On Discussing the Application of Language Education Theories in Teachers' Questioning Practice in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: Over the past few decades, "the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition and teaching have accumulated a respectable repertoire of teaching approaches" [1] for language education. Approaches including Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), the Audio Lingual Method (ALM), the Direct Method, the interactional approach and the CLT approach thus have enabled language education professional and researchers to reach to a variety of methods to be utilized in English language education to effectively improve learning and teaching. This paper aims to provide an in-depth discussion on relevant theories of second language instruction understood and appreciated in a more applicable manner if applied in particular research settings. Pedagogical suggestions are expected to be drawn on how these theories could effectively support the potential research centering on the study of teachers' questioning practice in ELT classrooms in mainland China's universities. A proposed study is preliminary designed with a clear guided conceptual framework indicating potential results and contributions.

Keywords: foreign language education; pedagogical methods; teachers' questioning practice

1. Introduction

Pedagogical methods in second language education are not only closely related to the theories in adult language learning in higher education age and specific contextual conditions, but also inform language teachers about today's principled language teaching approaches and the changes. In recent years, topics concerning empowering teachers with a variety of basic theoretical knowledge of pedagogy utilization to form an effective, efficient and adequate learning and teaching environment in developing their strategies is gaining justifications. This article aims to provide a guidance of pedagogical practice especially in relation to teachers' questioning in EFL contexts so that future studies dealing with patterns and linguistic models to entail teachers' subsequent continuous professional development in this area will be based upon.

2. Major theories and methods in foreign language education

Major and basic Second language acquisition (hereinafter as SLA) theories include universal grammar hypothesis[2][5], input hypothesis theory[3], intake and output theory[4]. Language production, claimed by Swain, is a fundamental part of the language acquisition process and should not be only confined or encouraged exclusively in only speaking or listening activities, especially after learners have mastered a certain linguistic structure[6]. The theory of output hypothesis is another crucial theory, which not only admits the important role of output in guiding learners to artistically notice their knowledge and linguistic gap due to their increased awareness of language learning, but also leads them to explore and have higher cognitive readiness towards linguistic exposure. This hypothesis is echoed with Vygotsky's tradition on sociocultural theory, in that they both recognize the value of social experience. It is of high value that students should have the opportunities to be immersed in linguistics mediation process in which influence from peers and reflections from themselves could boost their learning outcome effectively[6].

2.1. Pedagogical Methods in Second Language Education

Some typical pedagogical methods in SLA are grammar translation method[7] (hereinafter as GTM), naturalistic approach, direct method, Audio-Lingual Method (hereinafter as ALM).

GTM was firstly introduced by Richards and Rodgers to be applied in modern language teaching in America. Its primary focus and purpose lie in preparing students in literature study especially towards analyzing the classical readings[8]. Typical learning styles based on GTM method are comparatively old-fashioned, whereas are still prevailing in today's EFL classrooms in China in which the study of grammar can only be categorized or described as mechanical memorization based, thus highly context deprived. It is no wonder that nowadays, GTM is accused of reliance on rigid memorization[9] and highly dependent on first language in that the first language is used as a filter to comprehend the information description[10]. As an alternative method to GTM, linguistics including Henry Sweet, Paul Passy etc. Proposed naturalistic approach[8], which puts the learning of a foreign language or second language in the position of natural acquisition process and subsequently advocates the popularity and practical use of translation method.

Another method called Direct method enjoys a certain period of popularity in that it suggests teachers' use of native like language so that crucial contextual messages could be repetitively reinforced to students in their learning process, which in turn will help students to digest knowledge in diversified situations. This method, highlighting the authentic use of target language instead of just assessing students' basic knowledge in fixed and designed manners[7] draws critics for its overlook on the difficulty in the actual implementation.

Nevertheless, direct method has given rise and paved the ways for ALM, which promotes the acquisition of structural patterns and form of habits formation through repetition. This method is criticized for it is associated to behaviorist approach and strictly confines vocabulary and grammar learning is "in context"[9]. When applied in higher education of English in English as a foreign language (herein after as EFL) classrooms, ALM has also been criticized as "an oral-based approach". Comments have been made as "rather than emphasizing vocabulary acquisition through exposure to its use in situations, [it] drills students in the use of grammatical sentence patterns"[11]. Undoubtedly, the communicative nature of language learning e.g. grammatical drilling is far from sufficient for learners to be instructed with the actual merits of language in real life communications. In higher education EFL classrooms, it is without doubt that activities involving negotiations of meanings should not be deprived and comprehensible input should not be non-authentic.

Having recognized the crucial roles of input, intake and output in EFL classrooms through discussions of the theories and methods above mentioned, how these concepts could facilitate the construction of the foundation for discussions around EFL teachers' language education beliefs and approaches is worth of further discussions especially with pedagogical uses in empirical studies.

2.2. Pedagogical Beliefs in a Learner-centered EFL Context

As a basic and traditional pedagogic belief, Constructivism theory[12] is proposed by Piaget in the 1960s. When being applied in an EFL context, the major emphasis of this theory regards the central role of learners in knowledge construction. Teachers or instructors are the facilitators and help providers. Communicative ability cultivation is another crucial and highly regarded aspect in English language education other than interactions. Under the call that "communicative language teaching was to develop communicative competence"[1], a suitable EFL teaching methodology should emphasize the authentic use of language and enhance learners' communicative competence in an authentic communicative environment.

The communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which has been proved to be "the most comprehensive nature [among other] teaching approaches or methods known thus far" [13], echoes with Chomsky's arguments that "language is not a habit structure [and] ordinary linguistic behavior characteristically involves innovation, formation of new sentences and patterns in accordance with rules of great abstractness and intricacy"[13]. The improvement of communicative competence is the main goal, supplemented by aims including the development of procedures of basic language skill teaching via guiding students to experience the interdependence among them[14].

Using CLT in EFL settings in universities in China, under the constructivism view of learning, one should highly advocates the importance of scaffolding, so that learners should be trained into independent thinkers and explorers and a classroom could be featured with comprehensible input and

interaction opportunities to really involve learners in abundant negotiation of meaning. Scaffolding also boosts interactions in language classrooms and enriches the opportunities of negotiation of meaning, thus "transcend individual factors and have been shown to be far more predictable for success among all learners, young and old"[15].

3. Teachers' Questioning in EFL Settings

Teachers' questioning, a behavior which is essentially a process of message encoding and decoding, gradually directed learners to reformulate their ungrammatical utterances[12] and experience repetitive comprehension checks, clarification of meanings, learning reflections towards linguistic input. Teachers' questions often involve feedback, indicating the gap of learning objective and actual learning capability of learners and making the gap more prominent with linguistic modifications, so, the desire of learning is boosted. Teachers' questioning practice enables the realizations of communication context, teacher-student and student-student cooperation, the mutual beneficial dialogue and meaning constructions towards materials instructed, which are the four learning elements advocated in constructivism theory.

3.1. From a Linguistic Perspective

In an EFL classroom, CLT should be realized through "contextualized repetition" which can effectively necessitate classroom activities that allow for productive (and not merely receptive) recycling of grammatical structures and vocabulary items in a relevant and meaningful context"[16]. Brown[17] and Nunan[18] have argued from teachers' standpoints that "in second language classrooms, where learners often do not have a great number of tools…, your questions provide necessary stepping stones to communication" [17][18] and questions play a crucial role in language acquisition through allowing learners to keep participating in the discourse and even modify it so that the language used becomes more comprehensible and personally relevant"[19] and facilitating the effective learning environment under which the cooperative interactions between teachers and students are guaranteed. Constructive dialogues between the two parties are constantly realized in meaningful mutual discussions and idea exchanges derived from questions.

Investigations of teachers' questioning practice adopted as a formative assessment strategy in university EFL classrooms in mainland China should be theoretically based on approaches discussed so far so, that is, an effective interaction featured with scaffolding and contextualized meaningful repetitions can help teachers to achieve better lexical use for pedagogical purposes and foster more positive learning attitudes for better learning outcomes.

Influenced by the learning styles and contextual features of EFL learners in universities in Mainland China[20], if the theories and approaches are vitalized and guided with proper pedagogical approaches, students will benefit from teachers' questions in the following aspects:

①Teachers' design of 'scaffolding' mediated through question-based interactions inspired by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning[21];

②Teachers' design of classroom activity and teacher-student conversations to close the gap of students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD);

③Teachers' design of reflective teaching with facilitation assessment to involve students in the experiences of the metalinguistic function of language.

These benefits are in line with Bakhtin's Dialogue theory, called dialogism. It believes that dialogue, as the center of thinking, language, art and life, is essentially the major task in language teaching. It calls the attentions to be given to students' initiatives and passions reflected in their voices, contributing to the prosperity of an English education classroom featured with a chorus communication in dialogues[22].

3.2. From a Social-Cognitive Perspective

Teachers' effective questions can challenge students' existing thinking patterns and reasoning skills[23] through stimulating students' learning process and expanding their thinking while engaging learners in "extended cognitively challenging conversations" as mentioned by Massey et al. in 2008 [24]. When learning and assessment are involved simultaneously, teachers in EFL classrooms often ignore

the power of effective questioning. Teachers' questions are usually lack of communicative or interactive merits. Pedagogical practices of questioning have demonstrated the inefficiencies such as lower level questions are often proposed or used for only generating basic learning performances, resulting in only informing students and teachers of students' current knowledge level.

As a practical suggestion, application of language education theories in questions, especially in how to form questions so that they do not become isolated monologue of teachers but constructive dialogues between teachers and students, as strongly influenced by social interaction[24] with communicative values should be explored to a fuller extent in EFL classrooms in universities in mainland.

4. A Proposed Study

A proposed study is expected to be dedicated into investigating teachers' questioning practice in higher education, particularly the context of EFL classrooms. Authentic situations are usually deprived throughout the learning process. Therefore, the purposes and possible results of teachers' questions for eliciting higher levels of students' linguistic output should be studied as processes of instructional sequences proposed by Gagne in 1985[24].

4.1. Background of the study

Explorations on teacher's effective questioning in university classroom have been made including the relationship between teachers' classroom questioning behaviors and student outcomes by experimental study method[25], pre-service teachers' views about teachers' questions and the importance of questioning in learning[26], examination on teachers' practice and their use of questioning in the numeracy context of [27]. Scholars including Sujiarti, Rahman and Mahmudhave have probed into basic studies of questioning strategies and the use of question types in a number of different situations[28]. Ndun also investigates the distribution of question type[29]. Moreover, Matra has found that recall questions are used most frequently by teachers, followed by comprehension questions[30].

Zainudin et al.[31] studied EFL teachers' questions and the challenges in integrating critical thinking questions in a recent study carried out in Indonesia. The study further proposes the reasons behind why most dominant questions asked by the involved English teacher participants are lower-order or lower level questions, thus justifies the importance of the difficulty level set by the questions to just meet students' ZPD. English language teachers' questioning strategies, and reasons of using certain strategies in South Sumatera are also explored by Astrid et al.[32]. Zhang et al. adopted social cultural framework and the corpus linguistic approach in a Singaporean primary school classrooms and researched students' learning of Chinese as their second language. They aimed to look at the structural characteristics[33] of teachers questions upon which they also investigate teachers' questioning behaviors. Findings confirmed that the interactions in language education classroom were constrained and sought facilitators of teacher and students communications. It shows that questions, as the major component of learning dialogues, is a complex discourse phenomenon.

4.2. Purpose of the Study

With the advocates of the implementation of formative assessment in EFL classrooms in mainland China, professional training for obtaining knowledge of basic theories and general teaching practice related to questioning is needed to inform teachers of the significance of proper questioning practices. Recognizing the needs and characteristics of EFL students as the center of discussion, and seeing the suitability of the importance of linguistic repetition, studies centered on teachers' questioning practice should bear in mind the provision of opportunities in continuous activation of lexical items, and thus, giving rise to a proper level of learning consciousness. For better achieving students' outcome of learning of vocabulary acquisition, linguistic accuracy and commands of language, repetition is best achieved when implemented in a communicative and significant way.

Therefore, the establishment of a framework of questioning composed of a straightforward pedagogical model and clear linguistic guidance to entail teachers' subsequent and continuous professional development in their assessment literacy ESL classrooms should be fully supported by theoretical discussions for future studies.

4.3. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Based on Jiang's study which explored teachers' questioning as a formative assessment strategy[34], the theoretical framework composed of the key concepts and logical connections between them could be presented as the following diagram (Figure 1). By placing teachers' questioning practice as the fundamental factor to formative assessment[35], a key strategy in formative assessment[34], an important technique in teachers' assessment literacy, also a crucial aspect in teacher training[36], a relationship of interrelations and mutual reliance among the three concepts involving questioning, formative assessment, and assessment literacy is formed and presented by Figure 1.
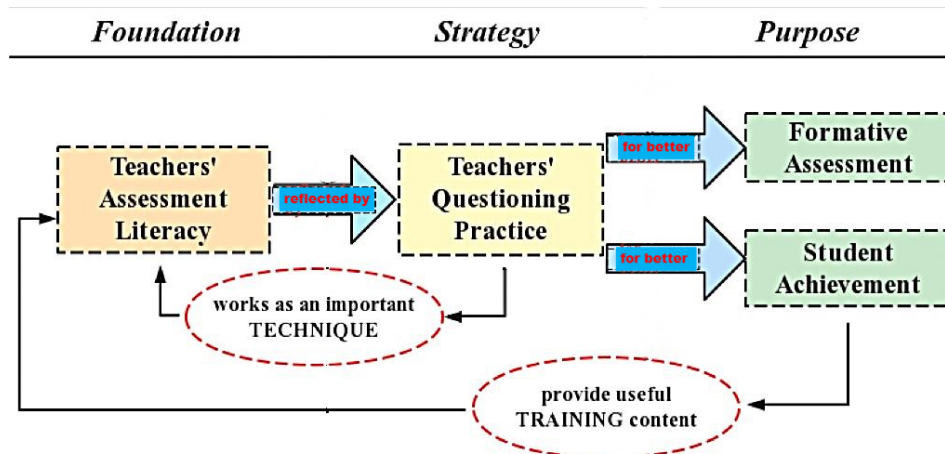
Adapted from Jiang, 2014&2020

Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework

5. Conclusion

Vygotsky believed that the significance of education mostly lied in the conversations between teachers and students, which guaranteed better co-movement of teaching and learning[21]. Hammond and Gibbons also stated that effective teaching went beyond than just information transition between individuals or separated pieces but occurred during the process of collaboration and negotiation of meaning in group members[37], a very crucial concept and step above mentioned in SLA as well, thus, new knowledge could be constructed.

It highlights the importance of teachers' encouragements to students for boosting verbal communication in class, putting conversation study in classrooms at a high stake of generating crucial pedagogical implications. It also strengthens the values of my potential study in teachers' questioning practice as a means of formative assessment, a contrast to traditional view of question study, which only focuses on the types of questions. Analyzing questions from the angels of discourse context and pedagogical structures of teacher and student interactions, is by no means a challenging yet rewarding attempt.

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