

## **An Instructor's Style of Questioning in an Undergraduate L2 English Classroom in Assam**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on two aspects of classroom interaction between the instructor and the learner participants in English as a second language (L2) classroom in Assam. First, the style of questioning of the instructor that helped him to create spoken discourses between himself and the learners and among the learners themselves. Secondly, focus is on the various cultural information that the instructor brought in for discussion and the ways in which the information was integrated with the course under study. The researcher attempted to investigate the specific cultural aspects highlighted by the instructor and the manner in which the weaving of culture and language was promoted in the classroom discourse by keeping a close look at the instructor's questions.

**Keywords: L2, Assam, India, Culture Teaching, Pedagogy, SLA, ELT**

### **1. Introduction:**

The style of questioning adopted by an instructor influences the nature and the pattern of discourse in a classroom. In interactions between the instructor and learners in English as second language (L2) classroom, it becomes extremely important. The style of questioning may decide the length and quality of interaction between the instructor and learners. If the style of questioning is conducive to classroom discourse, it will offer ample opportunities for language use and practice too. So, experienced instructors often take special care about the way the questions are posed to the learners in a classroom. The findings of this paper are based on a study undertaken at North Lakhimpur College, Assam. It was part of a case study focusing on the oral interactions between the instructor and the learner participants in English as an L2 classroom. The main objective of the study was to understand the incorporation of culture teaching in language teaching. The style of questioning adopted by the instructor during the class sessions recorded during study is presented here.

There were four types of questions asked by the instructor in the classroom discourse sessions of the present study. The first type of questions was the ones of which the instructor knew the answer and they are termed as demonstrative questions. The second type of questions was the ones in which the instructor requested for the unknown information and they were the imploring questions. The third type was called explanatory questions in which the instructor asked the learners to provide more elaborate explanation of their responses. The fourth type of questions was the follow-up questions which were asked by the instructor not in anticipation of any answer from the learners but as a link to more explanation from the instructor himself of the points that he happened to raise in the course of the interaction with the learners.

## 2. Dominance of Follow-up and Demonstrative Questions

The analysis of the question types used by the instructor is done by taking into account the ten classroom interactions centred on cultural themes, termed as Moments of Cultural Discourse (MCDs), in six class sessions between the instructor and the learner participants during the semester. The instructor raised 84 questions during these ten MCDs. It also shows that the number of demonstrative and follow-up questions raised by the instructor is larger than the number of clarification and imploring questions raised during the MCDs. There were 28 (33.33%) follow-up questions and 47 (55.95%) demonstrative questions out of the total number of 84 questions asked by the instructor during those ten MCDs.

The reasons for raising larger number of follow-up and demonstrative questions are the teaching goals that the instructor aimed at. The first goal was to check whether the learner had the necessary information related to culture mentioned in the text as a whole and the vocabulary in question in particular or not. The second goal was to direct the learners' attention to the culture related information that they might have failed to notice during the class sessions.

## 3. Analysis of an Excerpt from a Class Session

An analysis of an excerpt from recorded class session to illustrate the style of questioning adopted by the instructor is presented in Example 1 below.

Example 1 (I: Bhola mastor; Gayatri, Pompi: learner participant, Ss: majority of the learners)  
(Continuing from the PPT shows that presented a conversation between two people and his related explanations)

- 1 I: In the standard variety you have the rule, like if you have to use the *do* verb, with the third person singular then you have to say *does*. In the same way this variety has its own rule. What does this rule say? Does the rule say you have to take "st" after the do verb when you put in the do verb after the second person singular? So, what do you mean by a second person? Singular means? "thou" is a second person singular or third person singular? "thou" is second person singular or third person singular?
- 2 Gayatri: Second person singular.
- 3 I: Louder.
- 4 Ss: Second person singular.
- 5 I: Second person singular. So if you are using the do verb after thou then by rule what would it be?
- 6 Gayatri: Do'st.
- 7 I: Do'st. If you are using the do verb after second person singular, then what is the form of do?
- 8 Ss: Do'st
- 9 I: Thou do'st or thou do?
- 10 Pompi: Thou do'st.
- 11 I: Right. That's correct, right? Then, if you have to use the word can after that, then?
- 12 Pompi: Can'st.
- 13 I: Can'st, right? Then if you have to use a verb, if you have to use a verb then? Thou swell'st or thou swell?

- 14 Ss: Thou swell'st.  
 15 I: Ok, thou swell'st. thou think or thou think'st? r  
 16 Ss: Thou think'st.  
 17 I: Ok. Thou think'st. Now you are talking. So, any verb, any verb which is, which occurs second person singular, in the variety right, in the variety that John Donne wrote, in that particular variety, any verb that comes after thou will takest, so that's the rule, is that okay? So, you have thou do'st, thou can'st, thou swell'st, thou think'st, so thou do'st means what in the standard form?  
 18 Gayatri: You do.  
 19 I: You?  
 20 Gayatri: Do.  
 21 I: Do. Then thou think'st means what in the standard variety?  
 22 Pompei: You think.  
 23 I: You think. Then thou swell'st means what?  
 24 Ss: You swell.

As Example 1 shows, the learners were given lessons in some grammatical rules of the regional variety of English in which the poet composed the poem under discussion. He followed up his explanation with some follow-up questions and a series of demonstrative questions. He began with: "thou is second person singular or first person singular?" It was replied by Gayatri. She said that thou is second person singular. To make it more audible and at the same time to repeat the answer for the other learners in the class, the instructor asked Gayatri to repeat the answer. Gayatri followed suit and the instructor repeated her response loudly and followed it up with another question: "so if you are using the do verb after thou then by rule what would it be?" Gayatri again gave the instructor the correct answer.

The instructor rephrased the question in a raised tone to throw it to the entire class. The whole class responded to instructor's question by saying: "do'st." In order to re-affirm the understanding of the grammatical facts he asked another question: "thou do'st or thou do?" Pompei answered the question this time. Thereafter, the instructor brought in another word "can" and asked a few demonstrative questions in the similar line. The learners answered all the questions raised by the instructor correctly. Finally, he explained the concept again and followed up his explanation with some more demonstrative questions.

It is noteworthy that there was no evidence of any attempt at an elaborate response on the part of the learners in this excerpt. The instructor took care of the fact that the learners were made to focus on the usage of some words in the verbal interactions during the class sessions as part of his main objectives of building learner vocabulary, as specified in the interview with the researcher.

Moreover, Example 1 shows the instructor's method of asking multiple questions in a row in addition to the invocation of various question types as part of his style of questioning. An analysis of the question runs of the instructor during these class sessions is given in the next section.

#### 4. Question Sequence of the Instructor

During the ten MCDs used for the analysis of the style of questioning of the instructor, there were 41 (41 questions or 48.8%) instances of one question followed by a response from the learner and the rest of the 18 (43 questions or 51.2%) instances were two or more questions in a row followed by a learner

response out of the 84 questions in the 10 MCDs of the class sessions. A total number of 43 questions or 51.2% of the total number of questions raised by the instructor during the 10 MCDs shows the high amount of question runs in the style of questioning of the instructor. Mention must be made of the fact that learners ignored the first few questions asked by the instructor and responded only to the last question of the question runs in 18 of the 18 instances or on 100% instances.

Considering the number of questions in a row that require no learner response but aim for transmission of further cultural information, these questions were coded as follow-up questions. In turn 1 of Example 1, six questions in a row to raise the learners' awareness of the use of the second person thou in the discussion of a language variety and its importance in UK were asked by the instructor. The initial move taken by the instructor was to begin the sequence of questions as suggestions, then the instructor changed the nature of the questions by asking the learners two repeated back to back rapid fire demonstrative questions whose answers are directly related to the use of person and number concepts in that language variety.

The six questions asked by the instructor contained a logical planning. The first four questions were follow-up questions which the instructor asked with the intention of preparing the learners by providing them with associations for the final question of "thou is second person singular or third person singular?" The final question was a gentle enquiry in the form of a demonstrative question aimed at eliciting grammar-related cultural knowledge with reference to the variety of languages within the English language and the relative status in the society from the learners.

## 5. Use of Tag Questions

Moreover, another aspect of the style of questioning that the instructor adopted in the classroom discourse was the frequent use of tag questions by him. The instructor used tag questions like "Is that okay?", "Is that right?", "Okay?", "Right?", "Shall we?", "aren't they", "Is not it?" and so on. Since these tag questions were not used to elicit any response from the learners, the researcher has coded them as follow-up questions. In Example 3, the tag question of "And most of these places are very very wet, aren't they" required no response from the learners. The tag question of "aren't they?" only reconfirmed the information provided in the statement that went with it.

There were 11 (13%) tag questions out of the total number of 84 follow-up questions found in the 10 MCDs of the class sessions. These tag questions were frequently used by the instructor in the introduction of new information. Turn 11, 13, and 17 of Example 1 are some of the instances that show that these tag questions were used with the purpose of providing new information to the learners during the class sessions. In addition to this function of breaking in new information to the learners, these tag questions were also used as tone-softener by the instructor in the course of his conversation and interaction with the learners during the class sessions.

## 6. Reasons for Instructor's Particular Style of Questioning

The finding that comes out of the discussion of the style of questioning that the instructor adopted in the class session is that there were three major characteristics in the style of questioning of the instructor. First, demonstrative questions and follow-up questions dominated the major part of the question time of the instructor. Second, the instructor had the habit of putting multiple numbers of questions at a stretch to

the learners. Third, the instructor used a large number of tag questions to introduce new cultural information and for the purpose softening his tone during the class interactions with the learners.

Notwithstanding the fact that, in relation to the question of the method of teaching culture specific perspective, the instructor in his interview with the researcher mentioned the need for involving the learners in the understanding of the culture perspectives in such a way that the negotiation for meaning related to the cultural perspectives turn out to be the result of the joint effort of the instructor and the learners, the high frequency of display and follow-up questions which end up eliciting only convergent response from the learners in the form of short answers. As Example 2 and 3 show how the dominance of display and follow-up questions constrain elaborate discussion of the cultural topics brought in by the instructor.

Moreover, the instructor's method of asking a number of questions in a row broke up the main question asked in the beginning into simpler and more concrete questions directed towards the eliciting of the various cultural information related to the language community under study. The response of the learners to the last question in the row showed that the learners were aware of the questions eliciting factual information of the culture related discussions. As a result, the significance and necessity of the main question set in the beginning got affected during the classroom discourse sessions. The learners on majority of the instances preferred to ignore the first few questions to await the final question that coincided with the pause on the part of the instructor.

In addition to it, the high frequency of tag questions used by the instructor during the classroom discourse in the first semester Alternative English course shows one more instructional problem related to the nature follow-up questions. The tag questions used in Example 1 elicit no response from the learners but carry the instructor's one-sided commentary forward blocking further interactions with the learners.

## 7. Conclusion

The instructor's style of questioning may be justified by various reasons. The first is that the course under study may contain unobserved instructional issues related to the learners beyond the scope of the data collected in the present study. The second reason is concerned with the relative proficiency level of the learners in English. Even though the learners are taking an advanced level course in English, it cannot be deduced that the learners have high level of proficiency in speaking skills. Because of it, the learners are unable to engage in open-ended and elaborate discussions on the culture related topics brought up in the class sessions by the instructor.

Besides, the instructor states that learners had differing levels of proficiency in English and this differential proficiency level was observed across the four skills. It is possible that the instructor realized the fact that some learners will be unable to participate or respond to elaborate discussions or questions expecting detailed explanation from the learners for their differential proficiency level. Consequently, the instructor decided to break up the question asked in the beginning seeking elaborate answer from the learners into demonstrative questions expecting one-word response from the learners to accommodate this negatively differential proficiency level among the learners.

The third reason is concerned with the fact that the instructor used follow-up questions in plenty so that he could provide comprehensible information to the entire class to enable them to discuss these issues in the classroom. He might have expected that a random offering of ideas related to the cultural

topics under discussion might end up eliciting elaborate response from the learners. But the instructor's style of questioning ended up on almost all occasions with one-word response from the learners. Another explanation for it is that the final demonstrative question following a number of follow-up questions asked by the instructor aimed only at factual information related to the culture of the language community under study closing off more elaborate discussion of the issue thereby.

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