RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN AN EFL CLASSROOM: AN INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at knowing: 1) types of questions and answers used in an EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom of a Catholic junior high school in the City of Kupang, Indonesia; and, 2) grammatical errors found in the questions and answers used by a teacher and his students in the EFL classroom of the school studied. The research used qualitative research method.Its research subjects were one EFL teacher and his grade VIII students chosen purposively. The instruments used for data collection were interviews and observations done in May, 2016, in the school. The data were analysed descriptively. The result shows that there five types of questions and answers used by the teacher and his students in their EFL classroom dialogues, that is, clarifying questions and answers, relational questions and answers, causal questions and answers, polar questions and answers, and non-polar questions and answers. The errors found in those questions and answers are classified based on the surface taxonomy proposed by Dulay et al. (1982), namely, ommission, misformation, and misordering.

KEYWORDS: questions, answers, EFL classroom, and classroom interaction.

INTRODUCTION

As an important part of formal learning, teachers' meetings with their students in their classrooms are crucial as it is in those classrooms that students develop their cognitive, psichomotoric, and affective competences throughout their lives in and beyond schools. It is, therefore, understandable that what goes on in primary, secondary, and tertiary classrooms has been studied intensively (see, for example, Polancos et al., 2015; Peng & Yang, 2017; Osman, 2017). In terms of English as a school subject, for example, studies on classroom interactionsand 'teacher talk' have been actively done in the last few decades (Tsui, 1995; Hall & Verplaettse, 2000; Kiasi & Hemmati, 2014). It is also the case for the teaching and learning of EFL in general as well as the teaching and learning of EFL writing in particular (Tans and Semiun, 2015; Ibrahim, 2017). However, studies in relation to what goes on in an EFL classrooms in Indonesian secondary classrooms in general, in a junior high school in particular are pretty rare. It is, therefore, important to know what questions and answers go on in such a context as this research has tried to answer. In other words, the question to be answered through this research is how questions and answers are designed and practiced in an EFL classroom so that students' critical and creative thinkings are well-nurtured so that, in turn, they grow well their cognitive, psychomotoric, and affective potentials.

Growing such aspects in an individual is basically an integral part of education as a totality of learning experiences of people during their lifetime organized by both their formal learning experiences in schools and by their informal/nonformal learning experiences beyond schools.It is a process by which people gain understanding of themselves and of their environment.In this context, Laska (1976:3)states that education is an important activity in which human beings engage in such expereinces. This means that educational processes and their role in transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to the next make human societies able to maintain their existence. In short, it can be said that through education, people change or improve their societies.

Educational processes as such are often complex and multi-faced. There are many variables involved in its two major important components, that is, teachers' teaching and their learners' learning that build up a meaningful and effective educational context. However, it is not easy to observe and determine if learning really takes place in a class. Therefore, we have to use many means of checking whether learning really happens or not. Teachers' questions are some examples of these prominent tools in any kind of classroom, including an EFL class, through which learning is evaluated from different perspectives. The outcomes of this process could be revealed in an increasing amount of students' learning.

Within the line of such thoughts, this study intends to examine how teachers' questions influence their students' learning in an EFL classroom, that is, a classroom in a country where English is not a dominant language although the students in such a class share the same language and culture. In some rae cases, their teacher may be the only native English speaker they have exposure to. Outside of their classroom, the students have very few opportunities to use English. For some, learning English may not have any obvious practical benefits. In other words, for the sstudents, exposure to English-speaking culture is very limitted, most often through such means as TV or music programs.

It is, therefore, common to see a main problem of EFL classroom, namely, EFL teachers whousually face non-interactive classrooms where their students are frequently unresponsive and passive in interacting with their teachers or among themselves. Most students keep quiet and do not respond to their teacher's questions. This problem needs to be answered because classroom interactions can bring about many advantages for language learning such as comprehension checks and language practice (Ellis, 1993).

Taking those thoughts into account, this research is aimed at knowing: 1) types of questions and answers used in an EFL classroom dialogue in a junior high school; 2) grammatical errors found in questions and answers used by a teacher and his students in anEFL classroom dialogue in the school. We believe that achieving these aims will help EFL teachers and students alike create more comprehensive EFL interactions that, in turn, help them develop well their potentials, whatever they are.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Questions and answers are common activities in teaching and learning of a school subject, including the teaching and learning of EFL (Widdowson,1978; White & Lightbown, 1984; Wring, 1988).They are included in the so-called classroom interactions that give great opportunities for students to learn and develop (Widdowson, 1978). It is also a good chance for teachers and their students to negotiate meanings through verbal and non-verbal ways of communicating in their class to achieve their learning aims (Long & Sato, 1983; Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992; Ellis, 1993).

In that sense, classroom interaction is an important feature in EFL language instruction for several reasons. First, it provides specific ways for learners to acquire specific language usages. Second, it is an authentic way of communicating between teachers and their students or among students in their classrooms (Chaudron,1988; Dillon, 1988). Third, a good way of interacting between students and their teachers or among students themselves generally results in mutual exchanges of thoughts and meaning negotiations which are substantially important for students to develop their languagelskills and at the same time they modify their speech in such a way that what they say is more comprehensible by their partners in talking (Long & Sato, 1983; Brown& Campione, 1996; Semiun, 2014). Fourth, such interactions would lead students to have greater level of language acquistion (Long & Sato, 1983; Yule, 1985: 136-157),EFL in this context. Fifth, classroom interactions may also help students to be familiar with authentic communications in classroom

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settings, that is, a real kind of communication though which ideas are expressed by the interlocutors (Stern, 1983; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

In order to make students active in asking and/or answering questions so that they may get the benefits in their interactions, it is important that the students actively participate in and beyond their classrooms. It is, therefore, crucial that their teachers apply such teaching methods as audio-lingual method and communicative language teaching methods in such a way that such methods can make the students more active in using the language being learned and taught as a part of what is called learning by doing or students' active participation (Laska, 1976), communicative and task-based leanguage teaching (Wring, 1988; Tsui,1995) as well as students' freedom to learn based on their talent/potentials, interest, and learning needs (Rogers, 1983)

Some studies try to know *why* some students are active or passive in a classroom discussion. They find that such social factors as teachers' and students' age, gender, and culture as well as organizational factors like class sizes and curricullum influence one's active or passive participation in a classroom discussion (Laska, 1976;Chastain, 1998).

Other studies, on the other hand, try to find out *how* students participate in a classroom discussion. They find that classroom interaction represents the process through which teaching and learning are achieved (Stevick, 1982; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000). It is also pointed out that students need a degree of knowledge and competence to participate properly and/or approrpiately in their classrooms (Brown &Campione, 1996).

Students' participation is, of course, shown by, among other things, their ability to ask questions and/or to answer them. In order to be understood by others, such questions, regardless of their levels, that is, from low to higher levels, must be correctly and effectively constructed. To be effective, every question should be designed to ask for any piece of information and every answer to provide the information needed. This means that in every question and answer, there must be a communicative purpose and a piece of information gap to be filled.   Questions that do not serve that prupose will be of little value in language teaching since questions are not asked in vacuum (Ur, 1996: 230).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative one, that is, a type of research in which researchers try to find a phenomenon and describe it in such a way that the phenomenon will then be well-understood (see, for example, Borg and Gall, 1989; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The phenomenon studied in this research is how a teacher and his students interact using certain questions and answers in an EFL classroom.

Its research subjects were one class of grade VIII students of a Catholic junior high school in the City of Kupang, Indonesia and one of their EFL teachers. The grade VIII EFL class that consists of 32 studentswere chosen purposively, that is, for such reasons as the class size which is not too crowded and too small, and their teacher has great understanding of what the researchers want to do in his class.

The research was done in May, 2015. The instruments used to get the data were classroom observations and interviews. The data were analysed descriptively based on the research questions and research aims stated. For error analysis, the researchers used surface taxonomy theory of Dulay *et al.*(1982)

For clarity, the researchers use such code as *T* for teachers and *Ss* for students or *S* for a singular student. In addition, the correct forms of questions and answers are written in brackets.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TYPES OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWER IN AN EFL CLASSROOM

It is found that in the EFL classroom that we have studied, there are five types of questions and answers, that is, clarifying questions and answers, relational questions and answers, causal questions and answers, polar questions and answers, and non-polar questions and answers. It is acknowledged here that the classifications as such are not clear cut, that is, some questions and answers grouped as clarifying, relational, causal and non-polar questions and answers can also be classified as non-polar questions and answers. For example, such sentence as "What is your name?" may be grouped both as a non-polar question and a clarifying question as the person who asks the question needs clarification of the addressee's name. In that

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sense, the classification is quite flexible and it should be seen as a simple way of classifying the questions and answers as they are described below.

Clarifying Questions and Answers

This type of questions and answers is used primarily with an aim ofasking for and/or giving a reason for, clarifying, and/or confirming an existence of something/someone or a process. It is, therefore, common to have questions started with such questions words like *why* and *how* or questions in which students need to have a choice as in questions that use the word *or*. The following Text 1 is an example of a question asking for reasoning.

Text 1

Teacher (T): *Why you cannot see something?* [Why can't you see anything?]

Students (Ss): *Because eyes is closed[Because our eyes are closed]*

The students' answer to the question is logical as they give a reason for not seeing anything when they close their eyes. So, in Text 1, the teacher asks his students why they cannot see "something" and the students say that they cannot see it because their eyes are closed. In that sense, the teacher wants to know their reason for not seeing the object. Since this starts with the question word *why,* this question may also be regarded as a non-polar question to be described later.

In addition, based on the researchers' observation,the teacher also asks questions to lead his students into a topic that is going to be discussed as in the following Text 2.

Text 2

T   : *Killer or Keller?*

Ss   : *Killer (Indonesian: pembunuh), Keller (someone's name).*

In asking his students the question as such,the teacherwants to check his students' understanding of the difference between *Killer and Keller.* In other words, he wants them to choose which one is correct: Killer or Keller. The students answer their teacher correctly by saying that*killer* means *pembunuh* (in Indonesian)*,* whereas *Keller* means *someone's name.*

Text 2 is also related to the following Text 3, that is, the teacher wants to know how his students know that a thing is a book without seeing it. So, he asks them how they know that the thing is a book. The students say that it is because they can feel it.

Text 3

T   : How do you know that is a book?

Ss   : Can feel it.

Relational Questions and Answers

Relational questions are designed to look at the relationship between two or more variables. In the context of our research, the variables are related to classroom interactions in EFL teaching and learning as in Text 4 below.

Text 4

T   : Have you read the text?

Ss   : Yes!

In Text 4, the teacher wants his students to be related to "the text" that they are going to discuss, that is, a text on Helen Keller. In other words, in asking his students the question, the teacher does not really want to check them whether they have read the text or not. What he basically wants is to lead his students to the text, that is, how familiar they are with the text to be read soon.Therefore, the question given/asked has the purpose of relating his students to something that will be done.

This is also the case for Text 5 below. A dialogue is created in order to find out a relationship between two or more variables.

Text 5

T   : *What is the title of the text?*

Ss   : *The Story of Helen Keller.*

In Text 5, the teacher's question has been designed to relate his students to the text that they are supposed to read. In other words, his purpose is to relate the question with the topic that they are discussing. In that sense,the teacher does not mean to check whether his students know the title or not but it is simply to relate what they are readingto what they are going to discuss. This is also true for the following Text 6.

Text 6

     T   : *What is the suitable question for the sentence [Helen Keller was a famous American]?*

     Ss   : (*No answer*)

In Text 6, the teacher's question aims at relating his students to the text which is being read. In that sense, the teacher does not mean to ask his students to construct a question based on this sentence: *Helen Keller was a famous American*. What he basically wants is that by constructing a "suitable question for the sentence," the students are able not only to show their comprehension of the text but alsoto link them to the topic. Since the students fail to answer him, the teacher knows that they are not able to link themselves to the topic being discussed.

Causal Questions and Answers

     Causal questions are designed to determine whether certain variables have an effect to one or more variables measured or discussed about as in the following Text 7.

Text 7

     T   : *When you close your eyes, can you feel something in your bag? Can you feelwhat you take?*

     Ss   : *Book!*

In Text 7, the teacher wants to know the effect of his students' book touching when closing their eyes and touching anything in their school bags. In other words, these two questionshave been designed to find out what effects the students have when they touch something at the time their eyes are closed or blind like Hellen Keller, their reading text topic. Those questionsare called causal ones because they need an answer which is related toan effect of an action (cause-effect relationship); in the context of Text 7, its cause is *feeling something* and its effect is *knowing what the object is*, that is,*abook*.

     Another example of a causal question and answer can be seen in the following Text 8.

Text 8

     T   : *Can you see something?*

     Ss   : *No*

     T   : *Why?*

     S-1   : *Dark*

In Text 8, the teacher knows that they cannot see enything when they close their eyes. Yet, he wants to know why they cannot see anything. By asking both questions, he wants to relate the students' condition to the fact that they cannot see anything. It turns out, as Text 8 shows, the students believe that the effect of closing their eyes is "darkness" (a cause) that results in seeing nothing (an effect).

Polar Questions (Yes/No Questions) and Answers

     Polar questions or closed questions are questions thathave to be answered by "Yes" or "No" plus one or more statements depending on the questions. This is why they are also called "Yes-No Questions." Our data obtained during our research show that the EFL teacher asked his students the following questions in his EFL classes:

     Have you read the text?

     Mario, can you read the text?

     Mario, can you retell the text after you read it?

     Can you close your eyes?

     Can you see anything?

     Can you feel anything in your bag?

     Can you feel what you take?

     Can you see that book?

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A complete picture of such polar questions can be seen in the following Text 9.

Txt 9

T		*: Have you read the text?*
Ss		*: Yes*
T		*: Can you feel something in your bag?*
Ss		*: Book.*

In Text 9, both questions need 'Yes'or 'No' answers, that is, "Yes, we have" or "Yes, we have read the text" for the first question and "Yes, we can" or "Yes, we can feel somtehing in our bag." For an informal English, however, it is quite common to simply say "Yes!" as in the text or "No!" It is also quite common not to use "Yes-No" answer in informal dialogues by mentioning directly what is supposed to be related to the question as in the students' answer in Text 9, that is, "Book," to the question, *Can you feel something in your bag?*If the anwer is negative, then its structure is as follows: "No, we haven't" (short answer) or "No, we have not read the text" (long answer). For the second question, the answers will be: "No, we can't" (short answer) or "No, we cannot feel anything in our bag" (long answer).

Non-Polar Questions (Wh-Questions)and Answers

Unlike "Yes-No" or polar questions, non-polar questions use interrogative words, that is, five Ws and one H (that is, *what, who, where, when, which*, and *how*) in asking questions. This is why they are called "Wh-" questions. The questions of this type used by the EFL teacher in our research are as follows:

Who is absent today?

Why you cannot see something?

Why?

How do you know that it is a book?

What is the title of the text?

Who can read the paragraph 1?

A complete use of the non-polar questions can be seen in the following Text 10a/b.

Text 10a

T		: *What is the suitable question for the sentence?*
Ss		: - (*no answer*)
T		: *What does the word " famous" mean?*
Ss		: *Terkenal (Indonesian: famous)*
T		: *What is "write"?*
Ss		: *Menulis (*Indonesian: *write)*
T		:What is writer?
Ss		: *Penulis (Indonesian: writer)*

Text 10b

T		*: Who is absent today?*
Ss		*: Ihsan, Tessa.*
T		*: Why you cannot see something[Why can't you see anything?]*
Ss		*: Because our eyes is closed [Because our eyes are closed]*
T		*: Why?*
Ss		*: Dark.*
T		*: How do you know that it is a book?*
Ss		*: [We] feel it.*

Both Text 10a and Text 10b show how the EFL teacher uses non-polar questions in interacting with his students. As the texts show, his students seem to have no problem in understanding his questions as they are able to answer him correctly and logically despite the fact that they do not always use complete answers, a phenomenon which is quite common in EFL classrooms.

GRAMMATICAL ERRORS OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM STUDIED

The grammatical errors found in the questions andanswers in the EFL classroom studied between a teacher and his students are classified based onsurface taxonomy proposed by Dulay et al., namely,omission, addition, misformation and misordering(1982: 146). Addition, however, is not included here because there is no data that show addition errors in our research.

Omission

According to Dulay *et al.* (1982: 154), omission is a type of error in which some part of a word, phrase or a sentence is absent or omitted asin the following Text 11.

Text 11

    T   : *Who is absent today?*

    Ss   :*Ihsan, Tessa***.**

Text 11 shows that the students omit some parts of their answers as they should say, for example, "*Ihsan and Tessa are absent today."* In that sense, what is omitted is *and, are, absent,* and *today*. This is also the case when the students simply answer "Yes" to the question, "*Have you read the text?"* by simply saying "Yes," the students have omitted *we, have, read, the,* a*nd text* (Text 9).

Misformation

Misformation is a kind of errorin which false forms of a morpheme or a structure are used (Dulay*et al.,* 1982: 160). In that sense, there are some kinds of misformation errors found in this research, that is, the teacher and his students use questions and answers with some mosformations as in the following Text 12.

Text 12

    T   : *What is "write"?*

    Ss   : *Menulis [Indonesian: to write)*

The first error in the text is the interrogative sentence which is incomplete that makes it quite hard for the listener to understand. Actually, the question should be:*What is the Indonesian word for"write"?*

The second misformation error can be seen in the followingText 13.

Text 13

    T   :*What is writer?*

    Ss   : *Penulis* (Indonesian: writer).

In Text 13, what is supposed to be the teacher's question, based on our obersvation, is asking his students definition of the word *writer.* In that sense, the question should be: *What is the definition ofwriter?* Or, who is a writer? So, the error of this dialogue is on teacher's question,*What is writer?* If the teacher wants to ask his students the meaning of the word *writer* in Indonesian, the correct form of the question,therefore,should be this:*What is the Indonesian meaning of the word writer?*

Misordering

Misordering is an error in which phrases and or words in a sentence are ordered falsely in terms of a good English structure. In other words, it is a type of error characterized by incorrect placement of a morpheme or a group of morpheme in an utterance/sentence (Dulay et al., 1982:162). In our research, misordering error has occured once, that is, during the dialogue between the teacher and his students in their EFL classroom. The error of misordering can be seen in the following Text 14.

Text 14

    T   : *Why you cannot see something?*

    Ss   : *Because our eyes are closed*

The error of this dialogue is related to the teacher's question in which the placement of modal auxiliary*can*and the word *not* is incorrect. As an interrogative sentence, the structure of this question should be:*question word + modal auxiliary + subject + not + first form of verb + object* or *question word + modal auxiliary + not +subject + first form of verb + object*. Thus, the correct question is:"*Why can you not see anything?* or "*Whycannot you see anything?*

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CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that English is a foreign language in Indonesia, that is, it is not widely used in every day lives of Indonesian people, the language is widely taught and learned all over the country. In teaching and learning it, EFL teachers and their students use the language in their classroom interactions to express their ideas, feelings, complaints and many more purposes. The interactions can also be in the forms of asking and answering questions between teachers and their students, among teachers and students themselves as the focus of this research.

It is found that there five types of questions and answers used by the teacher and his students in their EFL classroom dialogues, that is, questions and answers intended to clarify, questions and answers to show relationship, questions and answers to show cause and effect, questionsthat need "Yes" or "No" answers, questions that start with question words (that is, *who, what, when, where, why,* and *how*). In general, the questions and answers are well-constructed. In some cases, however, there are some errorsfound in those questions and answers, namely, some words/phrases/sentences are falsely formed, omitted uncessarily, and incorrectly ordered.

In addition to those major findings, it is also interesting to point out here that the students and their teacher are not that active in asking and answering questions in their EFL classrooms. Our data indicate that most of the questions are produced by the EFL teacher, whereashis students literally asked no question at all. It is good that they answer most of their teacher's questions, yet they have no effort to ask him a question. It is also interesting to state here that the students mostly answer their teachers' questions collectively, not individually.

The question is why it happens or how we can motivate the students to be more active in asking questions and/or answering their teacher's questions individually; questions that should be answered to make the students more successful in their learning, EFL or other school subjects. This study, however, does not discuss the issues as they are not included in the topic of our research and discussion. Further research is, therefore, needed to tackle the issues which, we think, are important to develop students' critical and creative thinkings, two ways of thinking necessary not only for an individual student'sgrowth and success but also, through those students, for a nation to develop better towards its destiny. It is crucial because a nation would never be well-developed if it has no critical and creative thinking habits.

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