

# Research Proposal on Teacher Questioning and Classroom Interaction in Chinese University EFL Classrooms

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**Abstract:** This research proposes to investigate the correlation between teacher questioning strategies, classroom dynamics, and student engagement in Chinese university EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings. The proposed research will draw upon mixed methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative analyses including classroom observation, questionnaires, focus group interviews with students and semi-structured interviews with teachers, a kind of methodological triangulation. By addressing the impact of questioning methods on student participation and interaction, this study aims to offer insights into enhancing instructional practices and fostering a more engaged and participative learning environment.

**Keywords:** Teacher Questioning; Classroom Interaction; EFL Education; Student Engagement; Teaching Strategies; Chinese University

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## 1. Introduction

Teacher questioning are regarded as the fundamental element underlying the majority of classroom teaching approaches (Gall, 1970). Questioning, according to Ellis (1994), is not only a good teaching strategy that may motivate students to think and learn, but it is also a way to regulate the entire classroom interaction process. Ellis also noted that questions are crucial as they have to be answered and utilized to encourage students to participate in classroom interaction and practice communicative language.

In China, the recently revised 2017 Guidelines on College English Teaching further emphasize that an active EFL classroom needs both teachers' guidance and students' participation. However, many EFL teachers in China reported that despite the guidance they considered appropriate, the students' participation in the classroom was still unsatisfactory (Yu, 2010). The silent classroom makes them agree that the key to effective EFL teaching is to ask effective questions and get students involved to ensure active interaction.

Moreover, in June 2023, I distributed questionnaires to the college students, of which 172 valid questionnaires were returned. The results showed that 64% of the college students mainly obeyed the teacher's arrangement in their past English classes, and 54% of them thought they spent most of the class time passively listening and responding passively. And when it comes to the reasons for answering questions in class, 74% of the students interacted with teachers mainly out of the desire for extra scores related to classroom performance. This indicates that the teacher's arrangement of classroom activities and the way of asking questions are extremely important, since students' motivation may not be enough to support their active interaction and active thinking.

This study focuses on teacher questioning, a vital variable affecting students' willingness to communicate or silence (Shao & Gao, 2016). It will explore how EFL teachers can improve their questioning to enhance student participation in classroom interaction. In addition, previous studies about teachers' questioning seldom take the experiences and expectation of students into account or even overlook it. This study hopes to fill the gap and contribute to second language acquisition in EFL classrooms.

## 2. Research questions

- a. Why students are reluctant to participate in EFL classroom interactions?
- b. What are the feedback and expectations of students about EFL teachers' questioning?
- c. How can EFL teachers' questioning strategies be improved to enhance classroom interaction?

## 3. Literature review

Questioning has been one of the most common teaching methods for nearly a thousand years. Research even states that 20-40% of classroom talk is taken up by questioning (Chaudron, 1988). In the English classroom, as elsewhere, this is the most common kind of contact between teacher and student, with both sides heavily involved.

Effective questioning has been defined by researchers around the world in a variety of ways, and there is still no consensus on the concept of ‘effective questioning’. According to Ur (1999), effective questioning should enable students to give relevant, complete and specific responses to the teacher’s questions, and at the same time stimulate students’ sense of initiative and participation; if the questions are such that students can only give short or inappropriate responses or fall into prolonged silence, then the questioning is considered ineffective. Borich (2002) argues that effective questions are those that prompt students to think actively, to respond in a structured way, and therefore to engage in the learning process. The effectiveness of questions is influenced not only by the choice of words and phrases, but also by the variation in the intonation of the teacher, the context in which the question is asked and the classification, role and method of classroom questioning, etc. For example, Tsui (1995) classified questions into three types: yes/no questions, alternative questions, and wh-/how questions. In terms of function, Richards & Lockhart (1994) noted that classroom questioning has 6 functions. In terms of strategy, scholars such as Norton (1989), Orstein (1995), and others have made some useful ideas. Wang (2002) synthesized the views of Norton and Orstein then pointed out that the strategy of questioning is mainly closely related to four stages, which are preparation for questioning, questioning, students organizing answers, and teachers providing feedback.

Effective questioning not only increases student engagement but also creates a conducive environment for learning, it is a tool that “reduce the gap by connecting known to unknown between the learner and the concept which is to be learned” (Nappi, 2017). According to Siddique (2016), if teachers are able to ask effective questions in the classroom, students will be motivated to ask more questions, thus facilitating interaction between teachers and students. Given the above-mentioned facts, it is critical to explore the possibilities of using effective questioning in a classroom.

Nunan (1989) believes that classroom questioning is not only a tool for teachers to implement teaching plans, but also an important source of students’ language input. For language students in particular, while answering teacher questions, they are presumed to be committed to thinking and producing understandable output, testing their assumptions about how language works, and revising their output when negative feedback is received (Swain, 1995). In this regard, question-and-answer communication in foreign language classrooms deserves more attention than other subjects.

However effective questioning does not always happen even among experienced teachers. Due to the pressures of exam-oriented education, both students and teachers work hard to get good grades. As a result, teachers frequently ask informative questions to assist students to recall knowledge (Yu, 2010). And some teachers ignore the significance of question type, question distribution, wait time, and teacher feedback. This also results in students lacking the ability to think independently, use reasoning skills, ask relevant questions, and explore alternative solutions. Hence, graduates who cram a subject into their exams in order to get a good grade are mass produced (Siddiqui, 2016). To find the answer, there is a need to peep into the classrooms. The typical classroom in mainstream universities is a teacher-led classroom where students are placed on the receiving end, and they are not encouraged to ask questions. In this type of classroom, the interaction is almost imperceptible.

Siddiqui (2016) also notes that many teachers believe that a good student is the one who sits in the class quietly and behaves nicely. He never disagrees with the teacher, asks hardly any questions, and has a sharp memory to repeat what the teacher has taught. This also keeps students memorizing what they have received rather than exploring and reflecting on it.

Some studies have also analyzed the lack of interaction in the college EFL classroom from the perspective of the students. Ruth (2013) found that the interactive teaching mode applicable to English classrooms in European and American countries is not effective in Chinese EFL classrooms, and questions often encounter great silence. English teachers hope to improve students’ language ability through communicative activities. They asked Chinese students to communicate and discuss in English in class, but found that the effect was not obvious, and college students were reluctant to participate in class interaction. There are many factors that lead to silence in English classrooms, mainly including students’ fear of embarrassment, high power distance between teachers and students, and students’ learning experience. Through research, it is found that those students with better language ability have stronger willingness to participate in English interactive activities. This is related to their English learning experiences before university, their adoring for Western culture, and their proficiency of oral English. Nevertheless, how many of these factors can be weakened or even resolved by teachers’ questions? This research also attempts to give answers by understanding the relevant experiences and expectations of students.

#### 4. Methodology

The proposed research will draw upon mixed methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative analyses including classroom observation, questionnaires, focus group interviews with students and semi-structured interviews with teachers, a kind of methodological triangulation. It is hoped that data gathered from the four aspects would, taken together, give a more complete picture of questioning behavior

and offer a reasonable foundation for interpreting teacher-student questioning conduct in EFL classrooms.

The class observations will be documented with a checklist based on Wajnryb's (1992) classification of question type, focusing on question initiation and the way they were responded to. Then I would like to use questionnaires and focus group discussions to gather non-English major students' experiences, attitudes and expectations regarding EFL classroom questioning. Questionnaires data collection and analysis will occur first, followed by focus group interviews data collection and analysis, since the qualitative data may further explain and contextualize the quantitative findings.

Research data needs to be gathered from both teachers and students to increase the accuracy of data and reliability through data triangulation. Using multiple data sources to answer my research question can also reduce bias in the research and enable compensation between strengths and weaknesses of research strategies (Denscombe, 2017). To this end, semi-structured interviews with approximately 10 EFL teachers will be conducted to explore their questioning characteristics and self-evaluation.

## 5. Conclusion

I hope that the findings of this study will give teachers a better understanding of students' feedback and expectations in relation to questioning in the classroom and give them some encouragement and guidance to change the way they address questions. The more active classroom interaction that ensues will also help to reduce the pressure or even fear of students facing teachers' questions, so that they can express their ideas more actively. As a result, the phenomenon that most mainland Chinese students are merely passive recipients of knowledge in EFL classroom has a better chance of being changed.

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