Teachers' Voice in Lesson Plan: What EFL Teachers Consider When Formulate Teacher Questions

He Fang and Supyan Hussin

Abstract — It is teachers' belief that engaging students in smooth interaction is decisive to successful EFL teaching. There are many an aspect in relation to how to get students involved in classroom learning activities, where teacher questions remain a big part as they may influence whether students are willing to respond. Serving as a cognitive tool in pedagogical contexts, questions have been highly valued in classroom interaction. The present study focuses on how EFL teachers perceive teacher questions and what they may consider when formulate teacher questions to ensure interactive learning. A group of six EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers from a university in southern China were invited to assemble and brainstorm. And a thematic analysis was illustrated based on their transcribed discussion. Results suggest that current events around us surprisingly do have a say when teachers try to look for some connections with the teaching contents during the course of planning a question. Besides, the possibilities of triggering classroom interaction count a lot as teachers would predict the effects of teaching and learning. Moreover, students' life experience, language competence, as well as their cognitive level, are also what English teachers prioritized.

Keywords — teachers' voice, EFL lesson plan, teacher questions, classroom interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to enable students to grasp the foreign language in different sociocultural contexts (Council of Europe, 2018; Hooman Saeli & Payam Rahmati, 2022) in the future, language teachers have to come to terms with several challenges it presents, like persuading learners to get involved in language lectures (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), creating classroom interactions for meaningful language learning (Snow, 2014; Chrysi Rapanta, 2023), and helping students use the language as a tool to interpret the language as the learning content (Gibbons, 2015). Classroom interaction, as an inescapable part of classroom teaching and learning (Allwright, 1984), becomes particularly crucial in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education where learners seldom use this language in their daily life. This is partly because students tend to use their mother tongue out of instinct outside classrooms. Learners' capacity to communicate in English may also inhibits their enthusiasm to express themselves in this foreign language. However, EFL learners' language competence is still highly emphasized these days as English is considered as the worlds' lingua franca. Therefore, classroom interaction has been valued as an essential aspect in EFL education and EFL teachers need to pay attention to

He Fang, Nanning University, China (email address: hefang@unn.edu.cn) .
Supyan Hussin , The National University of Malaysia (email address: supyan@ukm.edu.my).

teacher-student discourse within whole-class dialogic interactions (Chrysi Rapanta, 2023).

In China, it is stipulated as the top goal in English curriculum by the Ministry of Education that college students should acquire communicative competence, especially oral communication. To meet this end, the newly updated 2020 Guidelines on College English Teaching further defines that college English instruction should be language-competence-oriented, accomplished with a combination of interactive participation from both the teacher and students. It is also teachers' belief that engaging students in smooth interaction is decisive to successful language teaching and learning (Liu & Xia, 2011; Chrysi Rapanta, 2023). There are many an aspect in relation to how to get students involved in classroom learning activities, where teacher questions remain a big part as they may influence whether students are willing to respond (Shao & Gao, 2016). And teacher questions are considered as a primary way to initiate interaction in language classroom. The present study focuses on how EFL teachers perceive teacher questions and what they may consider when devise teacher questions to ensure learning happens.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Teacher Cognition and EFL Teaching and Learning

The psychological environment for teaching is the habitat for interpreting and executing courses, and it is also the main part for implementing teaching activities. Teacher's thinking, planning, and decision-making constitute a large part of the psychological environment for teaching. Teacher's behaviour is substantially influenced by teacher's thoughts and even determines the entire teaching and learning process (Borg, 2007). Working as a guide that indicates and affects teachers' decision-making, behaviours, and practices in their teaching (Borg, 2011; Isikoglu et al., 2009), teacher cognition refers to teachers' beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions, and attitudes towards various aspects of their work (Borg, 2003).

What L2 teachers know and believe basically offers the foundation for teachers' actual practices. There are lots of L2 research on teachers' beliefs emphasizing on various aspects of language teaching, including feedback towards students' language learning performance (Roothooft & Breeze, 2016; Kamiya, 2016; Kartchava et al., 2020), instruction of language skills (Wesely et al., 2021) , interaction (Taghizadeh & Ejtehadi, 2021, Trang Le Diem Bui & Phung Dao, 2023), technology use (eg. online interaction tools, mobile assisted language learning (Pascual et al., 2018; Mostafa Nazari & Ismail Xodabande, 2020; Taghizadeh & Ejtehadi, 2021)). The previous research uncovered that both

congruencies and incongruences would pop up between teachers' perceptions and their practices, implying that it may influence the ultimate performance of language teaching and learning. In addition to the teaching actions that can be observed in the classroom, the "thinking" part of a teacher is an unobservable that even the teacher himself/herself is not aware of. The present study focuses on teachers' perception when they are preparing questions in the hope of probing the possible cognitive presence of EFL teachers.

2.2 Teacher Questions and Interaction-oriented Language Teaching and Learning

It is revealed that teachers tend to ask many a question in the classroom with different purposes (Danu Angga Vebriyanto, 2015). Serving as a cognitive tool in pedagogical contexts, questions have been highly valued in classroom interaction (Walsh & Sattes, 2015) as questioning and answering often functions as a communication between students and teachers. Apart from testing knowledge, a question-and-answer sequence can also be used to guide learners' understanding (Smit et al.,2021) when both language and critical thoughts are elicited from the students (Mercer & Dawes, 2014). During a question-answer process, both teachers and students get involved in the teaching and learning activities that help develop foreign language competence (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Therefore, it is demanding for language teachers to purposefully create good questions when prepare lectures as they have to engage students to co-construct in the process of language learning (Menninga et al., 2017).

What questions a teacher asks in real time-classroom interaction may pose different degrees of challenge for the students. Some researchers concluded that the most picked question type in lectures is the closed, directive ones (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) while others questioned the possibility of stalling classroom interaction when such type of questions are used too often (Cullen,2002; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). What's more, there seems less opportunities for students to do language practice orally when they are likely to offer short and simple answers (Van Vondel et al., 2017). As an indicator of learning, the expecting amount and quality of learner involvement in the classroom interaction should be taken seriously by language teachers when preparing questions.

2.3 EFL Teachers' Perception and Teacher Questions

It is almost a consensus for teachers to put an emphasis on questioning and answering part (Danu Angga Vebriyanto, 2015; Van Vondel et al., 2017; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Smit et al., 2021; Chrysi Rapanta, 2023) as fabricating high-quality questions benefits both teachers and students to co-construct knowledge. Teachers may have an estimation about how students may respond to questions that come as planned and prepare questions that showcase their expectations about their potential as creative thinkers (Angela K. Salmon & Maria Ximena Barrera, 2021). Every and each question is purposefully designed to accomplish

designated teaching objectives, be it checking students' understanding of the teaching materials discussed in the class, grabbing students' creative thinking about certain topics, asking students to translate some words or sentences, or testing students' prior knowledge and understanding.

It may be helpful for students when discussing and answering well-refined teacher questions in the learning process as good questions can promote the development of thinking skills. When interacting with each other in the classroom, the language as both the learning content and communication tool is intertwined with cognition (Coyle et al., 2010). It is expected that learner may display high levels of participation when there is meaningful classroom interaction, despite affective factors. Therefore, various ideas expressed in the target language may occur in longer utterances, or it may tell that students fail to understand well if there is limited or hardly any verbal student participation (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Tapping teachers' intention for question formulating would help teachers to be more intentional as this cognitive activity may facilitate language teaching and learning as long as teachers raise questions that enhance students' curiosity and critical thinking.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study focuses on how EFL teachers perceive teacher questions and what they may consider when design questions to ensure interactive learning. A group of six EFL teachers from a university located in southern part of China were invited to assemble and brainstorm. The round-table meeting was conducted for about eighty minutes with the teacher-researcher coordinated around. And a thematic analysis was illustrated based on the discussion. The basic information of the participants are shown as following in table 1.

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Name	Gender	Age	Title	EFL teaching experience (by years)
T1	Male	38	Associate professor	12
T2	Female	29	Lecturer	3
T3	Male	31	Lecturer	5
T4	Female	49	Professor	21
T5	Female	35	Associate professor	9
T6	Female	26	Lecturer	2

All the participants had got their master's degrees and two of them had the experience of learning abroad. Being informed of the study purpose, the respondents illustrated their ideas about what they were thinking towards question preparations when making lesson plans and what questions they usually favored to ask in the classroom. Their interactive communication was recorded, combed and analyzed in thematic items.

IV. DATA AND DISCUSSION

After conducting the round-table meeting, the researcher transcribed and analyzed what the participants

had expressed. Several thematic items were categorized from the following four aspects.

4.1 EFL Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Content-centered Question

To plan lectures, educators must be knowledgeable in understanding the scope of their course, creating questions that engage students in stipulated study, and cultivating learning activities that support inquiry (Moje, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Teachers may usually design questions after deeply appreciating the texts, putting the emphasis on the language points as well as the subject matter itself of the texts. Generally, language points are embedded in some English passages that students are required to read and comprehend when content-focused questions may help them better grasp a bird's view of the whole text, especially those planned by paragraphs. Besides, objectives of the lecture are always intertwined with teaching and learning contents, which also had a role to play when questions are made. Here are the quotes from T4 and T1:

When I think about what to question, the texts that my students are going to appreciate is a must to consider as classroom language learning and teaching is often conducted based on textual passages with a certain topic. And learners may accomplish the global reading of the text during the question-and-answer procedure (Quotes from T4).

Most of the time I would bear the teaching objectives in mind when prepare a question, with the key being whether it can lead the students to the learning target. Without efficient connection between learning activities and teaching objectives, we cannot say it as successful teaching and learning. Sometimes it makes me feel more comfortable when I lack strong questioning skills towards specific subject without deemphasizing our learning target and classroom involvement (Quotes from T1).

In planning and writing content-centered questions, teachers may decide to cultivate a scenario or event from the subject matter the textbook currently contains and develop this context. They may cultivate questions by identifying a situation according to the subject matter that would focus on particular aspect that the students may react to and work through the activity. Such questions may be developed where the follow-up discussion may determine whether the learning activity are successful or not. These questions also serve to guide learners to utilize critically specific thinking and reasoning procedures as to respond to some content or situation. T6 related that,

I try to develop a question where the directions would be specified to guide students thinking in specific ways and instructions are built into the context of the learning activity itself. For example, to make the students understand something about emojis, I set up a framework for them before reading the passage, guiding them to locate words and sentences that describing definition, usage, significance of an emoji. These particular requirements tend to make me free from becoming actively involved in the group discussion

when I can be more observant of the whole teaching and learning process. (Quotes from T6)

In such cases, follow-up content-centered questions may be preferred by teachers to check whether the students understand well the major language points as objectives stipulated after observing students working their way during the learning process. This is in line with Costa and Kallick (2015) who claimed that teacher questions are the gateway into students' thinking. Besides asking many questions, EFL teachers should also be masterful to purposefully formulate and pose good questions that are suitable for each particular learning goal. Thus, it is an art for teachers to present intentional questions to promote critical thinking so that the students will better grasp concepts and respond accordingly.

4.2 EFL Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Student-centered Question

Some college English teachers in this study reported when making their lesson plans by shouldering responsibility for understanding their students in a way that helped them keep responsive to their needs and experiences. This required them to check their own expectations about their students' situation, examine their students' ideas and be ready for changing their thinking and teaching. Thus the decontextualized and prescribed teaching materials were shifted based on the students' needs to more meaningful learning experiences. T2 described what this method entailed for her:

It is a must for me to get to know my students before preparing a lecture, or I can't be completely involved in the classroom teaching and learning activities. Similarly, I can't ask a triggering question if I don't know what they are interested in. So, I try to understand what they really want from me. And I tend to frame questions in light of what they've said or the things that they've shown that may attract them (Quotes from T2).

What T2 reflected protrudes the relationship between getting to know students and engaging them in learning (Watson & Devereaux, 2022). He even collected students' reflective writing about what they expected from English class to learn about learners' interests. T2 emphasized that it is not appropriate to assume that students may have the same experience about this world and he has to educate himself about his students.

The concept of student-centered philosophy allows teachers to move away from strictly following the excerpts in designated textbooks. Student-centered questions are more likely to pop out when teachers become attune to students' backgrounds, experiences, and interests. T3 also shared how she decided to frame certain questions on the topic about tourism in China.

I try to be there and make the learning materials more approachable to their daily lives. Considering that they may be more familiar with where they lived comparing to other tourist places around China, I chose to assign them to talk about what they have in their hometowns. And it turned out that they offered a fruitful presentation with inspiring

confidence (Quotes from T3).

Students' life experience, language competence, personal characteristics, as well as their cognitive level, are also what EFL teachers prioritized. A student-centered, guided inquiry-based approach allows students, with the initial English scores being the lowest or the highest, to have the largest learning gains when they are encouraged to relate what they understand well within the guided inquiry condition. So, the perception that a teacher have towards students' life experiences, backgrounds and even language proficiency may help him/her to take a step back and really look via the lens focusing on the learners when making a relevant question.

4.3 EFL Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Classroom-interaction-intriguing Question

Classroom interaction has been highly valued in EFL education. Classroom-interaction-intriguing questions are universally designed to inspire students to bring out their potentials in discovery, problem-solving, and the co-construction of knowledge, which may lead to classroom processes in which students seek to find answers about the world. Therefore, students may be enlightened to meaningfully explore and develop critical thinking when questions are interaction-intrigued enough. At the same time, opportunities for language learning in classroom interaction are embedded in question-and-answer turns. T5 shared that,

In my section, I usually consider the aspects that can 'fire' the classroom where students may interactively attend the lecture with both body and soul. That's no easy task. But I have to relate to all of the questions that hook all the students without a miss, otherwise they may fail to demonstrate the strongest learning gains. And I have to be open to learning some theoretical frameworks about classroom interaction and researching certain things so I can be well-prepared when I need to release questions in the classroom (Quotes from T5).

Here T5 emphasized a lot on classroom interaction when cultivated questions for a lecture. Typically, the teacher presents the problem by asking questions to the class, with the students then thinking critically, using problem-solving skills to form initial answers based on prior knowledge, then reconsidering in more depth before proposing possible solutions (Schlemper et al., 2019). It revealed that the possibilities of triggering classroom interaction count a lot as teachers would predict the effects of teaching and learning when learners draw on language points, promote ideas as well as reflect on their own performance.

A classroom-interaction-intriguing question appropriately responds to the sociocultural perspective saying that learners may develop language competence through the process of getting socialized into competent involvement in the social activities when encountering more knowledgeable group members. Proper questioning may lead to interaction between teachers and students that 'are consequential in the creation of effectual learning environments and ultimately in the shaping of individual

learners' language development' (Hall & Walsh, 2002, p.186). The questioning and answering process usually engages teachers and students in foreign language learning when teachers mainly guide understanding and elicit language and thoughts from the learners, while students co-construct meaningful language expressions. Hence, effective language learning happens. As T1 and T3 responded that:

It is really a big headache for me to think about what questions to ask in order to drive my students crazy in the classroom. Sometimes I may focus on the contrastive relations between English and Chinese (their mother tongue), to see whether there is any linking or comparison in terms of structures, forms, morphology or translations. Next time I may aim at eliciting pre-defined answers, like asking students to illustrate their own thoughts and opinions about the lecture where I observe them brainstorming. Similarly, language learning occurs spontaneously during the process of classroom interaction (Quotes from T1).

Sometimes I really enjoy looking at my students heckle each other using English without their own noticing, especially after I posed certain questions. I think that is a kind of simultaneous interaction. Does that indicate, er, something about the power of my question? That is amazing! (Quotes from T3).

The questions a teacher asks in real-time classroom interaction may decide how communicative the language lesson would become when students try to develop their foreign language competence during the process as it simultaneously facilitates language development and thinking (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). And an interaction-intriguing question allows teachers to probe into the possibilities as to how far the learners may go in particular learning contents.

4.4 EFL Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Questions Relating to 'Ongoing' Events

Nowadays, college students are capable enough to keep an eye on what is happening around while extracting, identifying and analysing information. And they are eager to be heard about what they have on mind. This requires EFL teachers to be attune to currently hot topics and current affairs around the world and be creative to ask well-designed questions to enhance learning. Results suggest that ongoing events around us surprisingly do have a say when teachers try to look for some connections with the teaching contents during the course of planning a question. As is shown in the following:

Sometimes I intend to surf the Internet to locate what is happening right now, whether there is any link to what I am going to teach for next lecture, or whether there is any updates concerning that issue we are about to cover. I am trying to find a key to ignite what attracts the students. (Quotes from T6)

To some extent, a discussion on diverse materials on current affairs and hot topics constitutes a necessary part of my classroom teaching. Sometimes I can just tell that it is what some students expect and they are ready to share. So

how to integrate relevant thinking-revoking questions in terms of social reality issues into what we have in the textbook is really challenging for me. We need to find the clue. (Quotes from T2)

It is not exaggerating to consider the 'ongoing' events as the 'flow code' that we teachers should hold, as the students we are teaching are born netizens who know what is moving in the world with a fingertip. This is the world we are living. (Quotes from T1)

Yes, I found that students may become more talkative when it covers what is happening, they know well, like the newly updates of their idols. But it is not easy to exert in-depth reflections, especially when I want to enhance their cognitive level and cultivate their ability to comprehensively and objectively analyze problems. (Quotes from T4).

For a teacher, teaching begins when he tries to sketch the image of his students (Malaguzzi, 1994). Teacher questions work well in defining the image of learners. Teachers need to purposefully design questions to broaden students' learning horizons and make them shift their focus from themselves to the society as a whole. This allows EFL teachers to be alert about the world affairs and at the same time act as a cultural bridge guiding students to a broader world. Yet, it is still not a easy task for EFL teachers.

V. CONCLUSION

The study used narrative excerpts formed from a round-table meeting of six EFL teachers exploring how EFL teachers perceive while formulate teacher questions through their pedagogical choices and actions. The results imply that teachers' cognitive perception do have a say in the ultimate presentation of teacher questions in EFL teaching and learning. It also revealed that asking good questions is beneficial to making learning happens even when our language learners appear to be reticent in classes. Thus, EFL teachers may become more masterful in question design when pay attention to connections of ongoing events with lesson transcriptions, students' characteristics (including life experience, language competence, as well as their cognitive level) , as well as the possibilities of triggering classroom interaction.

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