Postmodern Language Pedagogy

Dr. J. JOHN SEKAR, M.A., M. Phil., PGDTE (CIEFL), PGDHE (IGNOU), PGDCE (UH), Ph.D.,
Head & Associate Professor
Research Department of English
Dean, Academic Policies & Administration
The American College
MADURAI – 625 002
INDIA

Abstract

Language pedagogy has been influenced by postmodern theories. The pedagogy of the English language classroom has become the site for reflecting, playing, exploring other identities, choosing, subverting, opting out, creating, criticizing, resisting, welcoming ambiguity, dealing with ambiguity, accepting uncertainties, surfing technological sources et al. Of all of them, asking questions in the postmodern class is an essential, inevitable teaching and learning tool. It is taken for granted that modern teachers raise questions and **grant** permission to students to raise questions as well. While teachers are absolutely convinced that the raising of questions is a legitimate pedagogical activity, they also imagine that allowing students to raise questions is a **matter of charity**. This paper argues that teachers ought to raise questions of different types and functions so that they can minimize teacher talk time and allow learners to use time for language production through comprehension. It also argues that students ought to raise questions so that they can develop strategies to approach language in a focussed manner. It does include learner autonomy that aims at maximizing the potentials of independent learners.

Keywords: Socratic Questioning, Learner Autonomy, Learning Outcomes, Postmodern Condition

Background of the Study

The twenty first century learners are the product of the postmodern era. The ESL classroom is now typically postmodern and therefore it requires postmodern language pedagogy. Its postmodern learners are tech savvy, digital natives. They are no longer passive receivers of received knowledge that would traditionally and unidirectionally flow from the 'sage-on-the-stage' to the yet-to-learn-disciples. As postmodern learners they contest it and create knowledge that does not make any universal claims. The postmodern classroom does not construct knowledge for posterity, either.

It is a commonsensical reality that teachers are empowered to ask questions in the English language class as much as in any other subject classes. The very purpose of asking questions is normally to get feedback from learners on a topic already dealt with in the

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IBI FACTOR: 2.9

previous class or to prepare their mind to receive new knowledge in the present class. The phenomenon of teacher questions is also normally taken for granted to the extent that not much attention is paid to the type of questions that they ask and the function of such questions either in promotion of teacher authority or of learning processes. For instance, many teachers are unaware of the kind of questions they ask or the quantity of the same on average. Student questions appear to be an uncommon and aberrational phenomenon. In fact, it is a healthy sign of learning processes of postmodern learners.

Research Methodology and Design

The research paper is mainly based on reflections of the researcher on the hard reality of teachers posing questions to students and not encouraging students to raise questions in the class as a method of inter-dependent and collaborative learning. The present research enquiry was initiated out of the researcher's curiosity to investigate why teachers raise questions, what kind of questions they raise, why they allow learners to raise questions as a learning strategy and so on. He designed a set of teacher questions through self-introspection over his twenty eight years of English language and literature teaching from undergraduate to research level, out of interaction with fellow teachers, and observation of the question strategies in the classes irrespective of the content of lectures. He then carefully examined the existing literatures in the field for classification and interpretation of the data.

The teacher questions predominantly fall into the following two categories:

1. **Factual type**: do you know…? Who knows the answer to …? What did I do in the last class? Do you remember the definition of …? Where do you use this phrase? What is the difference between …? Can you guess….?
2. **Eliciting reasons**: Why didn't you submit the assignment on time? Why do you think that the writer says this?
3. **Rhetorical Questions:** Don't you think so? What's the use of high score in English if you can't communicate in English?

To the query why teachers raise questions in class, the following responses could be crystallized:

1. Questions are asked to check if students have understood or if they are concentrating on or if they are following the lecture.
2. Questions are asked when the teacher is running of presenting materials.
3. Questions are raised as a strategy to enhance their authority and power
4. To establish teachers' epistemological superiority
5. Questions can be a mode of testing but teaching-learning!

To the issue of students raising questions in the class, most teachers believe that students being learners cannot pose questions to teachers. They are emphatic in their belief system that students do not have any background knowledge and experience of the subject

being introduced in class. They are like patients who cannot question the wisdom of the physician!

Research questions

The researcher began the investigation with the following research questions to keep track of his attention on the object of the study and investigation:

1. What constitutes postmodernity and how is it related to ESL?
2. Who are postmodern learners and teachers?
3. What is the functional value of questions for teachers and learners?

Review of Literature

Orland (2001) argues that effective questioning by teachers can have significant impact on learners' learning and the learning outcomes. Again, **Chan** & **Zahar (2013)** claim that effective questioning can promote teaching, learning, and learning activities. Meanwhile, **Costas Gabrielatos (1997)** discusses the different types of questions and their functions and establishes that posing questions can facilitate teaching-learning process. Going a step further, **Jane D Hill & Kathleen Flynn (2008)** argue that teachers' questions can build students' English language skills though teachers tend to ask lower-level cognitive questions that ask students to recall or recognize information rather than higher-level cognitive questions that require students to analyze and evaluate knowledge. They also argue that teachers should improve their questioning skills that include the alignment between questions and students' stage of language acquisition. **Junyi Meng**, **Tao Zhao**, & **Athithouthay Chattouphonexay (2012)** report that both teachers and learners benefit from teacher questions simply because they help teachers keep students actively engaged in the lesson or listening to lectures and stimulate them to keep thinking.

Research Hypothesis

The following hypothesis was formulated for validation in the study:

Raising questions promotes English language teaching-learning processes

Theoretical Reflection & Discussion

Literary theories, particularly postmodern theories, influence the English language pedagogy by redefining the role of both teachers and learners. Of course, a postmodern perspective cannot be applied to English language learning and teaching without inherent paradoxes and problems. The twenty first century classroom is characteristically postmodern because the learners are postmodern netizens. The postmodern condition is constituted by a host of assertions. Some of them are

1. There is no real truth
2. Knowledge is always manufactured or invented and not discovered

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IBI FACTOR: 2.9

3. Nothing can be known with certainty. All ideas and facts are 'believed' instead of 'known'

4. The individual cannot experience enhanced existence without the necessary support of community

5. Everything achieved by humans "is inherently open to revision"

At the same time, a postmodern perspective cannot provide ideal prescriptions as much as communicative language teaching and learner autonomy since postmodern thinking is not a collection of prescriptions, but diverse ideas that seek to interpret the human condition. Human efforts at innovations directly reflect personal and professional experiences in the postmodern condition. Postmodern perspectives reveal serious challenges to teachers' assumptions about approaches to education in general or English language teaching in particular which can be understood as 'learner-centred' or 'humanistic' or growth-oriented. In other words, such perspectives provide space for critical reflection over recent innovations in language teaching.

How is postmodernity related to English language teaching? At the outset, it should be remembered that there is a clash of reconstructionist and deconstructionist theories in the sense that the former views learning as a community and therefore students should rely on this sense of community to find meaning and success in language learning. On the other hand, the latter relies on individualism which is seen as the key to societal success rather than community as a whole. **Ferris (2009)** asserts that postmodernity helps students think critically and express themselves effectively in the target language rather than persuade them to accept one's worldview on any issue. At the same time, **Brown (2004)** puts the onerous responsibility on teachers who, according to him, ought to provide opportunities about issues through developing critical thinking. The role of the teacher in modern and postmodern classroom can be compared and contrasted:

	Modern	**Postmodern**
1	The source and transmitter of knowledge & the bearer of correct and appropriate forms, meanings, and interpretations.	A co-learner
2	A judge and arbiter. He legitimizes what is correct & acceptable	A facilitator of research process: learners be confronted with key decisions to be made & the teacher will seek alternative preferences
3	The manager of the teaching-learning process. He is the leader, parent, messiah	Mobilizes learner reflection and self-monitoring so that learners can refine their learning agendas

A postmodern learner displays all or some of the following attributes that characterize them as 21st century learners or as tech-savvy learners and as 'millennials' (**Neill Howe** & **William Strauss** 1993 & 2003).

1. They seek instant gratification, look for the best deal, want to negotiate, and to become litigious if disappointed. They see themselves as special starts

2. They believe that education is supposed to be entertaining, easy and fun.

3. They feel that they are entitled to receive the product (course credits) for simply having paid for the course. Since nothing is absolute in the postmodern world, then everything is negotiable. The syllabus represents a starting place for bargaining academic expectations

4. They have notoriously poor critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and long-term planning skills, but they are adept at adjusting to various situations and expectations

5. They look so independent and self-interested; they meet their own needs from the available resources. At the same time, they are the most academically disengaged

6. They tend to question authority and traditional sources of knowledge; they question the veracity of information and place greater importance on subjective and personal experience. They view the social institutions of government, the media, religion, and business/economy as corrupt and untrustworthy

7. They believe that they cannot know all that they need to know or to meaningfully control their lives. They tend to be more comfortable with cultural, racial, and sexual orientation diversity

8. They tend to be very comfortable with technology, but impatient with lack of technological sophistication

The purpose of questioning can range from drawing learners' attention and participation, checking their comprehension and evaluating their learning outcomes to provoking discussion and enhancing critical thinking. Teachers can use and encourage learners to use varieties of questions like closed and open ended questions, convergent and divergent questions, display and inferential questions. But scholars contend that these questions are applied for basic level of cognitive learning and lack the drive to link teaching-learning contents and procedures with learning outcomes. **Paul** and **Elder (2005)** argue that poor questioning technique cannot produce deeper understanding of how learners develop rationale, judgment, and understanding. Besides, effective questioning reduces teacher talk time (TTT) and promotes learners' participation through their talking (LTT). In turn, it demands teacher expertise in high level cognitive questioning such as Socrates technique.

Teachers need not overemphasize the view that student engagement is important, but how do teachers of English in India engage English language learners in class? Questions can influence students' performance and achievement. In fact, they can act as a mediator. **Hill** and **Flynn (2006)** recommend that if teachers use questions as often as possible through out a lesson, they can provide learners with opportunities to use the language and teachers

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IBI FACTOR: 2.9

with chances to assess how learners understand the content being presented. There is a correlation between the stages of language production and stage-appropriate questions. **Krashen** and **Terrell (1983)** have identified five stages of language production: production, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency. **Hilly** and **Flynn (2008)** have tiered questions at each stage as follows:

Stage 1: Show me or who is or where is…?

Stage 2: Yes or no, either…or, who what, how many?

Stage 3: Why, how? Questions that require a short sentence response

Stage 4: What would happen if…? Why do you think…? Questions that require more than one sentence response

Stage 5: Decide if…, retell

However, though teachers tend to questions in the class more frequently than they think, they do not realize that they heavily depend on cues and questions. **Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock (2001: 119)** affirm that questions and cues "are at the heart of classroom practice." Ironically, they often do not discriminate between lower-level and higher-level questions. Rather, they tend to raise lower-level questions that demand students simply to recall or recognize information, and to evaluate and analyze knowledge. This is partly due to the teacher belief that learners cannot respond to higher-level questions. This is not actually true for two reasons. One, teachers must be conscious of students' stages of language production. Two, they should equally be conscious of the levels of questions that they ask students everyday. Bloom's Taxonomy makes a distinction between lower-level and higher-level abstraction of questions.

Students who are unable to use English in English language classes or in English medium classes are effectively prevented from any meaningful education. ELLs are defined as students who do not understand enough English to learn without support in mainstream classrooms. They lag far behind those who use English and most of their parents are unlikely to have had a formal education or to speak English. It leads to a dependent situation where most students rely on English language teachers for their survival. Unfortunately, there is a severe shortage of qualified competent teachers of English as foreign language in India. One of the powerful skills of English language teaching is teacher's ability to question learners according to their stage of language proficiency. In practice, teachers do not pose questions in the class on the basis of learner's proficiency and they do not consciously select questions of different types with explicit functions either.

Teacher questions are the most vibrant medium of interaction between teachers and learners in English language classes. They must be exploited in an effective way. It is possible only when teachers are aware of the type of questions asked and of their pedagogical

implications for the teaching-learning processes. Teachers can, for instance, raise 'yes or no' questions that demand learners to take a stand; or open-ended questions that demand unexpected responses; or convergent questions that demand one fixed response; or divergent questions that demand a wide range of responses. The questions can cover a wide range of themes, such classroom management, language skills, grammar, understanding, and discourses.

Teachers can influence learners' performance through engagement. Engagement should facilitate learners in learning. Encouraging them to ask questions is a powerful strategy through which quality interaction between learner and learner and between teacher and learner. **Tucker** et al **(2005: 29)** report that "teachers exert a potent influence over the achievement of students," they often have "lower expectations for and fewer interactions with … students." Normally, it doesn't happen even in subjects classes.

Humans use questions every day. Much of their everyday conversations involve either asking questions or answering them. Yet, they do not use the skills of questioning to their full advantage. Some people who are good at communication gather information from others and they are able to maximize effective workplace communication through the use of skilled questioning techniques. They know how to ask the same question in different ways in order to secure different responses. It is therefore quite possible for both teachers and learners to improve their questioning skills by becoming aware of the different types of questions. As a result, they can use a variety of questioning styles and know when a specific type of question will have the maximum impact.

Basically, there are two question types: open question and closed question. An open question allows a person to answer in any way they want. For instance, "How are you finding the field study report?" does not have one fixed way of answering. On the other hand, a closed question asks for specific information like 'yes' or 'no.' For example, the question "Have you completed the analysis?" requires the response of either 'yes' or 'no.' The main advantages of open type questions are

1. They encourage people to talk and expand the theme or topic
2. They serve to loosen up the free flow of responses
3. They are useful to secure the widest possible responses from the candidates at interviews and the students in the classroom
4. They can also reveal the person's personality in terms of how well they express themselves without any prop and guidance
5. Open type questions are likely to start with words that begin with 'wh' like how, what, when, why not, which…
6. They gather more information as in the following exchange:
   Teacher: How did the break go?

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IBI FACTOR: 2.9

Student: Well… actually, I felt a bit lost. The teacher who handles the second hour overstays and by the time we go to canteen it is either overcrowded or nothing is available. I was wondering if the administration could restore the earlier timetable…

Teacher: That's unfortunate. We never thought about it. Anyway, we will discuss all these problems in the next Senatus meeting.

Closed types questions are also equally useful and advantageous in certain contexts:

1. They encourage short responses
2. They are highly useful to check on details and establish facts
3. Inexperienced communicators can start with closed types and move on to the open type
4. Closed type questions can easily be recognized since they start with words like 'do… is… can… could… will… would… shall… and should…'
5. They limit communication as in the following exchange:
   Teacher: Did the break go ok?

   Student: Well, yes, more or less

   Teacher: Great! see you tomorrow

6. They are useful to close down the rambling response
   Though the distinction is quite straight forward and easy to understand, we are often used to asking the more direct, closed version with the contextually rigid responses as in the following:

Teacher: Hi! How are things going?

Student: Oh! fine thanks.

While the closed type questions are useful in establishing facts, if they are overused, They are likely to sound as if the other person is being interrogated. It is therefore advisable to use 'question, answer, comment' structure in stead of 'question, answer, question, answer' structure. Besides, it can not only soften the questions but also indicate that you are paying close attention to the answers as well. However, it is strategically wise to frequently use open ended questions with closed types occasionally to seek clarification within the same context of situation so that complex issues can be explored. Of course, both the types are useful in gathering information and for meaningful communication. For instance, the following dialogue between a curious father and a normally uncommunicative child can be examined:

Father: What did you do at school, John?

Raju: Nothing much

Father: I'm sure you did. Did you do any painting then?

Raju:	Yes

Father:	Great! you love painting. What did you paint?

Raju: about and	Lots of trees. We went out on expedition last Friday and we found different types of trees. There are some that drop leaves in the Autumn and others that don't. All my trees kept their leaves.

Father:	That sounds fun. Where did you go on your outing?

Raju: played	Expedition, dad! to the Alagar Hills. We ate our packed lunches. We under the trees afterwards.

When father asked an open type question, it did not give him the information he needed. But once he changed the strategy by asking a closed type question, the information just starts flooding.

Of course, there are other more advanced type questions. Some of them are probing/clarifying questions, reflective questions, direct questions, and hypothetical questions. These questions are extensions of both open and closed types.

Probing/clarifying questions serve to build on the person's previous answers, comments, and responses. They are used for further exploration of information already established. They also demonstrate that they are being actively listened to. Some of these questions look like the following:

1. Tell me more about it?
2. What did you say next?
3. How did the accident happen?
4. Can you tell me why?
5. What do you mean?
6. Can you give me an example?
7. Who else spoke?
8. Were you there when it happened?
9. Why couldn't say it to them there itself?
10. Not happy? What was wrong with his response?

However, probing questions need to be tackled carefully because the person addressed should not feel that they are being interrogated. To overcome it, a brief summary of what the other person said can precede each of such questions. It will make the communication more relaxed.

Reflective questions are statement or comments said with an appropriate interrogative intonation so that they will soften the questioning and demonstrate that the speaker is being listened to. They constitute a typical short summary of what the other person

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IBI FACTOR: 2.9

has said and they look like a kind of paraphrasing. The following exchange, for instance, can be examined:

Employee: It's just that I'm feeling really pressure with the conference arrangements and then I slept in this morning and just managed to make it here in time. I missed the bus and walked all the way to the office.

Manager: It sounds like you had a bad morning. You were saying you were under pressure making arrangements for the conference?

[Its equivalent probing question could be: In what way are you feeling pressure?]

Hypothetical questions encourage the other person to reflect on issues through previously unconsidered options. They are also often used in interview situations to test the creativity and mental agility of prospective employees. For instance,

1. What other strengths would you like us to consider if you want us to appoint you to the position?
2. What other questions would you ask your patient if they also presented with shortness of breath?
3. If you had the extra financial support, how would you improve the working conditions of your wing?
4. If employees agitated over better service conditions, how would you convince them about the present financial crunch the company is facing?

Direct questions that can be either open or close type tend to have the following two traits:

1. You always use the name of the person while posing the direct question.
2. You pose the question as an instruction.

Direct questions are useful in the context of seeking specific information and getting the other person's attention. A direct question looks like the following:

1. Tell me, George….
2. Explain to me, John…
3. Describe to me, Jane

When you look at each phrase carefully, you can understand that by using the person's name, you secure their attention, and by phrasing questions like instruction, you seek specific information. Compare the following closed question and direct question and see how they function differently:

1. Did you get a chance to meet the principal for discussion on the seminar?
2. Tell me Joe, what are the issues you have finalized for discussion with the principal?

One may not need to use all these questioning types and techniques in any given communication contexts and situations, they can be very useful in filtering down information

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (G E O R J)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education and Creative Writing

I S S N
2454-5511
IBI FACTOR: 2.9

to the bare bones that you need. The following table presents a summary of relative advantages of each questioning type and one can use it as a checklist.

S.No	Question type	Use
1	Open questions	For more information
2	Closed questions	For specific information or a yes/no response
3	Probing questions	For added detail
4	Reflective questions	To get the other back on track
5	Hypothetical questions	To get the other to think/reflect
6	Direct questions	An instruction to get attention

Conclusions

Contemporary teachers and learners are part and parcel of postmodern reality. Interaction is the mantra of a successful language classroom. It is made possible through raising questions of different types for eliciting information and enhancing critical sensibility. There is nothing to offer through classroom lectures. Negotiation through interaction is the only way for them to learn language and to create reality. Teachers no longer enjoy the sage-on-the-stage status since they partner with learners in the learning process. Moreover, learners are encouraged to use learner autonomy judiciously so that they can become lifelong learners.

References

Breen, M.P. 1999. Teaching language in postmodern classroom. In R.Ribe. (Ed) **Developng   Learner Autonomy in Foreign *Language** [pp.47-64].* Barcelona: University of   Barcelona

Brown, H.D. 2004. Some Practical Thoughts about Student Sensitive Critical Pedagogy. **The   Language Teacher**, 28.7.   Accessed on Friday 20 Nov 2015 at http://jalt-   publications.org/tlt/articles/692-some-practical-thoughts-about-student-sensitive-critical-   pedagogy

Chan, H & Zahar, I.   2013. **Maximizing Learning Outcomes by Socratic Questioning: Exploring the Pedagogical Applications and Challenges among Language Lecturers   at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan**. Munchen: **GRIN Verlag GmbH.**

Ferris, D.R. 2009. Power and Change in ELT: Thoughts from a Fellow Traveller. In Eds.   M.S. Wong & S. Canagarajah. **Christian and Critical English Language Educators in   Dialogue: Pedagogical and Ethical Dilemmas**. [pp.205-] London: Routledge.

Gabrielatos, C. (1997). A question of function: Teacher questions in the EFL classroom.   Paper given at **18th Annual TESOL Greece Convention**, National Bank of

Greece   Training Centre, Glyfada, Greece, 12-13 April 1997. Accessed on Tuesday 11 August   2015 https://www.academia.edu

Hill, J.D & Flynn, K. (2008). Asking the right question. **Journal of Staff Development**,   29.1: 46-52.

Hill, J.D & Flynn, K. 2006. Classroom instruction that works with English language   learners. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Hill, J.D & Flynn, K. 2008. Asking the right questions. National Staff Development   Council, 29.1: 46-52.

Howe, N & Strauss, W (1993/2003). **13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?** London: Vintage Books.

Marzano, R.J., Pickering, D.J., & Pollock, J.E. 2001.**Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement**, Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Meng, J, Zhao, T, & Chattouphonexay, A. (2012). Teacher Questions in a Content-based   Classroom for EFL Young Learners. **Theory and Practice in Language Studies**, 2.12:   2603-2610.

Orland, L. 2001. Reading a mentoring situation: one aspect of learning to become a mentor.   **Teaching and Teacher Education**, 17: 75-88.

Tucker, C.M., Porter, T., Reinke, W.M., Herman, K.C., Ivery, P.D., Mack, C.E., & Jackson,   E.S. (2005)**.** Promoting teacher efficacy for working with culturally diverse students.   **Preventing School Failure**, 50.1: 29-34.