

EFL Learners' Speaking Development: Asking Referential Questions (Pembangunan Pertuturan Pelajar EFL: Pertanyaan Soalan Rujukan)

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ABSTRACT

With the growing interest in interaction in EFL classes, referential questions play an important role in this regard. This study, a quasi-experimental pretest and posttest design, aims at investigating the effect of asking referential questions on the oral production of a group of lower intermediate male students ($N = 16$) who were learning English in Iran. The students' performance in pretest and posttest was audio-recorded, and then by listening to the students' voice by the experimental group teacher, the number of words produced by every student in pretest and posttest was counted. The time during which the students talked about the topics before and after asking referential questions was also calculated in minutes. The results reveal that: (i) asking referential questions increased talk time and number of words produced by the learners and therefore improved their speaking ability, and (ii) the students in experimental group produced more words and talked longer than the students in control group. In conclusion, the finding of this study suggests that particular types of questions, called referential questions, increase learners' oral proficiency in classroom.

Keywords: Question, referential question, interaction, wait-time

ABSTRAK

Dengan minat yang semakin meningkat dalam interaksi di dalam kelas English Foreign Language (EFL), soalan rujukan memainkan peranan penting dalam hal ini. Kajian ini berbentuk kuasi eksperimen ujian dan ujian pasca ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti kesan pertanyaan soalan rujukan antara kumpulan pelajar lelaki menengah rendah ($N = 16$) yang belajar bahasa Inggeris di Iran. Prestasi pelajar dalam ujian pra dan ujian pasca dikaji dengan menggunakan rakaman audio. Guru akan membuat eksperimen di mana di mana bilangan kata yang dihasilkan oleh setiap pelajar dalam ujian pra dan ujian pasca dikira. Masa di mana pelajar bercakap mengenai topik sebelum dan selepas guru bertanya soalan juga dikira dalam beberapa minit. Hasil kajian mendapati (i) pelajar meminta soalan-soalan rujukan untuk meningkatkan masa bercakap dan bilangan kata yang dihasilkan oleh pelajar dan secara langsung meningkatkan keupayaan bercakap mereka, dan (ii) pelajar dalam kumpulan eksperimen menghasilkan lebih banyak perkataan dan bercakap lebih lama daripada pelajar dalam kumpulan kawalan. Kesimpulannya, penemuan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa jenis soalan tertentu yang dipanggil soalan rujukan dapat meningkatkan kemahiran lisan pelajar di dalam bilik darjah.

Kata kunci: Soalan, soalan rujukan, interaksi, masa menunggu

INTRODUCTION

Achieving proficiency in oral communication (speaking) is a dream for most students in English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classes (Richards & Renandya 2002). Providing students with as many opportunities to practice the language orally as possible is from Vilímec's (2006) point of view, an essential aspect of teaching this productive skill. One effective way to increase oral participation in speaking classes is to ask referential questions creating propitious circumstances enabling students to be more productive. Long and Sato (1983), Van Lier

(1988) and Brock (1986) maintained that referential questions by teachers may create discourse which can produce a flow of information from students to the teacher and may create a more near-normal speech.

The main purpose of the study is to consider whether the reticence of lower intermediate level language learners to participate in lessons, due to their poor language ability, could be overcome by asking referential questions that require their opinions and comments. Therefore, the present study addresses the following questions:

1. Do asking referential questions have any effect on the student's talk time and number of words produced?
2. Is there any difference between students' talk time and number of words produced in both experimental and control groups?

BACKGROUND

Interaction is used in a general sense in this study, referring to any sort of interaction, student-student or teacher-student discussions, group discussions, and any type of classroom participation (Long & Sato 1983). Van Lier (1996) stated that interaction is a key factor in the L2/EFL curriculum and helps a teacher to effectively teach a class. Teacher questions, as a kind of input provided by a teacher (Hasan 2006), form an integral part of classroom interaction (Ho 2005). Questioning plays an important role in language acquisition, because language learners mostly have the opportunity to participate when they are asked the question (Ozcan 2010). According to Wajnryb (1992, p. 47), teachers' questions were categorized as follows:

1. Yes/No questions, e.g. 'Here is a picture of woman. Have you seen her face before?'
2. Short answer/ retrieval-style questions, e.g. 'What did she say about the film?'
3. Open-ended questions, e.g. 'Whom could he have telephoned?'
4. Display questions (questions requesting information already known to the questioner), e.g. 'What color is this pen?'
5. Referential questions (questions requesting new information), e.g. 'What did you study at university?'
6. Non-retrieval, imaginative questions (questions that do not require the learner to retrieve given information but instead call on inferred information or information in which an opinion judgment is called for), e.g. 'What do you think the writer was suggesting by making the central character an animal?'

Referential questions have no one specific answer, but are therefore used to instigate genuine communication. The purpose behind asking this type of question is to allow students

to express opinions and exchange information (Ellis 1994; Thompson 1997; Thornbury 1996; Richards & Lockhart 1996).

Ozcan (2010) indicated that referential questions encourage more participation in the classroom, since the answers to such questions are not limited and they create an environment in the classroom where the students can express themselves, their opinions and ideas. Such questions enable students to practice language more and produce longer utterances.

Increasing the amount of time for students to talk in the classroom through teachers' directed questions is important. Biggs and Tang (2007) concluded that wait-time encourages reflective thinking. While factual recalls may be prompt, higher level and deeper learning can only result from critical thinking for which sufficient wait-time might be allowed. This can be interpreted to mean that questions relating to higher learning taxonomy levels would require longer wait-times.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was a quasi-experimental pretest and posttest design. The rationale behind using such a design lies on the fact that there was no random selection of participants in the institute because of the strict imposed limitation, although all the students were at lower intermediate levels. The participants were divided into experimental and control groups. Each group consisted of eight students. The participants in both groups were in the 15th level of the institute. This level is called "Wr.1".

PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted in a lower intermediate 12-session EFL course in Iran, where English language is not spoken out of classroom. The students, who participated in this study, were 16 male students, studying English at an English language Institute in Mazandaran. The students were at the lower intermediate level of English proficiency, which is equivalent to IELTS 3.5. In addition, they came from an urban environment and their ages ranged from 13 to 16 years. Both teachers and students' first language

was Persian, which is the standard language of the country. The two teachers were 32 and 37 years of age and had experience in teaching for about 10 and 13 years, respectively. They had master's degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. All the students approved the consent form for participating in this study.

INSTRUMENTATION

The participants' ability on English speaking performance both at the pretest and posttest stage was measured by an oral (speaking) test by the second researcher. Data were collected through audio-recorded lessons. Hopkins (2002) stated the advantages and disadvantages of audio recording and the former are: 1) It successfully monitors all conversations; 2) it provides sufficient material and 3) it is versatile – can be transported. However, the latter are: 1) It does not record silent activities and 2) it can disturb pupils due to its presence. In order to record the students' voice well and clearly, the researcher used three cell phones, Nokia N79, Huawei G700 and LG e 405. She put one of them on the teacher's desk, the other one on the first bench in the first student bench row, and the third cell phone on the last student bench row. All of them were on the airplane mode and frequently monitored to serve the purpose of this study. However, students' gestures were important in speaking and could not be recorded but observed by the teacher; the cell phones were small and placed in a proper place not to distract students' attention. The referential questions that the teacher asked about the topics "Education", "Languages" and "Neighborhood", were chosen from the book "IELTS Maximiser Educational Book" (Memarzadeh 2012).

PROCEDURE

A pretest was administered to both groups in order to capture the differences between the two groups. The second researcher instructed the experimental group herself through the intervention described below. The students in this group not only were taught how to write paragraphs, but also were given some class activities to help them develop speaking skills. In order to improve their speaking ability as well

as writing skill, the intervention was given to this group. After the intervention for 12 sessions, a posttest was administered to determine the degree of any change in learning in the experimental group. The control group was taught by another female teacher, though the second researcher observed the control class for 6 sessions to see if the teacher was not providing additional materials on speaking. The control group received no intervention provided for experimental one and the students were only taught how to write paragraphs. However, this group was also given a posttest after 12 sessions. The procedure is composed of two subcategories: Preparation phase and Intervention noted below. The cycle of preparation and intervention for the participants of the study totally took for about 5 hours and 40 minutes.

Preparation Phase

The purpose of the present study was to encourage lower intermediate students to use their English language knowledge in practice and speak in the classroom. In order to encourage the students to talk in English, it was helpful to familiarize them with some speaking strategies to interact with each other effectively. These strategies were explained to the students along with examples clearly. For instance, students were taught how to agree or disagree with other students' opinions politely. These strategies were taken from the book "On Target 1" (Purpura & Pinkley 1991). The preparation phase was provided in Table 1 showing the number of sessions, strategies and strategy instruction, which took about three sessions (90 minutes) to be completed.

In order to teach these eight strategies in session one (agreeing and disagreeing), in session two (asking for agreement, making generalizations and asking for advice) and in session three (giving advice, expressing preferences and expressing surprise or disbelief), the teacher followed three steps: i) she called students' attention to the language needed to express the strategies; ii) she provided an example to help students have better understanding of the language; and iii) after providing the example, she asked students to

work in groups of three and share their opinions about the topics introduced by the teacher using the language provided.

TABLE 1. Strategy instruction

Sessions	Strategies	Strategy Instruction	Time of Instruction (minutes)
1	Agreeing	Providing the language needed to agree with somebody or something; Providing an example; and Giving students a topic to speak like the example	30
	Disagreeing	Providing the language needed to disagree with somebody or something; Providing an example; and Giving students a topic to speak like the example	
2	Asking for Agreement	Providing the language needed to ask for agreement; Providing an example; and Giving students a topic to speak like the example	30
	Making Generalizations	Providing the language needed to make generalizations; Providing an example; and Giving students a topic to speak like the example	
	Asking for Advice	Providing the language needed to ask for advice; Providing an example; and Giving students a topic to speak like the example	
3	Giving Advice	Providing the language needed to give advice; Providing an example; and Giving students a topic to speak like the example	30
	Expressing Preferences	Providing the language to express preferences; Providing an example; and Giving students a topic to speak like the example	
	Expressing Surprise or Disbelief	Providing the language to express surprise or disbelief; Providing an example; and Giving students a topic to speak like the example	

Intervention

In order to apply interactional strategies in the experimental group, the following stages were taken in the intervention. The stages on group work (brainstorming the topic) and posing referential questions were administered during nine sessions. Before providing the detailed explanation for the students, the lesson plan (see Table 2) including asking referential questions was presented to the students. Table 2 has four columns. Column one has nine sessions in a

row, column two focuses on the group work, column three focuses on posing the referential questions and column four represents the amount of time spent on speaking each session. The lesson plan includes two stages: Group work and posing referential questions acted out by the teacher. This lesson plan was adopted from Brock (1986). The narrative for each of the nine intervention sessions is provided in Appendix 1 due to space constraint.

TABLE 2. Lesson plan

Sessions	Group Work (Brainstorming the Topic)	Posing Referential Questions	Time of Speaking (in minute)
1	Introducing the topic “Education” and asking the students to brainstorm it		37:30
2		Posing referential questions about “Education” by the teacher	44:33
3		Posing referential questions about “Education” by the teacher	25:50
4		Posing referential questions about “Education” by the teacher	20:15
5		Posing referential questions about “Education” by the teacher	13:22
6	Introducing the topic “Languages” and asking the students to brainstorm it		15:30
7		Posing referential questions about “Languages” by the teacher	38:45
8	Introducing the topic “Neighborhood” and asking the students to brainstorm it		28:26
9		Posing referential questions about “Neighborhood” by the teacher	47:10

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most important factor within an effective EFL course is student participation. Students need to be stimulated by referential questions. One of the most common methods and appealing activities in facilitating student participation is asking questions by teachers (Özcan, 2010). Therefore, to maintain student participation, the researcher posed a variety of referential questions to involve students in classroom interaction. The total number of questions asked in nine executive sessions was 66. The teacher's questions and the students' answers were audio-recorded. After collecting data, the researcher listened to the audio-recorded lessons many times and transcribed them in a detailed way. To analyze the tests, this study used a Paired Samples T-test and an Independent Samples T-test to assess each research question for the 16 participants who had completed both pre and posttest measures.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

The first research question of this study focuses on whether asking referential questions has any effect on the students' talk time and number of words produced. The descriptive statistics of the two sets of scores is presented in Table 3. The means of the pretests and posttests are 17.65, 66.76 for the talk time and 41.69, 79.30 for the number of words produced, respectively.

As can be seen in Table 3, the results of the paired-samples t-test found a significant difference between pre and posttest scores for the talk time ($M = 17.65$, $SD = 1.80$; and $M = 66.76$, $SD = 9.34$, respectively), $t(7) = 18.21$, ($p < .05$) and also for the number of words produced ($M = 41.69$, $SD = 15.10$; and $M = 79.30$, $SD = 20.28$, respectively), $t(7) = 13.05$, ($p < .05$). According to Table 3, the obtained p-Value is less than .05 for both the talk time and number of words produced. This finding suggests that asking referential questions increased student talk time and number of words produced, and improved lower intermediate students' speaking skill.

TABLE 3. Descriptive information and the results of paired-samples t-test in the pre-test and post-test ($n = 8$) and statistics for pre-post comparison

	Pre-test		Post-test		t-Value	p-Value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Experimental Talk Time	17.65	1.80	66.76	9.34	18.21	.00
Experimental Word number	41.69	15.10	79.30	20.28	13.05	.00
df			7			

One of the main functions of the teacher’s questioning behavior was observed to be the turn allocation. Students who were less likely to participate were usually encouraged, or forced, to speak when *asked* to speak. Questions were also a means at teacher's disposal to distribute turns fairly among all the students, who were less confident or shy, but they could also participate when the teacher allotted them a turn. Aligned with the finding of this study, Shore (1994) maintained that this turn allocation reinforces the teacher’s control of classroom talk though paradoxically, and it is intended to encourage the participation of all students.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

The second research question of this study focuses on the differences between students’ talk time and number of words produced in both experimental and control groups. The descriptive statistics of the two sets of scores is presented in Table 4. The means of the posttests for the experimental and control groups considering Talk Time are 66.76 and 17.81 and the means of the posttests for the experimental and control groups considering the number of words are 79.30 and 42.16, respectively.

TABLE 4. The descriptive statistics for the posttest scores of the two groups considering talk time and the number of words

	Experimental		Control		p-Value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Posttest Talk Time	66.76	9.34	17.81	1.90	< .05
Posttest Word	79.30	20.28	42.16	15.02	< .05

The results of the independent samples t-test are presented in Table 5 showing that the obtained p-Value is less than .05 for the talk time of the control and experimental groups ($t(14) = 14.51, p < .05$), meaning that there has been a statistically significant difference between the two sets of scores. The obtained p-Value is also less than .05 for the number of words produced by the control and experimental groups ($t(14) =$

4.16, $p < .05$), meaning that there has been a statistically significant difference between the two sets of scores. Therefore, drawing on the results from Table 5, there was a difference between control and experimental groups on the student talk time and number of words produced. The students in the experimental group produced more words and talked longer than the students in the control group.

TABLE 5. The results of the independent samples t-test for the comparison of the posttest scores of the two groups considering the talk-time and the number of words

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				
		df	M	t-Value	p-Value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post-test Talk Time	Equal variances assumed	14	-48.94	14.51	.00	.00
	Equal variances not assumed	7.58	-48.94	14.51		.00
Post-test Word	Equal variances assumed	14	-37.13	4.16	.29	.00
	Equal variances not assumed	12.90	-37.13	4.16		.00

The results of this study are in line with Ozcan (2010), who in a separate study indicated that referential questions increased student participation and talk time by means of longer responses during reading lessons in lower level classes. The results are also in line with Brock (1986) who contends that referential questions increase the amount of speaking in the classroom. While asking questions, the teacher repeated her questions several times whether the same person or another one was asked. This is considered as a pseudo-wait time, providing an opportunity for a student to think twice about the question. Biggs and Tang (2007) suggest that wait-time encourages reflective thinking. While factual recalls may be prompt, higher level and deeper learning can only result in critical thinking for which sufficient wait-time might be allowed. This can be interpreted to mean that questions that relate to higher learning taxonomy levels would require longer wait-time.

CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to examine the effect of asking referential questions on the number of words produced by EFL learners and the amount of time spent on discussing different topics through asking referential questions. The results of the study showed that students produced more words in posttest than pretest. For instance, student one produced twenty five words about the topic “Education” in pretest

without being asked any referential questions, but after asking referential questions, this number increased to one hundred and fifty three words. The results also showed that the time spent on discussing the topics increased after asking referential questions.

For example, before asking any questions about the topic “Education”, the students talked about it for about thirty seven minutes, but after asking different referential questions about the topic, they talked for approximately one hundred and four minutes. In this study, it was also found that when different questions about a specific topic were posed to the class, more students were willing to talk. In fact, every student in the class wanted to answer the questions and express his ideas. Hence, the time of speaking and student participation increased considerably. The most obvious implication for the use of interaction-based instruction (asking referential questions) would be for language teachers and language learners. As a case in point, teachers can use more referential questions to improve the learners’ conversation performance and develop their interest in English language learning, especially their speaking ability.

Further investigations are still needed to shed more light on the issues contributing to this area of study. For instance, for the sake of generalizability, it would have been better if the study could be conducted with more than one teacher and more than one class in each proficiency level. Furthermore, it would be

fruitful to collect the data for a longer period in a longitudinal fashion to increase its generalizability. On the other hand, the present study can be conducted on each gender separately to see whether the results would change according to each particular gender or not. This study could be conducted through using an experimental design involving two treatment groups to determine which one of the two treatment groups leads to a higher oral fluency. This kind of study can also be done within or among learners with different proficiency levels. Another study worth pursuing is to consider the effects that display and referential questions may have on the complexity of the students' responses at different levels through an experimental design.

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APPENDIX 1: 9-session intervention

First session lasted about thirty eight minutes, and the teacher introduced the topic “Education” and asked the students to brainstorm it. If the students did not know some words in English during brainstorming the topic or if they had some problems while speaking or when they were not sure about the structures of their sentences, they could ask their teacher or their classmates for help. Sometimes the teacher wrote some new words regarding the topic on the whiteboard and the students took notes. For example, the teacher wrote the words “illiterate”, “impolite”, “absence”, “elementary school”, and some other words on the board. Sometimes she had to correct the students’ mistakes. For instance, most students used to say “*saying jokes*” instead of “*telling jokes*”. Of course, the teacher did not speak about the topic herself. She let the students talk about it themselves and she just answered their questions or corrected their mistakes.

Second session lasted about forty five minutes, and the teacher posed different referential questions about the topic after all the students discussed the topic “Education”. After asking every question, the teacher provided a model answer herself and then she gave the students some time to think about the question. Afterwards, she asked a good student to answer the question. Next, she posed the question to the other students in the classroom in order to involve all of them into conversation. Seven questions regarding “Education” were posed to the students. The first question, “Can you tell me a little about your education?” led to three sub-questions, “What grade are you in? What school do you go to? Is it a public or a private school?”. The second question, “What is your field of study?” led to the sub-question, “When do you choose your field of study?” The third question was, “What are some school subjects?” In this part, the teacher made a distinction between *practical* and *theoretical* subjects. She also helped the students and wrote the names of some subjects on the board. The fourth question, “What subjects do you find most interesting/ what are your favorite subjects? Why do you like them?” led to two sub-questions, “How good are you at English? How well can you solve math problems?”. The fifth question, “What subjects do you find most difficult to pass?” led to the sub-question, and “What do you do to pass the subjects?” The sixth question was, “Have you ever failed a lesson during your school year?” The seventh question, “Are your present subjects relevant to you future major?” led to two sub-questions, “What is your favorite major at university/ what are you going to study at university? What do you want to be in the future?”. Here, the teacher had to make a distinction between *major* and *subject*.

Third session lasted about twenty six minutes, and another three questions about “Education” were asked. The first question, “Can you tell me about your educational goals?” led to the sub-questions, “Do you want to continue your studies?, Do you want to get your BA/MA/PhD? and What subject is very important to your future major?”. The second question, “Do you want to continue your studies abroad?” led to the sub-question, “What country do you like to study in?” and the third question, “Do/Did you have any teachers of special significance?” led to the sub-question, “Was/Is you teacher strict/bad-tempered/supportive/kind?”

Fourth session lasted about twenty minutes, and two more questions about “Education” were posed. The first question in this session was, “What do you like best about your school days? The second question, “What are your study habits?” led to nine sub-questions, “When do you usually do your homework or study your lessons?, How long do you study?, Can you study when the TV is on or when the other people are speaking?, Do you study in your bedroom?, Can you study early in the morning before you go to school?, Do you study after you come back home from school?, Do you take a nap after school?, Do you take a break when you are studying?, and Do you eat or drink something when you are studying?”

Fifth session lasted about fourteen minutes, and the last two questions about “Education” were asked. The first question, “What is the schooling system like in your country?” led to five sub-questions, “How many years do the students study at primary/high school?, How old are the students when they start primary/secondary education?, How many years does it take the students to finish secondary/primary school?, How do the students go to university? and Do the students pay any tuition fee to finish primary/secondary education?”. In this part, the teacher explained the primary, secondary and higher education to the students. The second question which was the last question about “Education” included,

“How are the students evaluated in your country?”

Sixth session lasted about sixteen minutes, and the topic “Languages” was brainstormed in the same way as the first session. While brainstorming the topic, the teacher wrote some new words like “an international language” or “abroad” on the whiteboard and the students took notes. Sometimes she had to correct the students’ mistakes. For instance, she told students to say, “Farsi is spoken at home” instead of “Farsi is speaking at home.” Like the first session, the teacher did not speak about the topic herself. She let the students talk about it themselves and she just answered their questions or corrected their mistakes.

Seventh session lasted about thirty nine minutes, and eleven questions about “Languages” were posed to the students. The first question was, “What language do you speak at home/school?” The second question was, “What is the first language in your country?” The third question, “How many languages can you speak?” led to the sub-question, “How well can you speak English/Arabic?” The fourth and fifth questions were: “What languages are taught at school?” and what language do you like most to learn? Why?” The sixth question, “What do you do to improve English?” led to the sub-question, “Who uses his dictionary as often as possible?” The seventh question, “At what age English instruction was included in the education system of Iran?” led to the sub-question “How old were you when you started learning English?” The eighth, ninth and tenth questions were, “Which English skill do you find easiest to learn? Why do you think so?” In your opinion, what is the most challenging part of learning English? And when did you first start learning English?” The last question about “Languages”, “How do you plan to use your English in the future?” led to the sub-question, “Do you want to continue your studies after getting a diploma in English?”

Eighth session lasted about twenty nine minutes, and the topic “Neighborhood” was brainstormed similar to the first and sixth sessions. The teacher wrote some new words including “move out” or “greener” on the whiteboard and students took notes. She also corrected the students’ mistakes. For instance, the students were told to use the sentence, “I have lived in my neighborhood for about fourteen years” instead of “I lived in my neighborhood for about fourteen years.”

Ninth session lasted about forty seven minutes, and the last topic “Neighborhood” was dealt with in the classroom. Nine questions were posed in this session. These questions were, “How do you describe your neighborhood? How long have you lived in your neighborhood? Have you seen a lot of changes during this time? Do you like the place where you live?, Do you like your neighborhood? Why or Why not?, What do you think your neighborhood is missing?, What do you like best about your neighborhood?, Is there anything that you don’t like about your neighborhood?, How do you think your neighborhood could be improved?, and What are your neighbors like?”. When asking the question, “What are your neighbors like?” and the teacher wrote some adjectives describing neighbors on the white board.

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