INSTRUCTORS' AND LEARNERS' QUESTIONING:
A CASE OF EFL CLASSROOM DISCOURSE IN IRAN

Reza Rezvani *
Assistant Professor
Yasouj University
rezvanireza@gmail.com

Ali Sayyadi
MA, TEFL
Yasouj University
alisayadi1989@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study was an attempt to examine how questioning was treated by EFL instructors and learners at a private language center in Yasouj, Iran. This study also intended to explore the types of questions posed by the EFL instructors and learners in different course levels and to scrutinize the extent to which the instructors' classroom behaviors were geared towards enhancing the learners' capacity to raise English questions. To accomplish such objectives, classes, from the same institute and with different levels were selected to be carefully observed. The researchers utilized a checklist of question types along with observation field notes to obtain a numeric summary and an in-depth description of the participants' intended behaviors in the classrooms. The analysis of the numeric data through descriptive statistics and one way ANOVA along with content analysis of the observational data indicated that the instructors teaching in classes with lower proficiency levels practiced questioning more substantially and, unlike their peers teaching in higher levels, mainly resorted to display questions to achieve their pedagogical objectives. Seldom did the learners, regardless of their proficiency levels, venture to phrase English questions, and often appeared anxious and resorted to their first language when they were to pose questions. Further, the instructors' classroom behaviors hardly intended to enhance the learners' capacity in asking English questions. This study bears the implications of the findings for language instructors and learners in the context of EFL teaching and learning.

Keywords: classroom interaction, referential questions, display questions, instructors' questions, learners' questions, questioning ability

1. Introduction

An ordinary everyday conversation occurring in real life discourse is a highly organized and socially ordered phenomenon, for the purpose of which conversation participants need to understand and respond to one another to interactively organize their social activities such as requests, proposals, apologies, and appreciations (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). People's ability to pose questions not only enables them to make well-structured naturally occurring conversations (Yule, 2006), but also helps them accomplish a number of communicative goals in real life situations (Ausubel, 1968; Brown &Yule, 1983). Presumed as one of the essential components of oral communicative skill, asking questions might be used as an indication for speakers "to mark their turns as complete" (Yule, 2006, p. 128), and as an indispensable element in helping them perform various speech acts such as requesting, inviting, and probing. Therefore, questioning ability appears to be of substantial import to be acquired by those seeking to learn a language.

Learning is claimed to occur best in an authentic environment, in interaction with other partners, and in real situations that have a direct association with the experience or life of the learner (Hart, 1986; Nummela & Rosengren, 1986). Although classrooms do not construct purely authentic communicative environments, they present a wealth of opportunities for social interactions among pupils and between teachers and pupils (Powell & Powell, 2010). Instructor-learner and learner-learner interactions are perceived to enhance language learners' learning status considerably and extend their oral language use from classroom to real life situations (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002; Mercer, 2000). Mercer and Littleton (2007) accordingly argued that "for a teacher to teach and a student to learn, they must use talk and joint activity to create and negotiate a shared communicative space" (p. 21). Such a communicative space is presumed to be created best in classrooms through raising questions expected to elicit particular responses known to the questioner, referred to as display questions, along with questions assumed to provoke language learners' thoughts, opinions, and reasons, defined as referential questions (Gibbons, 2003; Long & Sato, 1983; Renshaw & Brown, 2007). Once the communicative space is established, teachers are

able to extend students' content knowledge and strategic thinking through further dialogues (Gibbons, 2003; Renshaw & Brown, 2007).

Eliciting learners' thoughts, reasons, experiences, and opinions, questioning is at the heart of dialogic approaches to teaching (McNeil, 2012). Arguing on the significance of instructors' questions, Cotton (2004) maintained that effective questioning should give rise to stimulating interest in new subjects, ideas, and challenges as well as encouraging language learners to be reflective about their own beliefs, assumptions and comprehension of new topics. In addition, questioning practiced on the part of the instructors is perceived as a fruitful strategy which enhances students' analytical and communicative capacities and offers advantages for developing students' word power, encouraging them to extend their conversations (Harlen & Qualter, 2004).

Learners' questions, as well, appear to play a priming role in meaningful learning and can be very revealing about the quality of language learners' thinking and conceptual understanding, their reasoning, their confusion about various concepts, and what they want to know (Almeida, 2011; Almeida & Neri-de-Souza, 2010). Specifically, questioning helps language learners direct their learning as they try to merge their prior knowledge and new information in their attempts to make sense of ideas (Almeida, 2011). Thus, not surprisingly, students' low levels of questioning and explaining have been reported to be correlated with lower achievement (Watts, Gould, & Alsop, 1997).

Accomplishment of language instructors' pedagogic objectives along with enhancement of learners' potentiality for constructing well-formed interactions and fulfilling various social and academic objectives are firmly tied up with both instructors' and learners' practice of questioning in classroom discourse. However, a growing literature (see Almeida & Neri de Souza, 2010; Graesser & Person, 1994; Willis & Willis, 2007) emphasizes that learners' practice of questioning, unlike that of instructors, has been largely neglected in language learning classrooms. Thus, the current study attempts to examine the extent to which questioning is practiced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and instructors in a private language

center in Iran. It also strives to examine and identify the types of questions raised by language instructors and learners in courses with different levels.

2. Review of Literature

Imparting knowledge to a new generation of learners is primarily an interactional activity (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002). As the literature on cultural variations in educational practices indicates, instructional activities, in varying societies, are implemented through different ways of organizing interaction (Margutti, 2006; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). However, asking questions has been presumed as one of the most conventionally utilized teaching and learning practices in classroom context (Almeida, 2012; Graesser & Olde, 2003; Margutti, 2006). In other words, "questions and answers are the most prevalent instructional tools in a long standing pedagogic tradition in which the centrality of questions in teaching is widely recognized and which is claimed to have come down all the way from Socrates" (Margutti, 2006, p. 314).

Review of related literature substantially highlights instructors' heavy reliance on questioning as the main pedagogical practice (Almeida, 2012; Chin & Osborne, 2008; Floyd, 1960; Graesser & Olde, 2003). In his study on classroom behaviors of 40 elementary instructors, Floyd (1960), for instance, suggested that more than 93% of the classroom questions were posed by the instructors. Such findings are aligned with those suggested in a more recent study conducted by Almeida and Neri de Souza (2010), where they examined secondary science teachers and concluded that the questioning patterns found some decades ago are still prevalent, with teachers clearly dominating the classroom discourse. Instructors' effective questions potentially simulate students' thinking and reasoning (Nicholl & Tracey, 2007; Sachdeva, 1996), keep them involved in the learning process and activity (Margutti, 2006), and challenge their assumptions and prior knowledge (Petty, 1998).

As an essential component of discursive activity and dialectical thinking (Chin & Osborne, 2008), questions posed by learners indicate their level of language proficiency (Watts, Gould, & Alsop., 1997), let students benefit from various explanations of the material by their peers (Cotton, 2003), and enable them to direct their learning as they try to merge their prior knowledge

and new information in their attempts to make sense of these ideas (Almeida, 2012). Despite the educational import attributed to learner questioning, review of the related literature reveals that learners pose very few questions in classrooms. Reporting in their study that the participating learners raised, on average, only one question per week, Graesser and Person (1994), for instance, critically argued that questioning is an act solely practiced by instructors and not learners. This supports Willis and Willis' (2007) critical argument on the current classroom status, where they cited that "the normal procedure in classroom is for *teachers to ask* questions and for *students to answer* them" (p. 43).

Questions have been variously classified into different types. However, as far as a questioner's knowledge of the potential responses to his/her question is concerned, Long and Sato's (1983) dichotomy of display and referential questions might be a frequent frame of reference. Display questions are assumed to exert substantial influence on learning and teaching practices. In classes where learners are supposed to master language forms, such questions are considerably fruitful (Gall, 1984). In addition, display questions are arguably more practical and useful to enhance the language proficiency of learners with more limited capacities (David, 2007; Qashoa, 2013; Shomoossi, 2004). One striking case in point was David's (2007) study on Nigerian secondary schools to investigate the distribution of display and referential questions and to explore their effects on English as a Second Language (ESL) class interactions. The results of his study revealed that display questions significantly outnumbered referential ones in such schools, and that display questions served learners' language developments more noticeably than referential ones. Display questions, on the other hand, are blamed for tapping learners' cognitively lower capacities and turning the classroom context more teacher-centered and form-focused (see Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Ellis, 1994). As Edwards and Westgate (1994) argued, display questions merely elicit pieces of information which are predictable and consequently obviate negotiation of meaning.

The literature on classroom dialogues identifies referential questions as an important situational variable that help students produce extended turns of talk and provide a means for instructors and learners to co-construct

knowledge (Boyd & Rubin, 2002; Mercer, 2000). Referential questions encourage learners to comprehend and produce target language (L2) that reflects their own thinking and provides opportunities for instructors to assist in those processes. Known as higher level questions, referential questions potentially elicit responses which merit evaluation, synthesis, and/or analysis. Therefore, giving spontaneous response to referential questions is assumed as a clear indicator of higher achievements in second/foreign language (L2) learning (Brock, 1986; McNeil, 2012). While teachers are encouraged to use such questions frequently in their classrooms, the literature is replete with instances where English language learners are stifled by referential questions (see Gibbons, 2003; Shomoossi, 2004; Suk-a-nake, Heaton, Chantrupanth, & Rorex, 2003; Wu, 1993). For example, Suk-a-nake et al. (2003) reported language learners' struggles with referential questions. They collected observation and interview data from Thai university students of varying English proficiency levels with the aim to understand student responses to L2 questions. The results of their study unveiled the point that only students at high English proficiency levels could answer all question types. Low proficiency students ran into different troubles when answering the questions calling for opinions, evaluations, or analyses (i.e., referential questions).

As suggested by the review of literature, examination of Iranian EFL instructors' and learners' practice of questioning in classrooms has been under-researched. The incentive behind the present case study was to conduct a close examination of how questioning ability was treated by language instructors and learners at a private language center in Iran. The study was also motivated to closely explore, describe, and compare the types of questions posed by language instructors and learners in different course levels and to scrutinize the extent to which the instructors' classroom behaviors intended to enhance language learners' capacities to pose English questions.

3. Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were addressed:
1. How is questioning practiced by EFL instructors and learners in different course levels (lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced) in the private language institute?

2. How comparable is EFL instructors' and learners' practice of questioning in different course levels (lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced) in the private language institute?

3. What types of English questions, if any, are raised by EFL instructors and learners in different course levels (lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced) in the private language institute?

4. How far do the EFL instructors attempt to promote their learners' questioning ability in different course levels (lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced) in the private language institute?

4. Method

Case studies are presumed to generate particularistic, descriptively rich, and heuristic delineations of intended issues in the totality of the environment (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2006). Accordingly, the current case study aimed to generate descriptive and particularistic characterization of how questioning ability is treated by English instructors and learners in an Iranian EFL classroom environment in Yasouj, Iran.

4.1 Participants

The study was undertaken at a private language center in Yasouj, Iran. According to documents of Education Organization in Yasouj, this institute had held the longest history, demonstrated normally the most noticeable educational qualities, and admitted the largest number of learners for ten consecutive years in Yasouj.

To examine the extent to which participants' questioning might vary depending on the course level, one class from each level was randomly selected and observed from among the available lower intermediate ($n = 7$), intermediate ($n = 9$), upper intermediate ($n = 6$), and advanced ($n = 4$) classes. All classes were co-educated, ranging in the number of students from 11 to 14. The age of the learners attending the four observed classes ranged from 14 to 29. The class instructors were four native Persian speakers (three males and one female) with 26 to 35 years of age and had experience in teaching English for at least five years.

4.2 Data collection procedure

A mixed method of quantitative and qualitative classroom observations was utilized to categorize and investigate the intended classroom behaviors. More specifically, use was made of a question type checklist, which helped one of the researchers to identify and tally the type of questions raised when observing the class interactions. It involved two columns with a few descriptively characteristic features of question types above them. Observation notes were also taken to obtain more in-depth description of the participants' natural behaviors in the classrooms. In order to develop detailed, extensive and accurate field notes, the guidelines to writing field notes were followed, as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). In other words, an attempt was made to record everything observed, heard or experienced during the observation sessions, to develop the field notes immediately after the observations, and to maintain the naturalness of the situations through making the observations in a way not noticeable to the subjects. One of the researchers carried out the observation and kept observing each class for eight sessions up to data saturation and coherence.

4.3 Data analysis

The data collected through quantitative observations of the intended classrooms were analyzed through descriptive statistics and one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to indicate a numeric summary of occurrence of the observed behaviors in the classrooms and to examine whether they differed significantly in the four levels, respectively.

To analyze the data accumulated through qualitative classroom observations, constant content analyses were employed as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967).These analyses involved a process of repeated sifting through the data to distinguish similarities and patterns of reference in the collected data. Analyses of these similarities and patterns gradually led to an evolving coding system for the categories. More specifically, during the process of the content analysis, the units of analysis and coding schemes were defined and developed. The codes were subsequently transformed into categorical labels or themes that were repeated or appeared as patterns in the observations. This procedure, according to Patton (2002), is intended to help

researchers in "developing some manageable classification or coding scheme" as "the first step of analysis" (p. 463). Once coherence and saturation of the data were accomplished, conclusions were drawn based on the analyzed data.

5. Results
5.1 The instructors' practice of questioning
Table 1 provides a descriptive statistics for the number of questions posed by the language instructors in the observed classes.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the language instructors' classroom questioning

Level	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
LI	93	145	114	18.696
IN	50	71	62	7.026
UI	30	41	36	3.625
AD	25	40	33	4.803

Note. LI = Lower intermediate; IN = Intermediate; UI = Upper intermediate; AD = Advanced.

As Table 1 suggests, as the level of the classes increased, fewer questions, on average, were utilized by the instructors. Compared with other instructors, questioning was most and far considerably practiced by the language instructor teaching at the lower intermediate level (about 114 questions, on average, per session).Motivating the less proficient learners to speak out in English was noted as a marked underlying reason for his strong tendency to fall back on numerous questions. A good case in point is the following dialogue highlighting the instructor's reliance on questioning to converse with a learner in the initial session of the same course.

Instructor: *Can you introduce yourself please?*
Learner: *[Silence].*
Instructor: *What is your name?*
Learner: *Sara.*
Instructor: *Nice to meet you Sara. Where are you from?*
Learner: *I am come from Yasouj.*

Instructor: *Nice. I am from Yasouj too. Now, can you tell me how old you are?*
Learner: *[silence].*
Instructor: *O.K. Do you know the meaning of age? Age.*
Learner: *Yes.*
Instructor*: Good, can you tell me your age?*
Learner: *20.*

As it is illustrated above, when the instructor's exemplification and modeling failed to provoke the learner to introduce herself completely, he resorted to further, yet smaller, questions to prompt her to respond at least briefly.

As far as the same class and level are concerned, qualitative data analysis further suggested that the lower intermediate learners did not often initiate learner-instructor or learner-learner interactions, and except when they were exposed to the instructor's questions, rarely did they use English in the classroom. Hence, not surprisingly, questioning was frequently employed by the instructor as an effective strategy to prompt these less proficient learners to use English.

An overall finding emerging from the qualitative analysis of the observations was the pattern that the instructors practiced questioning decreasingly in more proficient classes. In other words, the higher the interactive capacity of the students, the more their opportunities and turns to pose their own questions and to express their opinions, feelings, and experiences. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run to determine if the instructors' practice of questioning was significantly different in the observed classes. This is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. One factor ANOVA for the instructors' practice of questioning

	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	34155.706	3	11385.235	106.670	.000
Within Groups	3095.264	29	106.733		
Total	37250.970	32			

The results of Table 2 indicate that there was a highly significant difference among the instructors in terms of posing questions, $F = 106.670$, $p < 0.05$. Using a Tukey Post-hoc test, multiple pair-wise comparisons were run

between the instructors' practice of questioning to detect where the difference lies (see Table 3).

Table 3. Multiple pair-wise comparisons between the instructors' practice of questioning

(I) Teacher level	(J) Teacher Level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	IN	52.764[*1]	5.020	.000	39.09	66.44
LI	UI	78.875[*]	5.166	.000	64.80	92.95
	AD	81.125[*]	5.166	.000	67.05	95.20
	LI	-52.764[*]	5.020	.000	-66.44	-39.09
IN	UI	26.111[*]	5.020	.000	12.43	39.79
	AD	28.361[*]	5.020	.000	14.68	42.04
	LI	-78.875[*]	5.166	.000	-92.95	-64.80
UI	IN	-26.111[*]	5.020	.000	-39.79	-12.43
	AD	2.250	5.166	.972	-11.82	16.32
	LI	-81.125[*]	5.166	.000	-95.20	-67.05
	IN	-28.361[*]	5.020	.000	-42.04	-14.68
AD	UI	-2.250	5.166	.972	-16.32	11.82

Note. The Asterisks Indicate Significant Differences; LI = Lower intermediate; IN = Intermediate; UI = Upper intermediate; AD = Advanced.

The results in Table 3 suggest that the instructors teaching at the lower intermediate and intermediate classes employed a significantly different number of questions in their classroom practices in comparison with other observed instructors. Nonetheless, no significant difference was detected between the instructors of the upper intermediate and advanced courses in terms of frequency of questions used. In an attempt to uncover the underlying reasons, we reflected closely on the observation notes of these two classes. We noted that both instructors appeared to establish learner-oriented contexts and design tasks which more considerably tapped into the learners' evaluative and analytical competences. Therefore, considerable time of each session in these two classes, unlike the other classes with lower levels, was devoted to learners' practice of discussing various subjects to fulfill the tasks raised.

5.2 The learners' practice of questioning

Table 4 descriptively demonstrates the number of questions formulated on the part of the learners with varying language proficiency levels.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the language learners' classroom
questioning

Level	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
LI	0	4	1.25	1.488
IN	0	3	1.00	1.118
UI	0	5	1.12	2.100
AD	0	5	2.63	2.493

Note. LI = Lower intermediate; IN = Intermediate; UI = Upper intermediate; AD = Advanced.

Table 4 suggests that questioning ability was not practiced very often by the language learners. The number of English questions raised by all learners in each of the observed courses did not exceed three, on average, per session.

Regarding the lower intermediate class, an analysis of the data revealed that after the two initial sessions during which the learners asked seven English questions, they ventured to phrase only three English questions during other observed sessions. Rarely were the learners induced by their instructor to plan and practice student-student interactions, and in their interactions with their instructor, the instructor basically undertook question making and prompted the learners to respond to his own questions.

Questioning ability was also neglected by the language learners in intermediate and upper intermediate levels. The striking point emerging from the data is that they, despite their apparently more language-related experience and capacities, posed, on average, fewer questions compared with their lower intermediate counterparts. Three and six continuous sessions went on without any practice of questioning on the part of the language learners in these two courses. Besides, observations revealed that although the upper intermediate language learners demonstrated remarkable analytical and evaluative capacities while arguing over the issues raised in the classroom, they refrained from using English when it came to posing questions and employed their first language (L1) instead. Interestingly, once when one of the learners was arguing on a controversial discussion topic, she asked her instructor, in Persian, if she could ask a question. Encountering her instructor's insistence on posing questions in English, the learner ignored to phrase her question and retorted, *Forget it.*

Although the advanced learners, similar to their upper intermediate peers, seemed proficient in reasoning their insights into the issues raised by their instructor, they appeared quite anxious when they had to put forward questions to hold on to their discussions and frequently resorted to their L1 to tackle the problem. However, the results shown in Table 4 indicate that the advanced language learners posed most questions on average among all levels. In order to explore the statistical significance of such differences one way ANOVA was performed (see Table 5).

Table 5. One way ANOVA for the learners' practice of questioning in different levels

	SS	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Between Groups	13.367	3	4.456	2.272	.101
Within Groups	56.875	29	1.961		
Total	70.242	32			

The results of Table 5 reveal that no significant difference was detected among the observed learners in terms of practicing English questioning in language classrooms, $F = 2.272$, $p = .101$. In other words, questioning ability was not run through considerably by the learners in the observed classes. One behavior commonly practiced by the learners in the four levels was that they were observed to pose Persian rather than English questions in their attempts to appeal to their instructor for permission, breaks, further explanations, statement repetition, class time modification, and so forth.

5.3 Types of questions raised by the instructors

The present study further sought to identify the types of the questions employed by the instructors. Table 6 illustrates the percentages of referential and display questions employed by the instructors.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for the types of questions utilized by the instructors

Level (question type)	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*%*	*SD*
LI (display)	73	139	100.88	88.1	23.245
LI (referential)	6	24	13.75	11.9	6.756
IN (display)	24	50	34.89	56.1	9.597
IN(referential)	18	35	27.22	43.9	5.191
UI (display)	10	18	13.38	37.5	2.615
UI (referential)	20	26	22.50	62.5	2.204
AD (display)	10	16	13.38	38.8	2.068
AD (referential)	16	26	20.63	61.2	3.068

Note. LI = Lower intermediate; IN = Intermediate; UI = Upper intermediate; AD = Advanced

Table 6 indicates that as the proficiency level of the observed classes increased, the degree of the language instructors' reliance on display questions decreased, and referential questions were utilized by the instructors more recurrently. However, the proportions of the display and referential questions employed in the advanced course did not involve dramatic changes in comparison with those in the upper intermediate one.

The highest frequency of display questions in the lower intermediate coursehighlights the instrumentality of such questions in planning and practicing pedogogical classroom behaviors on the part of the instructor. Analysis of the qualitative observations indicates that the instructor frequently utilized display questions to review the previously instructed contents, vocabulary and grammatical notes as well as to help the learners comprehend the new grammatical structures. For instance, the instructor recurrently posed questions about the available items in the immediate classroom context to support the learners to gain practical control over, for instance, demonstratives, articles, plural makers, and possessive adjectives and pronouns. The following dialogueillustratesan attempt by the instructorto make one of his learners focus on the intended grammatical notes through using some display questions.

Instructor: *What is there on the table next to the laptop computer?*
Learner: *There is one mouse.*

Instructor: *You mean there is an animal on the table?*
Learner: *No. It is a computer mouse.*
Instructor: *Whose laptop is it?*
Learner: *It's yours.*
Instructor: *What about the mouse? Is it mine too?*
Learner: *Yes. It is.*

Regarding the intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced courses, it can be suggested that their language learners' more developed interactive, analyctical and evaluative capacities as well as their instructors' attempts to motivate the learners to take the floor and use such capacities to enhance their English were conducive to the instructors' more frequent utilization of referential questions. Referential questions were employed by intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced instructors with the aim of encouraging the learners to engage in classroom discussions and to express their mind on aspects of issues under debate. The following learner-instructor dialouge in the intermediate course accentuates the instructor's attempt to urge one of the learnersto keep going:

Instructor: *What is a good teacher like?*
Learner: *I think, a good teacher should be kind and teach very well. He should understand students' problems.*
Instructor: *Do you think a good teacher is a strict one?*
Learner: *No. I fear them.*

5.4 Types of questions raised by the learners

Among the ten English questions posed by the lower intermediate learners during the eight observed sessions, six questions were display questions and the rest were referential ones. The four referential questions were posed by the learners in only one session where the language learners were required to practice probing into their counterparts' schedules on weekdays immediately after an explicit instruction of simple present tense. The intermediate learners practiced display and referential questions three and five times, respectively, during eight sessions.

English questioning was never observed to be practiced by the upper-intermediate learners other than when they were directly required to. Having

been explicitly instructed some new grammatical structures in the first and eighth observed sessions, the upper intermediate learners were required to practice the newly introduced language forms through raising and replying to questions. The learners posed four display questions in the initial session of the course and practiced referential questions five times during the eighth session. Therefore, it appears that the language form instruction evoked the learners to employ questioning and conditioned the type of the questions.

As regards the advanced course, it should be pointed out that no display English question was raised by the learners during the eight sessions. Further, among the twenty referential questions asked, only two concerned an interactive goal other than asking for the meaning of unknown words.

5.5 The instructors' focus on the learners' questioning ability

In spite of the instructors' remarkable resort to questioning to instruct and manage the classes, they were observed to neglect and fail to encourage their learners to develop practically such a critical ability. How the four instructors treated the language learners' capacities to pose English questions was not observed to be markedly distinctive. The learners generally practiced questioning when they were directly ordered to, and the instructors typically called upon the learners to ask English questions when the text-books required them to do so. In other cases, the learners freely fell back on their first language to meet their needs through questioning in the absence of considerable reactions, warnings, or objections by their instructors. One salient point observed in the four classes was that the learners' numerous attempts to put their questions in Persian during the 32 observed sessions were frowned upon only once by one of the instructors, where he strived in vain to encourage a learner to put her questions in English rather than Persian.

Seldom did the instructors encourage their learners to plan and practice learner-learner interactions. Unlike teacher-learners interactions, such conversations are more likely to provide instances when one of the learners/partners, and not the teacher who always ask questions, may be required to put a question. In other words, since the trend they had always observed was that of an omnipresent teacher who should ask questions, they were obviated to take their teacher's exclusive questioning role. It appears

that the teachers were not discontented with this role distinction and rarely made attempts to reverse it.

6. Discussion

The current study was an attempt to investigate how questioning ability was treated by language instructors and learners at an Iranian private language center in Iran. It was also purposed to closely explore, describe, and compare the types of English questions employed by the language instructors and learners in different course levels and to examine the extent to which the instructors' methodological practices intended to enhance their learners' capacities to ask English questions. A close analysis of the data indicated that the observed instructors benefited from questioning in their classroom practices frequently in order to meet various pedagogical objectives including encouraging the learners to use English to interact and elaborate on their insights and feelings, drilling the learners to demonstrate good commands of language forms, raising new subjects of discussion, and soliciting further information and/or arguments from the learners. Similar objectives have been reported in the related literature to be achieved by language instructors through utilizing effective questions (see Cotton, 2004; Harlen, 1999; Harlen & Qualter, 2004; McNeil, 2012; Wu, 1993). Cotton (2004), for instance, maintained that effective questioning should give rise to stimulating interest in new subjects, ideas, and challenges as well as encouraging language learners to be reflective about their own beliefs, assumptions and comprehension of new topics. In addition, Harlen and Qualter (2004) asserted that questioning is a fruitful strategy which enhances students' analytical and communicative capacities. In his taxonomy of questioning techniques, Wu (1993) regarded reliance on questioning to solicit further information and argument from students and to decompose incomprehensible questions into smaller intelligible parts as two worthwhile techniques to be applied by instructors in classrooms.

As it was suggested by the results of the study, in lower level courses, the instructors practiced questioning more significantly, and, in particular, used display questions to give a boost to the learners' command of basic English language forms. Further, the learners in lower level classes were

rarely observed to participate in classroom discussions other than when they were asked some questions. Such results are in line with those suggested by Dashwood's (2005) and Tan's (2007). Dashwood (2005) was of the opinion that display questions are typical of teacher-fronted lessons and are typically utilized for the purpose of transmission of knowledge to students. Tan (2007) also asserted that high proportions of lower cognitive level questions (i.e., display questions) reflect the assumption of the centrality of textual knowledge in classrooms.

Considering the impact of the type of instructors' questions on learners' cognitive behaviors, some previous studies (e.g., Cotton, 2004; Dashwood, 2005; Tan, 2007) have shown that display questions may limit the range of learners' answers and deprive learners of the opportunity to express their analytic, synthetic and evaluative opinions and to contribute further to the discourse. They also have suggested that employing referential questions rather than display ones may fruitfully encourage competent learners to use their knowledge to solve problems, analyze, evaluate, and think critically and creatively. By the same token, the results of the present study unveiled that in the courses with higher levels, the instructors preferred mainly to use referential questions in order to elicit longer and more evaluative responses from the learners. Such findings, however, are not supported by the conclusions drawn in studies conducted by Wu (1993) and Long and Sato (1983) who maintained that learners' responses to referential questions are restricted and tap learners' cognitively lower capacities.

As far as the language learners' practice of questioning is concerned, a careful analysis of the accumulated data revealed that the learners with different proficiency levels, unlike their instructors, devoted scant attention to questioning ability. More specifically, the number of the questions raised during each observation did not exceed, on average, beyond three per session. As it was unveiled, the learners hardly strived to practice English questions in their classroom interactions, and when they were to ask questions, they often resorted to their L1 in order to meet their needs in their instructor-learners and scant learner-learner interactions. The related literature is replete with studies (e.g., Almeida, 2012; Graesser & Person, 1994; Willis & Willis, 2007) critically arguing that questioning ability is typically taken into consideration

by language instructors and neglected on the part of language learners. As Graesser and Person (1994) asserted in their study, while each student asks, on average, one question per week, teachers spend up to 50% of class time on questioning and ask between 300 and 400 questions a day.

In this study, no significant difference was detected among the learners with varying proficiency levels in terms of asking English questions. In other words, the learners' enhancement in their proficiency levels seemingly did not exert any significant influence on their willingness and attempts to practice questioning in English. This does not support the direct relation between learners' level of language proficiency and the degree of their questioning practice suggested by Watts and his colleagues (1997). It was observed that even the most confident and proficient learners with noticeable analytical and evaluative capacities regularly fell back conveniently on their L1 to ask questions to manage their classroom interactions and to appeal to their instructor for permission, breaks, further explanations, statement repetition, class time modification, and so forth. When they were to phrase their questions in English, they appeared desperately anxious and their attempts often gave rise to poor questions and reliance on L1.

Classroom context ought to be a simulation of real life context, and the classroom interactions are supposed to enhance language learners' learning status and extend their oral language use from classroom discourse to real life situations (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002; Mercer, 2000). The courses observed in the present study, however, failed apparently to create contexts which resemble authentic situations and to impel the learners to practice language as it is employed in real life due to ignoring one of the most critical aspects of real life interactions that is questioning. Ignoring questioning ability may equate with neglecting the heuristic function of language and refraining from requesting, inviting, probing, and proposing in real life which are typically realized by questions.

It appears that what went on in the observed courses was impelling the learners to seek their language enhancement merely in responding to the questions raised by their instructors. Such behaviors, which were regarded by Willis and Willis (2007) as the normal procedure in classrooms, raise two critical questions to be pondered upon. First, are such learners supposed to

keep up being the same passive-responders in their likely authentic interactions? Second, is the context created by the normal procedure for a group *to ask questions* and for another to *respond to them* more aligned with the context of a classroom or that of a courtroom?

7. Conclusion and Implications

The incentive behind the present case study was to closely explore the practical tendencies of L2 instructors and learners towards questioning ability at a private language center in Iran. The study also intended to explore the types of questions they posed in four course levels and to investigate the extent to which the instructors' classroom behaviors intended to enhance the learners' capacity to raise English questions. Analysis of the accumulated data indicated that the observed instructors benefited from questioning in their classroom practices frequently in order to meet various pedagogical objectives including encouraging the learners to utilize English to discuss their views, feelings, and experiences, drilling the learners to demonstrate their mastery of language forms, raising new subjects of discussion, and soliciting further information and/or arguments from the learners. Similar studies (e.g., Cotton, 2004; Harlen & Qualter, 2004; McNeil, 2012) reported similar pedagogic objectives accomplished through classroom questioning. Moreover, it was unveiled that the instructors teaching in classes with lower levels utilized significantly a higher number of questions and, unlike their peers teaching in higher levels, mainly resorted to display questions to instruct and manage their classes. Such results support Dashwood's (2005) and Tan's (2007) studies on the functionality of display questions in transmission of knowledge to language learners with lower proficiency levels. As regards learners' practice of questioning, the results of the study indicated that the learners, regardless of their proficiency levels, hardly ventured to phrase English questions in their classroom interactions and often appeared anxious and fell back on their L1 when they were to ask questions. Further, the instructors were observed to neglect and fail to encourage their learners to ask English questions and seldom expressed noticeable objections or reactions to their learners' strong inclination to switch to their L1 to pose questions.

The results of the study might have important implications for language instructors to raise their awareness about how questioning ability is treated by both EFL instructors and learners. The results featuring the instructors' and learners' scant focus on learners' questioning ability may encourage EFL instructors to give more weight to learners' questions and, in particular, to dedicate periodically a certain part of class time to getting their learners to ask English questions from their peers and instructors about, for instance, their daily life and learning experiences. The incapacities reported in the learners due to neglecting questioning ability might also provoke instructors to draw their learners' attention to the criticality and sensitivity of effective questioning, to motivate them to overcome gradually their likely anxiety over asking questions, to assign more learner-learner classroom interactions to provide more room for questions, to impel learners to put their questions in English, and to discourage switching to native tongue while trying to ask questions. Such attempts may give rise to developing classroom interactions more consonant with real life communication engaging their interest, creativity, and fantasy.

Given the import attributed to advanced learners' accuracy in undertaking their interactive endeavors and the considerable influence of display questions on developing one's mastery of language forms, it seems worthwhile to suggest that instructors often exploit display questions to a larger extent in classes with higher proficiency levels to promote their learners' accuracy in communication. Instructors teaching in lower level classes are also recommended to practice phrasing referential questions further. Such questions are more likely to facilitate lower level language learners' fluency and their capacity to think critically and discuss their experiences, thoughts and feelings.

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