Classroom Interaction in Elementary *Eikaiwa* Classes

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Reference Data:

Cahill, K. S. (2015). Classroom interaction in elementary *eikaiwa* classes. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *JALT2014 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Teacher question and feedback techniques play a crucial role in helping students develop their language skills. Analyzing data collected through observation of after-school *eikaiwa* classes with elementary school students, this study investigated the types of question and feedback strategies used by native EFL teachers and how effective they appear to be. Findings illustrate the importance of having an informed repertoire of questioning strategies and an informed policy for providing effective feedback to students.

講師による質問とフィードバックの技術は、生徒の語学力を伸ばす際に、極めて重要な役割を果たす。小学生向けの放課後に行われる英会話クラスの観察を通して集められたデータを分析し、これらの研究では、EFLネイティブ講師が用いる質問・フィードバック方法のタイプとその効果について調べた。この調査結果は、確かな情報に基づく質問方法のレパートリーと、生徒への効果的なフィードバックを提供する確かな方策の重要性を示している。

Classroom interaction, including teacher questions and feedback, has been a common focus of second language research (SLR) in recent decades. Questions play a crucial role in promoting learner participation and language production, which is a key factor in acquisition. Likewise, feedback is important because it provides learners with the information they need to improve their language skills. Teachers who want to improve their teaching skills and enhance the communicative nature of their classrooms should develop an informed repertoire of questioning strategies (Brown, 1994a), as well as an informed policy for providing effective feedback to their students (Hedge, 2000).

In this paper, I will first discuss some of the question and feedback taxonomies that have been developed through past SLR. I will then analyze data collected through observation of private after-school English conversation classes with elementary school students. The specific questions that will be addressed are the following:

1. In an EL class, what are the questioning and feedback strategies employed by teachers?
2. How effective do they appear to be?

Research methodology includes various observation techniques and data are analyzed both quantitatively as well as through discussion, with examples collected during the observations.

Teacher Questions and Feedback

Understanding Questions

One of the most important forms of teacher-student interaction is the teacher's use of questions. Teacher questions fulfill many different functions, such as providing students the opportunity to produce language and participate in classroom conversations. Questions also allow the teacher to control the flow of the lesson, check the students' comprehension, and see what kind of linguistic improvements need to be made in their language production (Brown 1994a, p. 165). It is important for teachers to not only be aware of their own questioning behavior but also to try and develop their questioning strategies in order to challenge their students and create a more communicative classroom environment.

Questions can be classified in various ways according to the type of response they yield. The two main categories are referential and display questions. Referential questions, often called "genuine" questions (Thornbury, 1996), are those to which the asker does not know the answer (e.g., What do you do on Saturdays?); display questions, ones in which the answer is already known, are primarily employed to test the knowledge of students. Barnes (cited in Ellis, 1994) also differentiated between "open" and "closed" questions based on the length or number of acceptable answers. Referential questions are generally open, but not necessarily so, and likewise with closed and display questions. Studies by Long and Sato in 1983 and by Pica and Long in 1986 (both cited in Chaudron, 1988) found that teachers in ESL classes use significantly more display questions than referential questions, even though display questions are virtually nonexistent in "real life" conversation (Nunan, 1989, Thornbury, 1996). Referential questions are said to require learners to process more information and produce more language; they also promote more meaningful communication in the classroom (Chaudron, 1988, Nunan, 1989, Thornbury, 1996).

Another way questions can be distinguished is by the role they play in the classroom. Richards and Lockhart (1994, pp. 185-187), identified three categories of questions: *procedural*, which deal with classroom management (e.g., Did you do your homework?), *convergent* (e.g., Do you have a social media profile? How often do you access it?), and *divergent* (e.g., What kind of contributions has social media made to society?). Convergent questions often elicit short answers that draw on previously learned information, and divergent questions may be used to encourage students to think more about their responses and perhaps to use the language in a way they have not done so before. This is similar, but not identical to the use of open and closed questions.

Chaudron (1988) discussed three subtypes of questions: *comprehension checks* (e.g., Do you understand?), *confirmation checks* (e.g., You mean . . .?), and *clarification requests* (e.g., Pardon? or What do you mean by . . .?). These types of questions extend and improve interaction and also facilitate negotiation of meaning between speakers (pp. 130-131).

In order to facilitate student comprehension, teachers can modify their speaking and questioning in the classroom. Teachers may slow down the pace of their speech, make hesitations, and repeat or rephrase questions or sentences (Cullen, 1998, p. 182). In particular, a considerable amount of research has been done on what is called "wait time," which is the amount of time a teacher gives students to respond to a question. It has been said that teachers who wait as long as 3 to 5 seconds see an increase in student participation, as well as more complex language in their responses (Nunan, 1989, p. 193). However, according to King (2013), "evidence produced by the COPS [Classroom Oral Participation Scheme], in the form of empirical, statistically based data, suggest[ed] there is a strong trend towards silence in Japan's second language classrooms" (p. 326), and therefore, there is the potential for longer wait time in the context of this research (see also Hadley, 2003).

Understanding Feedback

Being aware of one's questioning and modification strategies is important for stimulating language production in the EFL classroom. However, recognizing the way one gives feedback on student output is also a crucial and complicated issue. Feedback in the form of error treatment is unique to foreign language teaching because it is something that does not usually occur in natural conversations (Chaudron, 1988, p. 132). Perhaps that is why it has been the subject of many investigations in the past few decades.

Brown (1994b, pp. 218-222) explained affective and cognitive feedback in its positive, negative, and neutral forms as naturally occurring in conversations between learners and native speakers both in and out of the classroom environment. Teachers must be aware of their own use of feedback as too much negative feedback can hinder motivation and possibly cause the learner to abandon communication, and too much positive feedback, or rather ignoring errors, can reinforce bad habits, perhaps causing fossilization.

There is much debate as to whether or not error correction is necessary, or if it even affects learner acquisition. Krashen was cited as being doubtful of the need for error correction because it can be distracting and demotivating and possibly lead to a negative affective response (in Hedge, 2000; Ellis, 1994). On the contrary, Stern (1992) stated that a complete lack of error correction can be confusing for students, and that without some corrections, learners have no way of measuring their own performance. Despite diverging opinions on corrective feedback, studies have shown that learners actually prefer to be corrected (Ellis, 1994), and see "error correction by the teacher [as] one of the most highly valued and desired classroom activities" (Nunan, 1991, p. 198).

How to administer feedback is one of the most difficult issues for teachers to consider. Citing a study by Lyster and Ranta, Lightbown and Spada (1999), identified, described, and gave examples of six types of corrective feedback. *Explicit correction* is when the teacher clearly indicates the error and explicitly provides a correct model (e.g., ". . . is incorrect. You mean to say . . ."). *Recasts* are the most widely used form of corrective feedback according to various studies (see Lyster, 1998; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). They are also said to be one of the least effective forms of feedback because the teacher only provides the correct form of the erroneous utterance, without supplying any information about where or how the error was made. *Elicitation* involves the teacher using various techniques to elicit a correct reformulation of the utterance, for example: "What is the word for . . . in Japanese?" or "She went to the . . .?" These are similar to *clarification requests* such as "Excuse me?" or "You went where?" and are likely to result in self-correction. *Repetitions* of the student's ill-formed utterances, usually with adjusted intonation to hint at the errors, are the least commonly employed type of feedback. *Metalinguistic feedback* "contains comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form." In their study, Lyster and Ranta found that recasts were the least likely to result in uptake, a learner response giving the correct form immediately after treatment. Metalinguistic feedback and elicitations were the more successful types of feedback for eliciting uptake (Lightbown and Spada, 1999, pp. 103-106).

I would now like to turn to the small research project in which I investigated five *eikaiwa* (conversation school) teachers' questioning and feedback strategies.

Method

Research Context and Participants

An *eikaiwa* in Gifu, Japan permitted me to observe lessons. Twenty-five 45-minute after-school lessons with elementary school students were observed and recorded. Each class had between three and 10 students. Most classes were composed of students of the same grade, however seven of the 25 classes had students of different grades who were separated by no more than 1 year (e.g., fourth and

fifth graders in one class). Most students seemed fairly motivated during the lessons and appeared to enjoy the activities and games. None of the students showed an ability to produce their own original utterances in the target language. However, many appeared to be able to understand the teachers.

Teachers A-E (see Table 1 below) had been working at the company for various amounts of time. None had any certification for teaching and only one had previous teaching experience, although not language teaching.

Table 1. Teacher Profiles

Descriptions	Teacher				
	A	B	C	D	E
Nationality/ Gender	American/ M	American/ F	American/ M	American/ F	American/ M
Age	29	23	26	22	23
Education	BA Criminal justice	BA Psychology	BA Marketing	BA Psychology	BA Adventure education
Teaching certification	None	None	None	None	None
Prev. exp. teaching children	None	None	None	None	Canoe, kayak, and sailing instructor, active sports intern
Length of employment	5.5 years	1.5 years	3 years	2 months	7 months

In each lesson, the American (foreign) teachers, (FTs), are accompanied by Japanese assistants, (JTs). The JTs, who are also uncertified teachers, are there to help with situations such as miscommunications between the students and the FT, checking assignments, and maintaining order. For reasons of simplicity, only questions and feedback strategies used by the FTs were analyzed according to the observation instrument discussed below.

Curriculum and Lesson Structure

The *eikaiwa* breaks up its curriculum into 6 levels. Levels A and B are taught to kindergarten students with elementary students starting in Level C. Levels C and D incorporate the vocabulary learned in levels A and B into simple present tense grammar, in a "slot-filler" or pattern format. Level C focuses on prepositions and time (*in the morning*, *on Tuesday*, etc.). Level D focuses on the auxiliary verbs *may*, *will*, and *can*, as well as *like* vs. *like to*, *want/want to/want to be*, *have/have to*, and *going to*. Students also learn the alphabet, reading, writing, and basic phonics using a series of four writing books produced by the company. Level E focuses on the verb *to be* and students do more writing practice using handouts produced by the company. Finally, there are the *Learning World* levels, named after the textbooks that are employed in the classes.

Lesson structure for all teachers is generally the same, starting with an opening statement "Let's start English," stating the date, and posing review questions—usually asked around the table, sometimes in pairs or groups (name, age, birthday, school, grade, *live*, *what do you do in the morning/on Tuesday/in spring*, etc., *what time do you . . .?*). Following "question time," students do phonics or writing practice then review the previous lesson's material. After that, new material is taught and then a game using the new material is played. In all the observed lessons, games had a drill-like format in order for students to practice speaking the grammar taught in the lessons.

Data Collection

Before observing the class, the teachers and I met at the company

office to discuss the lesson plan, materials, and students, as well as logistics of what recording devices were to be used, where they would be placed, and where I should be seated in the class. These meetings were not recorded, but notes were taken for later reference.

In order to have both qualitative and quantitative data to analyze, the lessons were recorded using two small voice recorders placed on opposite sides of the class. Field notes were also taken. This method of data collection proved to be adequate. During some of the lessons, there were occasionally group and pair activities, yet because the research question specified teacher questioning and feedback strategies, only teacher-student interactions were analyzed.

Observation Instrument

In recent decades, many observation schemes have been developed for the purpose of quantitatively recording interaction and behavior in the classroom. One of the most well known, and a "pioneer" (Stern, 1992, p. 49) for the development of other subsequent systems, is the FLINT observation system, which is described in detail by Chaudron (1988, pp. 32-33). Other well-known systems include COLT, MOLT, FOCUS, TALOS, SCORE, and more that are discussed by various researchers, (see Chaudron, 1988; Dörnyei, 2007; Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

Many of these observation systems require professional training because they include numerous categories, possibly with multiple coding in real time. For this particular investigation, it seemed that categorizing questions and feedback (as done in the literature) and tallying them in instances rather than in timed intervals was a more appropriate choice for executing this small-scale research project. A tally sheet was used, adapted from an essay on questions and feedback in classroom interactions (Herder, 2006). The tally sheet was modified to include wait time and procedural as well as open and closed questions in the Teacher's Question Techniques section. Also, the categories of *praises or encourages* and *repeats student response verbatim* from the FLINT system were included in the feedback section. Teacher behavior was categorized and tallied, and the subsequent student utterances are discussed below.

Results

Questions

The questions were tallied using multiple coding because, for example, procedural questions can be either referential or display, and referential questions can be either open or closed. For simplicity, only referential and display questions were multiple coded as either open or closed. Procedural questions and comprehension checks were not multiple coded. The average number of question types produced per 45-minute lesson is shown in Figure 1.

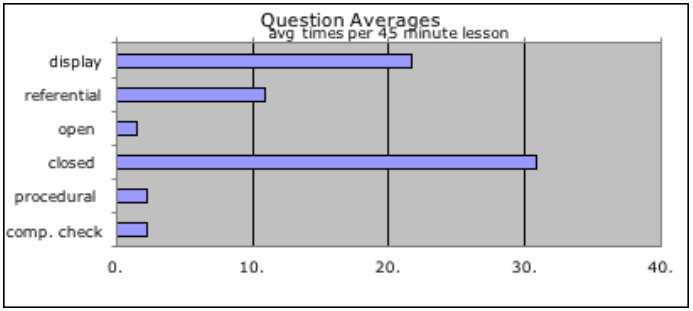

Figure 1. Question types employed.

Similar to the studies by Long and Sato in 1983 and Pica and Long in 1986 (both cited in Chaudron, 1988), the tally sheets show that the teachers most frequently used display questions. These were most often asked of the whole class, and referential questions were more frequently asked of individuals. All of the teachers

asked overwhelmingly more closed questions than open questions, which was the hypothesized outcome, given the context. Teacher D asked notably more open questions of her fifth graders than of her younger students.

Teachers' Question Modification Techniques

At times teachers repeated a particular question multiple times, but this was only tallied as an instance of repetition. How many times the teacher actually repeated that single question was not recorded. It was noticed that procedural and display questions were typically repeated, and referential and open questions were more often rephrased. As can be seen in Figure 2, teachers seldom waited more than 3 seconds for a response (an average of less than once per lesson) before repeating the question or suggesting an answer.

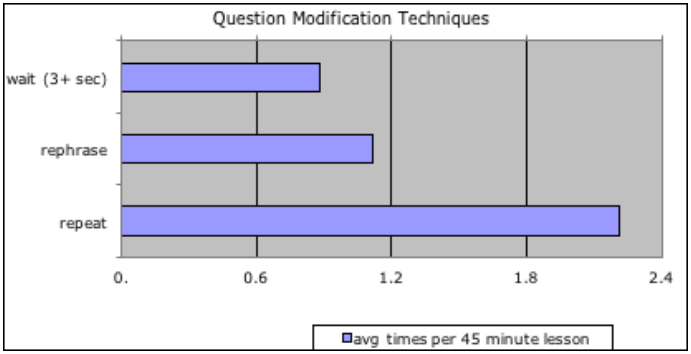

Figure 2. Question modification techniques employed.

Feedback

During the observed lessons, in instances where corrective feedback occurred, more than half of these instances were repetitions with a questioning intonation, contrary to studies by Lightbown and Spada (1999). Recasts were the second most frequently employed form of corrective feedback. Metalinguistic feedback and clarification requests had the fewest occurrences.

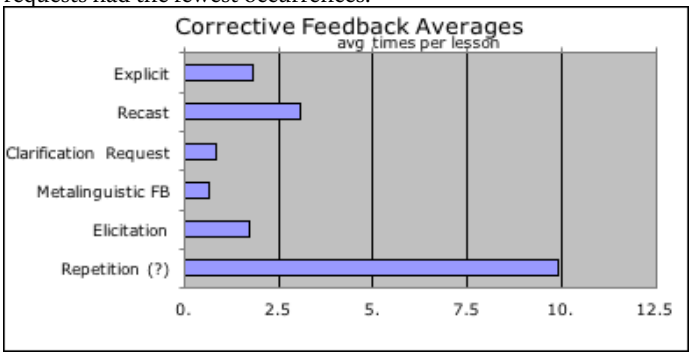

Figure 3. Corrective feedback techniques employed.

Teachers were more likely to praise a student's answer than repeat it verbatim, most frequently in the form of "Good," "Very good," and "Nice." Responses were almost never criticized, with only 11 instances in all 25 observed lessons.

Feedback Timing

Errors were treated immediately 98% of the time. There was only a single instance in which an error was addressed later in the lesson after multiple students had made the same error.

Discussion

As found in many other studies on teacher questions, the teachers used predominantly display questions, most often to the whole class (e.g., "What's this?" or "What is the date today?")

Referential questions were typically asked during the opening review question time or during drill games such as Go Fish.

I will now give examples of some of the different question types from the recordings and then discuss their apparent effectiveness.

Example 1: Teacher B, first grade elementary student

Closed display question, no wait time, starts answer to elicit response

T: When's your birthday? [1 sec]
My birthday is... [1 sec]
My birthday is, ready^
S & T: My birthday is
S: January twenty-two

The teacher used a display question during the beginning review and question time. When no response was given in a 1-second wait time, the teacher started the answer and recited it with the female first grader. This proved to be successful as illustrated by the student's response. However, it is also possible that had the teacher waited a few more seconds, an answer may have been produced without the help of a hint.

Example 2: Teacher A, first grade elementary students

Two whole-class closed display questions, multiple repetitions, ample wait time.

T: What is the date today?
S: Today is Wednesday.
T: What is the date today? [1 sec] Today is- [4 sec]
S: October one.*
T: Today is, okay, today is October one. Ready-
Ss: Today is October one.
T: What day of the week is it today? [3 sec] Today is- ... Today is- [1 sec]
What day of the week is it today? Today is-Sunday? Monday? Tuesday?
Ss: Wednesday.
T: Today is-
Ss: Today is Wednesday.
T: Okay. What is the date today?
Ss: Today is Wednesday.
T: What is the date today?
Ss: Today is . . . [6 sec]
S: [whispers the months, counts on fingers] October one.
T: Okay. What is the date today?
Ss: October one.
T: What day of the week is it?
Ss: Today is . . . Wednesday.

Note. *These were low-level students who have not yet learned *first*, therefore *October one* was considered correct by the teacher.

In this example, the teacher asked two display questions that have different meanings but contain many of the same words. White and Lightbown (cited in Chaudron, 1988) found that repetition is a rather unsuccessful modification technique. Contrary to that, however, this teacher was successful in eliciting correct responses using repetition, giving starts and hints, and providing ample wait time, which is suggested to promote more student participation. Assuming that effectiveness is measured by language production, these questions and modification techniques appear to have been effective.

Example 3: Teacher B, second grade elementary student

Individual closed referential question, no wait time, "feeds" answer

T: What do you do in the evening? [1 sec]
Take a bath? Watch TV? Do my homework? [2 sec]
S: Take a bath.
T: I . . .
S: I . . . take a bath . . .[1 sec]
T: in the . . .
S: in the . . . [1 sec]
T: in the ev-
S: in the evening

In this example, the teacher asked a referential question. When a response was not immediately received, the teacher provided some suggestions and the student used one of them. After that the teacher walked the student through the complete sentence answer. Although the teacher was successful in eliciting an answer, providing too many hints and walking students though answers too often can result in students becoming dependent on the teacher and becoming unable to produce language on their own (Tsui, 1996).

Example 4: Teacher D, fifth grade elementary student

Individual open referential question, recast

T: So, we had a looong weekend.
So, Saturday, Sunday, Monday
No school, yeah? No school Monday.
So, what did you do this weekend?
S: I go to shopping.
T: I went shopping.
[JT explains that *go* in past-tense is *went*]
T: nkay? So, I went shopping
S: I went shopping

Open and referential questions are said to "promote greater learner productivity" and "more meaningful communication between teacher and learner" (Chaudron, 1988, p. 127). Here, the teacher asked an open referential question to her fifth grade, female student. When she received an answer, she recast it in the correct form. After this the JT explained the difference in form, something the students had not learned before, and when she finished, the teacher again provided the correct form and the student repeated it. By providing information about the context of the question, the teacher was able to elicit a response without hesitation from the student, and with the help of the JT, the use of a recast was also effective, as it resulted in uptake, a learner response giving the correct form immediately after treatment.

Example 5: Teacher E, fourth grade elementary student

Elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, recast, praise

S: I want to . . . game . . .
T: Do what? What do you do with the game?
S: play game . . .
T: If it's one game you say a game, if it's many games you say "I play games" with an *s*. So, I . . .
S: I . . . play games [2 sec]
T: I want to play games.
S: I . . . want to . . . play games.
T: There you go. Good.

According to a Lyster and Ranta, metalinguistic feedback, along with elicitation, is one of the most successful types of feedback and is "more likely to lead to a corrected form of the original utterance" (cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1999, p. 106). This is likely because metalinguistic feedback actually provides students with the information they need to change their behavior, without necessarily directly pointing out the error, as well as promoting self-correction.

Example 6: Teacher C, second grade elementary students

Repetition (with questioning intonation) and metalinguistic feedback

S:	I swimming in summer.
T:	**I swimming?** [2 sec]
	Is it go, play or do?
S:	I do swimm-
T:	I **do** swimming? [2 sec]
S:	I . . . go swimming.
T:	Yes, good job. I **go** swimming.

In the literature, it is stated that repetition of the erroneous utterance is the least commonly employed type of feedback; however, in the observed lessons, the opposite was found. In this example the use of repetition with a questioning intonation helped to highlight where the error was. This proved to be effective as the student self-corrected.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to observe EFL teachers' behavior in classroom interactions, specifically with regard to questioning and feedback strategies. Various types of questions and feedback were investigated, and data were collected and analyzed and then discussed using examples from the observed lessons.

It was discovered that closed and display questions outnumbered open and referential ones. This is in line with several previous studies. Unlike in previous studies, repetitions were the most common form of correcting feedback.

With regard to the effectiveness of the teachers' question strategies and feedback strategies, most of them did appear to be effective. This is likely because the school emphasizes repetition—drills, "repeat after me," and such—as a way for students to produce grammatically correct utterances. However, teachers should be cautious about giving too many hints as well as about providing enough wait time. Also, it is possible that an overemphasis on repetition may make students over-dependent on teacher input, perhaps resulting in an inability to produce original output. Beyond what was discovered regarding the teachers' interactions with the students, the importance of classroom observation is emphasized, for as Nunan (1989) suggested, "if we want to enrich our understanding of language learning and teaching, we need to spend time looking in classrooms" (p. 76).

Bio Data

Kathleen S. Cahill has been living and teaching *eikaiwa* students in Japan for 6 years. She is currently working on her MA in TEFL/TESL through the University of Birmingham. <cahillks@yahoo.com>

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