

Teacher Questions in Second Language Classrooms: An Investigation of Three Case Studies

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Abstract

The present study investigates the types of questions asked by three NNS pre-service English teachers teaching in three different bands of secondary schools during the whole class teaching portion of their lessons through analyzing the transcripts of their videotaped lessons. A special emphasis is put on exploring the effects of the types of questions teachers ask on the students' discourse patterns. Similar to the results of previous research, the findings of this study show that in all the three lessons, yes/no questions, and closed and display questions were frequently asked by the teachers, while open and referential questions were rarely or even never asked. However, the referential questions themselves will not make students produce longer responses unless the teachers are able to encourage their students to elaborate further rather than just accepting those brief and syntactically less complex responses. The implications of this study are that pre-service teachers should be provided with more training in developing their questioning techniques. Also, to facilitate second language development and bring about more dialogic forms of whole class teaching, students could be asked to expand their thinking, justify or clarify their opinions in the follow-up moves.

Keywords: Teacher questions, Whole class teaching, Yes/No questions, Closed and display questions, Open and referential questions

Introduction

Traditional language classroom interaction is usually characterized by a rigid pattern, particularly the acts of asking questions, instructing and correcting students' mistakes. This phenomenon can be found in Tsui's (1985) study of Hong Kong secondary English classes. In Tsui's report on two Form 2 English lessons, she discovered that teacher questions were the most dominant in the lessons. The interaction generated was predominantly a teacher-centred question-answer-feedback interaction, or the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern suggested by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), during which student knowledge was displayed and evaluated.

Teachers in traditional classrooms tend to dominate the interaction and speak most of the time because they think that close and persistent control over the classroom interaction is a precondition for achieving their instructional goals and students' unpredictable responses can be avoided (Edwards & Westgate, 1994). This is especially the case for those teachers who lack confidence in the subject matter they teach (Smith & Higgins, 2006). A common consequence is that open-ended questions are rarely asked because of the unpredictability of students' responses. Instead, pupils act mainly as the receivers of knowledge and their responses are constrained by the types of questions asked by their teachers (Edwards & Westgate, 1994). This interaction pattern is likely to inhibit students' opportunities to use language for communication (Hasan, 2006).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the questions asked by three pre-service teachers teaching in three secondary schools with different banding during the whole class teaching portion of their English lessons through analyzing the

transcripts of their videotaped lessons. A special emphasis is put on exploring the effects of the types of questions the teachers ask on the students' discourse patterns. Similar to the results of previous research, the findings of this study show that in all the three lessons, yes/no questions, and closed and display questions were frequently asked. The effects were that the responses given by the students were generally brief and syntactically simple.

Significance of the study

The present study involved the investigation of the questions asked in the whole class teaching portion of three English lessons taught by three pre-service teachers and thus, contributes to our knowledge about such teacher trainees' developing skills in the teacher-student interaction in the whole class teaching. Previous local research studies devoted to classroom discourse analysis have mainly been related to analyzing input and interaction in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms (e.g. Tsui, 1985) or, more specifically, the teacher-student interactions in an English classroom (e.g. Chan, 1993), and the teachers involved were the more experienced teachers. The present study, however, was devoted to investigate the questioning techniques of three inexperienced teachers teaching in secondary schools with different banding in the whole class teaching portion of their English lessons. Through analyzing the lesson transcripts, the types of questions asked frequently by the pre-service teachers were found and their effects on the students' discourse patterns were explored.

Literature review

Teacher questions

Teacher questions, as a kind of input provided by a teacher (Hasan, 2006), form an

integral part of classroom interaction (Ho, 2005). Nunan and Lamb (1996, p. 80) suggest that teachers use questions “to elicit information, to check understanding, and also to control behavior”. In most classrooms, questioning remains the common strategy for eliciting responses from students during the whole class teaching. Chaudron (1988, p. 126) mentions that “teachers’ questions constitute a primary means of engaging learners’ attention, promoting verbal responses, and evaluating learners’ progress”. In other words, it means that teacher questions play an important role in managing classroom routines. Studies of ESL classrooms have mainly focused on the effects of teacher questions on learner production of the target language and the types of student responses given (Tsui, 1995). Thus, the present study was conducted to investigate the effects of the types of teacher questions asked on the production of the target language and the types of responses given by the students. Different from the other studies that focused only on open/referential and closed/display questions, the effects of yes/no questions were also investigated.

Teacher questions have been categorized in a number of ways: 1) open and closed questions, 2) display and referential questions, and 3) yes/no questions. Tsui (1995) classifies the category of open/closed questions according to the kind of response elicited. The former can have more than one acceptable answer while the latter can accept only one answer. The second category of questions, display/referential questions, relates to the nature of interaction generated (Tsui, 1995). For display questions, the teacher already knows the answers. They are asked in order to check if the students know the answers. On the contrary, for referential questions, the teacher does not know the answers and the students answer the questions in order to give the teacher information (Tsui, 1995). Thompson (1997), however, categorizes the first two types of questions based on two dimensions. One relates to “the content of the question” (p. 101): whether it asks something about facts or opinions, while

another relates to “the purpose of the question” (p. 101): whether the teacher already knows the answer or not. It is believed that closed or display questions elicit “short, mechanical responses” while open or referential questions elicit “lengthy, often complex responses” (Ho, 2005, p. 298). The last type of questions, the yes/no questions, is categorized by Thompson (1997) according to “the grammatical form of the question” (p. 100).

However, it is too simplistic for the above systems to classify teacher questions into either open or closed. From the analyses of the questions asked by three non-native ESL teachers during reading comprehension in the upper secondary school in Brunei, Ho (2005) found that there are numerous instances of questions, particularly those reading comprehension questions, that can neither be considered closed nor open. These questions are mainly used to gauge students’ overall vocabulary level, grammar and other general knowledge. Banbrook and Skehan (1989, p. 146) also note that the display-referential distinction can be influenced by “the students’ interpretation of the teacher’s intentions” of asking the questions.

Open or referential questions are more preferred on pedagogical grounds because they are the questions commonly asked in the ‘real world’ of students outside the classroom (Long & Sato, 1983). However, “there is a divergence between what theorists would consider to be good practice and what is actually going on in classrooms” (Banbrook & Skehan, 1989, p. 142). In a traditional language classroom, factual questions are the most common while open questions are the least common (Myhill, Jones, & Hopper, 2006). This situation can be found in Harrop and Swinson’s (2003) analysis of recorded teaching of ten infant school teachers, ten junior school teachers, and ten secondary school teachers. It was found that many questions asked by these three groups of teachers were closed questions (44.6%, 41.1% and 48.6% respectively), while open questions were rarely asked (7.1%, 7.4%

and 9.8% respectively). Also, in Burns and Myhill's (2004) research study in which episodes of fifteen minutes from 54 lessons were drawn from Year 2 and Year 6 classes, the analyses showed that the most common form of questions asked by the teachers is the factual questions (64%). The questions teachers ask are mostly display questions because of the unpredictability of the students' response for open questions (Edwards & Westgate, 1994). The answers are usually predetermined by the teacher and so negotiation of meaning is rarely necessary.

Effects of teacher questions

Most research on teacher questions has focused on open/referential and closed/display questions but yes/no questions are also commonly used.

The effects of display questions on students' discourse patterns were generally considered to be negative but positive for referential questions. Brock (1986) conducted a research study in which the effects of referential questions on adult ESL classroom discourse were investigated. In this study, four experienced ESL teachers and twenty-four non-native speakers (NNSs) enrolled in classes in the University of Hawaii's English Language Institute were involved. Two of the teachers were provided with training in incorporating referential questions into classroom activities while the other two teachers were not provided with any training. As a result, the treatment-group teachers asked more referential questions than did the control-group teachers. Each teacher was randomly assigned with a group of six students for a single period of forty minutes. The results showed that the student responses in the treatment-group classes were significantly longer and syntactically more complex than those in the control-group classes. This suggests a positive correlation between asking referential questions and students' production of target language. In another study, the ethnographic research done by Ernest (1994), it was discovered that when

the teacher asked display questions, students' responses were brief, with little elaboration. Lastly, Goodwin (2001, p. 11, cited in Myhill, Jones, & Hopper, 2006, p. 15) argues that "pupil responses tend to be short, and the teacher does not encourage elaboration of responses" when the display questions are asked.

From a pedagogical point of view, it appears that asking display or factual questions will produce negative effects on students' second language learning and thus, they should be avoided. Nunan (1987) also believes that display questions do not resemble real communication and are therefore pedagogically purposeless. However, Burns and Myhill's (2004) study showed that among the factual questions asked, 45% of them had a function of inviting more responses. McCarthy (1991) also claims that display questions and closed questions still have the function for the teacher to check the students' state of knowledge and provide them with opportunities for practicing language forms. Therefore, Nunn (1999) emphasizes that display questions are pedagogically purposeless only when they are viewed from the perspective of communicative language teaching.

For the yes/no questions suggested by Thompson (1997), Gower, Philips, and Walters (1995, cited in Thompson, 1997) point out that these questions are easier for learners to answer and may therefore be suitable for those weaker students as they do not need to produce much language output. However, the research evidence in this aspect is limited that further research devoted to this area seems to be essential.

In brief, classroom data from a number of studies show that display questions are commonly asked while referential questions are rarely asked. For the former type of questions, the responses elicited tend to be brief, with little elaboration, but the responses elicited by the latter type of questions are usually longer and syntactically more complex. In the present study, the major purpose is to find out the type(s) of questions the teachers ask frequently in the lessons and their effects on the students'

discourse patterns.

Research design and methods

In the present study, a case study approach was used in which the lessons of three non-native ESL pre-service teachers were studied with the purpose of investigating the questions asked in the whole class teaching portion of their lessons.

The participants

The selected participants in the present study were three Year 3 NNS pre-service teachers (one male and two females) in a tertiary institution in Hong Kong. All of them were from the same programme - Bachelor of Education (Honours) (Languages) (Four-year Full-time) programme. They did not have any real teaching experience and they had their first block teaching practice during the period the study was conducted. They were obtained from nonprobability convenience sampling. All of them were assigned to the researcher as her supervisees as it is part of her duty to supervise students in their teaching practice, based on her preferred geographical location of the schools. The three pre-service teachers were allocated to a Band 1, Band 2 and Band 3 school according to their residential addresses. The total number of students in these three classes was 42 (27 males and 15 females), 34 (all males) and 36 (18 males and 18 females) respectively.

The setting

The three pre-service teachers were allocated to three different banding¹ of secondary schools in the same district in Hong Kong for their teaching practice. One of them was allocated to a Band 1 EMI (English as the medium of instruction) co-educational

school, one (the male teacher) to a Band 2 CMI (Chinese as the medium of instruction) boys' school and one taught in a Band 3 CMI co-educational school. The teaching level of all these student teachers was junior secondary level (Forms 1 and 2).

Three classes of students were involved in the study. First, the investigated class of the Band 1 school was a Form 2 class of average academic ability among the five classes of the whole form. For the Form 1 class in the Band 2 school, it was a mixed-ability class with the highest passing rate in the English form test. And in the selected Band 3 school, there were only two Form 2 classes and the involved Form 2 class was slightly higher than the other class in their overall English level.

The data

The data for the present study was the transcripts of three videotaped English lessons. The three lessons taught by the three pre-service teachers were video-recorded and only the whole class teacher-student interactions were transcribed, with the student-student interactions or private talk among the teachers and their students during group, pair or individual work being excluded. The lesson of the Band 1 class was a vocabulary lesson, with its topic about beach, whereas the lessons of the Band 2 and the Band 3 classes were grammar lessons about passive voice and past continuous tense. The total class time of the three lessons is 51 minutes 12 seconds, 49 minutes 47 seconds and 40 minutes 10 seconds respectively, while the total transcribed time in the whole class teaching portion of the lessons is 19 minutes 24 seconds, 22 minutes 56 seconds and 13 minutes 27 seconds respectively.

Data analysis

Teacher questions

To identify the questions asked by the three teachers, like Banbrook (1987), apart

from those beginning with interrogatives, the utterances ended with rising intonation were also treated as questions. Through the quantitative analyses of the lesson transcripts, the number of different types of teacher questions in each sentence of the teachers' utterances were coded, as suggested by Tsui (1995) and Thompson (1997), including 1) yes/no questions, 2) open and closed questions, and 3) display and referential questions, and counted. In order to count the number of different categories of questions easily, the open or referential questions were categorized into the same group, and closed or display questions were also grouped together.

Effects of teacher questions on students' responses

In order to find out the effects of the types of questions the teachers asked on students' production of the target language and the types of responses given, the lesson transcripts were analyzed quantitatively by calculating the average length (that is, the number of words) of the students' responses to the three types of teachers' questions. Similar to Brock's (1986) study, for the purpose of this study, only those responses that immediately followed the teachers' eliciting moves were considered. Once the teachers spoke again, the responses were considered to have ended.

Results and findings

Type(s) of questions the teachers asked frequently in the whole class teaching portion of the lessons

The lesson transcripts of the present study show that in the whole class teaching portion, except for the lesson in the Band 1 school, open and referential questions, which can have more than one acceptable answer and the teacher does not know the answers respectively, were rarely asked. On the contrary, yes/no questions, and closed

and display questions, which have only one acceptable answer and the teacher has already known the answers respectively, were asked frequently. This situation is shown in Table 1 below.

Types of questions asked	Band 1 class	Band 2 class	Band 3 class
Yes/No questions	36 (42.35%)	85 (52.15%)	16 (39.02%)
Closed and display questions	20 (23.53%)	75 (46.01%)	25 (60.08%)
Open and referential questions	29 (34.12%)	3 (1.84%)	0 (0%)
Total no. of questions asked	85	163	41

Table 1 Types of questions the teachers asked in the whole class teaching portion of each lesson

In the Band 1 class, the type of questions asked most frequently by the teacher was yes/no questions (42.35%) that expect mainly some yes/no type responses. For example, “Are you ready for the lesson?”, “So who can tell me err do you like going to the beach?”, etc. Some questions that do not have the grammatical form of yes/no questions but expect yes/no responses were also categorized as yes/no questions. For example, “Alright? OK?”. There were 36 yes/no questions asked by the teacher, followed by 20 closed and display questions, and 29 open and referential questions. The closed and display questions were asked in this lesson mainly to check the students’ knowledge of the vocabulary items. For example, “But how do we call those big chair and then we use it under the umbrella?”. Another example is “In the middle of the sea, you will see a big floating thing. How can we call that?”. For the open and referential questions, they were asked mainly at the beginning of the lesson (that is, the lead-in part of the lesson). For example, the teacher asked the referential question “Why don’t you like going to the beach?” to find out the reasons for the student’s disliking the beach. Some open questions which accept more than one answer were also asked. One example is “So which beach do you think is the best in Hong Kong?”. Lastly, there were some questions asked in this lesson that only aimed to elicit students’ non-verbal react. For example, “Who say yes? Who say no?”. Here, though

the teacher did not know the answers of the questions, she expected students' non-linguistic react only (i.e. raising their hands).

In the Band 2 class, slightly more than half of the questions (85 questions) were yes/no questions that elicited mainly yes/no responses from students. Some of them aimed to check students' progress, for example, "Finished?", but some only aimed to draw students' attention. One of the examples is "It is still the receiver who receives the action and here we change the object to subject. Is this clear?". Nearly half of the questions asked, 75 questions (that is, about 46.01%), belong to the closed and display questions. The closed and display questions were asked in order to check if the students know the answers of the grammar exercise, for example, "How can I change these into passive voice? Err, yes, Andrew?", or to check the students' knowledge of the grammar point, for example, "Who is the receiver receive the action? Which one is the receiver?". Lastly, three referential questions can be found in this lesson, "... How many of you have learnt this in primary school?", "You just said 'are readed' or 'read'?", and "Number 5 is wrong. Number 6 is also wrong. How come?". For the first question, though the teacher did not know the answer, he expected only non-linguistic react from his students (i.e. putting up their hands). In the second question, the teacher did not hear clearly what his student had answered and therefore, asked for clarification. But for the last referential question, the teacher uttered the question probably because he did not know why his students made so many mistakes in the grammar exercise, rather than expecting an answer from the students.

Finally, in the Band 3 class, more than half of the questions asked (25 questions) were closed and display questions. 16 yes/no questions but no open and referential questions were asked. The closed and display questions asked aimed to draw students' attention to the use of the past continuous tense (for example, "From 9 to 10 am last Sunday, what was I doing?") and to check their knowledge of the past continuous

tense (for example, “So which one is the past continuous tense in this sentence?”). Yes/no questions were sometimes asked to draw the students’ attention to what had been written on the blackboard. For instance, the teacher asked “OK. Anything wrong? Any problems with the answers?”.

To sum up, in the whole class teaching portion of the three investigated lessons, yes/no questions, and closed and display questions were frequently asked to check students’ progress and knowledge or to draw their attention to the teaching point. On the contrary, except for the lesson of the Band 1 class, open and referential questions, which elicit longer and often more complex responses, were rarely asked.

Effects of the types of questions teachers asked on the students’ discourse patterns

Previous research, for example, Brock (1986) and Ernest (1994) has generally shown a positive correlation between asking referential questions and students’ production of target language but a negative correlation between asking display questions and the length of students’ responses. The results of the present study show a similar pattern. The effects of different types of questions asked by the three pre-service teachers in the whole class teaching portion on the length of students’ responses are summarized in Table 2 below:

Length of students' responses for different types of questions asked	Band 1 class	Band 2 class	Band 3 class
Yes/No questions			
One word	13 (92.86%)	28 (73.68%)	3 (75%)
Two to three words	1 (7.14%)	5 (13.16%)	1 (25%)
Four to six words	0 (0%)	5 (13.16%)	0 (0%)
Closed and display questions			
Three words or less	5 (100%)	36 (92.31%)	10 (100%)
Four to twelve words	0 (0%)	3 (7.69%)	0 (0%)
Open and referential questions			
Three words or less	4 (36.36%)	N/A	N/A
Four to nine words	7 (63.64%)	N/A	N/A

Table 2 The length of students' responses for different types of questions asked in each lesson

From Table 2, it can be found that students' responses were generally brief when the teachers asked yes/no questions. In the investigated Band 1 class, nearly all the yes/no questions asked (92.86%) elicited one-word responses only (that is, either 'Yes' or 'No'). In only one instance, the yes/no question elicited a two-word response ("Life guard") which was actually the pronunciation of the phrase elicited by the teacher.

In the Band 2 class, again, many of the responses, 28 responses (73.68%) were one-word responses. However, in some instances (10 responses), the yes/no questions produced two-to-three-word responses or even four-to-six-word long. For example, the teacher's yes/no question "Can I move on?" was followed by the students' three-word response "No, you can't". Longer responses produced by the yes/no questions can also be found. One of the examples is "It's absolutely clear what you have to do now? Is everybody clear?" was followed by a student's long response "Write a sentence into passive voice."

Lastly, in the Band 3 class, among the four yes/no questions, three elicited only one-word responses. Only one elicited a three-word response ("No. It's wrong.").

The closed and display questions asked by the three teachers in the whole class

teaching portion of this study also generally elicited brief responses. Excluding the unclear or unintelligible speech, the responses given in Chinese, and the spelling of vocabulary items, all the five responses in the lesson of the Band 1 class elicited by the closed and display questions were of three words or less. For example, “Bench” elicited by the closed/display question “How do we call those big chair and then we use it under the umbrella?”. One more example is the response “Swimming suit” which was elicited by the question “What do you wear on the beach?”.

In the Band 2 class, most of the responses elicited by the closed and display questions (92.31%) were of three words or less. For example, a one-word response “Jason.” was elicited by the closed and display question “Who is the doer?”. Only 3 responses (7.69%) were of four to twelve words. One example is “My bed is cleaned tidied by me every day.” which was elicited by the question “How can I change these into passive voice?”. Another example is “Are bought by me in the tuck shop every day.” elicited by the question “Some snack what?”.

In the Band 3 class, all the closed and display questions elicited short responses of three words or less. Some examples include “Having lunch.” elicited by “1:30 pm. What was I doing?” and “Were climbing.” elicited by the question “So which one is the past continuous tense in this sentence?”.

However, when the open or referential questions were asked, the students’ responses tended to be longer. In the Band 1 class, among the eleven responses elicited by the open and referential questions (the unclear or unintelligible speech is not considered), 63.64% (7 responses) were of four-to-nine-word long, for example, “The water is clean.”, “I think boring. I think it is so boring.”, etc., though 36.36% (4 responses) of them were of three words or less in length such as “Girls.” elicited by the question “What can you see on the beach?”.

To briefly summarize the results, for the effects of the types of questions asked

on students' responses, in all the three investigated lessons, most of the students' responses were very brief, with three words or less when closed and display questions were asked, and with only one word when yes/no questions were asked. Longer responses of four to twelve words could only be found in a few instances of the Band 1 class when open and referential questions were asked.

Discussion

Types of questions the teachers asked frequently in the whole class teaching portion of the lessons

Similar to previous studies such as Burns and Myhill (2004); Myhill, Jones, and Hopper (2006), the results of the present study indicated that except for the Band 1 class, open and referential questions were rarely or even never asked. On the contrary, yes/no questions, and closed and display questions were asked very frequently in all the three lessons, especially in the Band 2 class. Wong-Fillmore (1985, p. 41) claims that "questions which elicit one-word answers are not as good as open-ended ones which call for longer and more complex responses". However, a number of yes/no questions were asked in the Band 1 and Band 2 classes.

The types of questions asked by the three teachers are related to the pedagogical purposes of the lessons and "the nature of the instruction that is being provided" (Banbrook & Skehan, 1989, p. 147). In the present study, the two lessons of the Band 2 and Band 3 classes were grammar lessons while the lesson of the Band 1 class was a vocabulary lesson. In the initial stage of the Band 1 class, the teacher wanted to invite students to talk about if they like going to the beach or not and therefore, some open and referential questions were asked. But then in the subsequent stages of the lesson, the teacher asked a lot of closed and display questions in order to elicit the target

vocabulary items from her students. This phenomenon reflected what Banbrook (1987) suggests that there are clear differences in the number of display questions asked at different stages of the lesson, which is closely related to the nature of teaching activity being engaged in. And, in the Band 2 and Band 3 classes, the teachers asked a lot of closed and display questions in order to draw the students' attention to the correct form (for example, "Notes 'is' or 'are'?" in Lesson 2) and check their knowledge about the target grammatical structure (for example, "So which one is the past continuous tense in this sentence?" in Lesson 3). As suggested by Littlewood (1993), in teaching grammar, before having any communicative language practice, we may often want to engage the learners in practicing the language so that they can focus clearly on the structure itself. This can be achieved through some question-and-answer practice. Here, though the information is known and no real communication is taking place, the major purpose is to enable learners to practice the language structure so that they can use it later in authentic communication.

Effects of the types of questions teachers asked on the students' discourse patterns

From the results of the present study, it can be found that when closed and display questions were asked, the students' responses tended to be very brief (mostly of three words or less). This aspect is consistent with the ethnographic research done by Ernest (1994). In only a very few instances of the Band 2 class, the responses had four to twelve words. However, the long responses were produced by the display questions only because of the long answers of the students' grammar exercise. This can be discovered in one of the responses, for example, "Some snack bought by me in the tuck shop every day."

Thus, to investigate the effects of the types of questions teachers asked on students' discourse, it seems to be inadequate to count only the number of words of the students' responses. In the investigated lesson of the Band 1 class, though seven responses (63.64%) produced by referential questions had four to nine words, they were only slightly longer in length than those produced by display questions. However, these responses were rather simple without giving more elaboration. Some examples include "I think boring. I think it is so boring" produced by the question "Why don't you like going to the beach?" and "The water is clean" produced by "Isaac, you said Clear Water Bay (is the best beach in Hong Kong). Why?".

Smith and Higgins (2006) suggest that in many instances, it may not be the questions asked that determine the amount of student responses but how the teacher responds to the student's answer. This phenomenon can be illustrated in the Band 1 class. In the initial stage of the lesson, the teacher started with some yes/no questions to ask the students if they like going to the beach or not. It is, in fact, the way that the teacher responded to the students' one-word yes/no answers by asking them for clarification (e.g. "Why don't you like going to the beach?") that made the students expand on their responses and produce longer responses.

Implications for education

The results of the present study imply that pre-service teachers should be provided with more training in developing their questioning techniques. Those teachers who teach in higher banding schools or classes with higher language level, in particular, should be able to encourage their students to elaborate further on their responses rather than just accept brief and syntactically simple answers. The investigated Form 2 students in the Band 1 class were supposed to have higher English level and therefore, should be encouraged to give longer and syntactically more complex

responses. To develop teachers' questioning techniques, analyzing lesson transcriptions is a good way to raise teacher trainees' awareness of the types of questions they ask so that they may avoid asking too many yes/no questions which inhibit students' opportunities to develop their second language skills.

Besides these, more referential questions should be asked. As mentioned previously, the types of questions asked are usually determined by the pedagogical purposes of the lessons. However, even in grammar lessons, teachers should not just ask display questions that elicit mainly the answers of grammar drilling exercises. Instead, teachers should design some less controlled but contextualized practice in which they can guide students to give acceptable answers by asking some referential questions. In this way, students' second language development can be facilitated.

Limitations of the study

The major limitations of the present study are summarized as follows:

The first limitation relates to the small number of participants involved in the study. As this study investigated the questions asked by three pre-service teachers in the whole class teaching portion of the three selected lessons, the results were only applicable to the situations that occurred in the three lessons and thus they are by no mean adequate to draw any firm conclusions on this topic.

Another limitation comes from the three investigated classes. Because of the use of nonprobability convenience sampling, the data were obtained from three classes of totally different nature, in terms of the medium of instruction adopted in the schools (English versus Chinese as the teaching medium), and the gender (mixed gender versus single sex), grade level (Form 1 and Form 2) and academic level (Band 1, Band 2 and Band 3) of the students. All these differences might have some impact on how the students responded to their teachers' questions.

Finally, due to logistical constraints of the research and the system as the supervisor of teacher trainees, different topic areas were taught in the three lessons. In this study, one selected lesson was a vocabulary lesson while the other two lessons were grammar lessons. Different types of questions may be asked with different topic areas because of their different pedagogical purposes and teaching activities and therefore, the results may not be comparable.

Conclusions

The present study investigated the questions asked in the whole class teaching portion of three investigated lessons and addressed the effects of the types of questions teachers asked on the students' discourse patterns. The types of questions asked are, in many cases, determined by the pedagogical purposes the teachers want to achieve. However, to facilitate students' second language development, teachers, especially secondary school teachers, should not just ask questions that elicit only brief responses such as the yes/no questions. They should also ask questions that require elaboration and elicit longer and more syntactically complex responses. To bring about more dialogic forms of whole class teaching, students should be encouraged to expand their thinking by justifying or clarifying their opinions in the follow-up moves as well. On the other hand, we should not be too absolute to suggest that there is a positive correlation between asking referential questions and students' production of target language but a negative correlation between asking display questions and the length of students' responses. The referential questions themselves will not make students produce longer responses unless the teachers are able to encourage their students to elaborate further rather than just accepting those brief and syntactically less complex responses.

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Note:

¹ According to the Information Leaflet on the Secondary School Places Allocation System 2005/2007 Cycle, the scaled marks of all students in Hong Kong in their internal assessments at the end of Primary 5, and both in mid-year and at the end of Primary 6 will be put into an order of merit. Then students are equally divided into three Territory Bands (Band 1, Band 2 and Band 3, with Band 1 students having the highest academic level), each consisting of 1/3 of the total number of primary students in Hong Kong.