so on. Thus, teachers should arrange well the sequencing of questions

b. Nominating after questions

Some teachers are used to nominate students before questioning, which can help them save time in class so that they can ask more related questions. This way does not benefit students to think or even we can say it's a wrong way. In fact, the right way is posing questions firstly so that students have a pause to think teachers questions, and nominating students to answer questions in the end. Moreover, students will not be nervous and worried when their teachers nominate after questions, so that they will have enough time to organize their answers and be confident in answering questions rather than think about whether their teachers' questions are difficult or not.

c. Nominating non-volunteers

As a second language, it is difficult for some Chinese students to learn English. Some students in English class are

shy to answer any questions, some are absent-minded easily. Teachers should pay attention to these students and nominate these non-volunteers positively in class to promote these students to participate in classroom learning. In order to improve the enthusiasm of some non-volunteers, teachers can take some measures like following: a) Establish an equal relationship between teachers and students so that the non-volunteers can feel at home in class. b) Let the non-volunteers answer the questions in the game. c) Take reward policy to encourage the non-volunteers to join in classroom activities.

d. Giving chances to all students

Successful classroom communication means that every student takes part in it and has equal opportunities to answer different questions. Teachers should fully develop each student's motivation especially the non-volunteers instead of always nominating those active or top students. Teachers should give chances to all students to build up their interests in learning English. For example, teachers can play words dragon or sentences dragon game to help students review words and sentences patterns and to let all students join in it.

e. Probing and redirecting

Teachers should adjust the questions according to students' specific situation (e.g. characteristics, learning abilities, learning styles and so on) in time. They can probe students when they have difficulty in answering a question. Besides, when a student doesn't know the keys really and he or she cannot answer the question which the teacher asked, teachers can redirect the question to another student so that his or her self-esteem will not be injured and he or she will not be too embarrassed. Redirecting also can not only create an effective interaction between teachers and students, but also promote students to enhance their performances.

Probing may help students build up their confidence and redirecting can help students release the embarrassment when they cannot answer the questions. Teachers who use probing and redirecting in class will help them create a harmonious learning atmosphere.

f. Asking follow-up and challenging questions

Teachers' questioning can help students focus on classroom learning, but to some good students, easy or lower-level questions cannot attract their attention and will let them reduce interests, so teachers ought to some follow-up and challenging questions consciously to appeal to some students' needs. Follow-up and challenging questions are beneficial to develop students' thinking ability and language levels, which will increase students' confidence in English learning.

4.3. Giving Feedbacks After Questioning

Evaluating students' questions and answers in time can guarantee classroom questioning to go on effectively, that is, teachers need giving feedback to students after they answering the questions. There are some ways for teachers to give feedback as follows:

a. Praising

Praising means acknowledgment. Students need teachers'

praise, especially the backward students. Students with different ages, however, have different demands for praising. Praising will increase students' confidence in English learning. For example, after students' answering, teachers can give positive evaluation to encourage the students (e.g. "Well done!", "Perfect", "You are excellent!" and so on). While some non-volunteers ask questions, teachers can speak highly of them to improve their initiations in class.

b. Encouraging

When students' answers are not quite right or they cannot give answers, teachers should encourage them rather than ignore the problem or criticize the students. Teachers might give students some suggestions to help them analyze the questions so that they can give their own answers through teachers help. This will make them feel that their teachers do not give up them and they can do better through their efforts.

For example, when the students who cannot answer teachers' open questions in class, the teachers can give them some hints and some key words to encourage and lead them find their own answers.

c. Quoting

Quoting is an indirect praising. When a teacher quotes students' answers at the end of the class, students will feel a sense of success and recognition, which arouse students' confidence to attain higher learning goals.

From above strategies, teachers should make most use of classroom questioning to increase students' interests in English learning and develop students' individual thinking ability to find questions and solve problems.

5. Effectiveness of English Classroom Questioning

Effective classroom questioning can not only help teachers to carry out classroom teaching effectively and validly, but also help students to take part in classroom activities quickly. The author will analyze this from the following two points, including the principles of effective classroom questioning and suggestions of effective classroom questioning.

5.1. Principles of Effective Classroom Questioning

Only the English teachers master the principles of effective classroom questioning, can they realize the teaching aims which they set before class. The author will explain this from the following three points, including the principles of scientificity, comprehensiveness and artistry.

a. Scientificity

Teachers should firstly study the teaching materials and master the language points so that the questions they posed have no intellectual errors and are easy to understand, which correspond to the rules of language and cultural customs. And the difficulties of questions are moderate which not only matches with students' cognitive level but also promotes students' ideation. Only in this way, students can say what they want to say and the questioning is scientific

b. Comprehensiveness

Quality-oriented education is for all students, and each of the students has been improved as the foundation of their original. Thus, questioning should cater to all students. Teachers should try their best to initiative each student's motivation in English learning and let them take part in the answering for questions, and students ought to have equal opportunity to answer different questions where they can enjoy the joy of participation and success.

c. Artistry

The artistry of English classroom questioning covers many factors, which not only in knowledge but in human culture. (1) Asking questions which aimed to develop students' ability of comprehensive language application, to suggest students expressing their own views and to improve students' cognitive level. (2) Teachers give objective feedback after students' answering, and not only appreciate students' right answers but also point out students' errors smartly.

5.2. Suggestions for Effective Classroom Questioning

Effective questioning can help teachers realize the teaching objectives and help students master the aims of the lesson, which also depends on how questions are asked. Here are some suggestions for making questioning more effective. Firstly, teachers ask more diverse and reference questions. Secondly, teachers control waiting time according to specific circumstances. Thirdly, teachers encourage all students to answer questions actively. Fourthly, teachers give proper feedbacks after students' answering.

a. Asking more diverse and reference questions

According to authors' observation, most of the question asked by teachers are closed and display questions which aims to check students' understanding of old knowledge and mastering of new knowledge. The questions can't help students' understand the deeper meanings and do well for the development of students' critical thinking. Teachers ask more display questions than reference questions in class will prevent the improvement of students' actual ability. Thus, teachers should ask more diverse and reference questions. But from the observation, the author found that many problems are related to teachers' general cultivation. Reference questions without a standard answers which some teachers themselves cannot give reasonable explanation after students' answering. So the essential way to change the types of teachers' questioning in English class is to improve teachers' general cultivation. In addition, teachers should enhance their awareness of asking questions. They ought to realize that the aim of questioning is not only to check students' understanding of knowledge, but also to attract students' interests in English learning and to enhance their comprehensive capability. In a word, teachers should ask more diverse and reference questions.

b. Controlling waiting time according to specific circumstances

Without waiting time, students cannot do enough thinking, which will make them nervous and upset. Their attention will focus on teachers' nomination rather than thinking about teachers' questions, which will reduce the effectiveness of

questioning. Thus, teachers should leave time for students to prepare and organize their answers after questioning. Firstly, the length of waiting time depends on the degree of questions' difficulty. For example, the waiting time of lower-level questions is shorter than higher-level questions. Secondly, the length of waiting time depends on different students. If a student who are nominated to answer questions is good at English and he can understand and master teachers questions well, it is unnecessary to set aside too much time for him to answer questions, and vice versa.

c. Encouraging all students to answer questions actively

In author's observation, most of teachers are accustomed to nominating top or active students and choose a collective response in questioning. And a few teachers would like to nominate non-volunteers in class. As we know, English is a practical subject which needs every individual practice it by themselves. However, a collective response neither can check students' understanding nor give each student equal chance to practice themselves. Teachers should give equal chances and encourage each student to answer questions actively.

Facing those non-volunteers, teachers can take the following methods to help them participate into class: Firstly, teachers can change their ways to ask in a manner of encouragement and kindness. Secondly, keep smiling and eye contact with students when teachers are asking questions. Thirdly, don't criticize them even their answers are wrong and encourage them positively. This ways of questioning can help non-volunteers relax and have courage to answer questions.

d. Giving proper feedbacks after students' answering

In general, according to author's observation, some teachers' feedbacks are relatively one-fold. They just give simple words, such as: good, well done, to response students' right answering, while facing wrong answers, teachers seldom have feedback or even some teachers criticize students directly. These are wrong to react students' answering and will reduce the effectiveness of questioning.

In fact, teachers had better to give sophisticated feedback to students, when students answer questions firmly and quickly within right keys; it's time for teachers to give proper praise to students to inspire them. When students cannot use correct words to express their answers or less courage, teachers may as well encourage them and give some suggestions to students in a friendly manner. In addition, when students' answers are incorrect, teachers should guide them and give them another chance to think about it rather than criticize them directly.

6. Conclusions

Classroom questioning plays a core role in English teaching, which is one of the most important ways to initiative the communication between teachers and students. Through the preliminary study on the problems of classroom questioning in English classes, we can see that there are many problems in questioning which urgent to be solved so that teachers can use this method correctly to promote

students' English learning. According to author's observation, many teachers have problems in questioning, such as: lack of waiting time, lack of proper feedback, unequal distribution of questions and so on. However, how to solve these problems is what teachers should face at present. The author put forward a series of strategies for English classroom questioning, including preparation questions before questioning, controlling while questioning and giving feedback after questioning, and author also given some suggestions for effective questioning, which the author want can help some teachers in real classroom teaching.

However, because of the limited capacity of the author, the research on these problems is not enough in-depth and comprehensive and the analysis of some questions is not intensive, which need to do further study. In the future, the author will still keep on caring about these questions and do further research so that the author can adapt the demands under the new situation.

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