

A Case Study of Teacher’s Questioning in Chinese College EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Reviews from prior research indicated that in EFL classrooms, teachers have a tendency to favor lower-level questions over higher-level ones. Therefore, this case study primarily aims to examine the types of questions proposed by Chinese college EFL teachers and the impact of teacher’s questioning techniques on the cultivation and engagement of students’ higher-order thinking skills. The current qualitative study utilized classroom observations to collect data regarding teacher’s questioning. The data collected from class observations were analyzed using content analysis both in quantitative and qualitative way. The results of this study indicated that the participating teachers posed a higher percentage of lower-level cognitive questions than higher-level ones. The study also revealed weaknesses in the responding teachers’ questioning skills that could foster students’ higher order thinking. The findings are attributed to a lack of professional knowledge of HOTS instruction and the rigid curricula. Furthermore, future studies should focus on how to integrate higher-cognitive questions into Chinese college EFL classrooms.

Kata kunci: Teacher’s questioning, higher-order thinking, Bloom’s Taxonomy, question types, EFL classrooms

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In traditional classroom teaching, questioning is widely regarded as one of the most prevalent instructional techniques (Brualdi, 1998) and among the most frequently employed educational strategies. The ability to ask good questions in the classroom is considered a fundamental aspect of effective teaching (Khan & Inamullah, 2011). As stated by Zepeda (2009), questions can elicit a wide range of student reactions, spanning from basic recall of facts to the more complex tasks of applying, synthesizing, and evaluating information. Questioning is a crucial means of prompting students to engage in higher-order thinking. Hence, the examination of teachers’ questioning behavior has been a crucial concern in the implementation of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). EFL educators can utilize questioning techniques to assist students in developing HOTS. Incorporating HOTS into effective questioning is more beneficial for engaging students in higher-order thinking.

However, teacher-centered instruction has been the prevailing approach in Chinese language classrooms for many years, with students being seen as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge from teachers. Fortunately, as Chinese education continues to advance, there has been an increasing emphasis among Chinese educators on the cultivation of students’ HOTS. As outlined in the *China National Teaching Quality Standards for Foreign Language Majors* released by the Ministry of

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Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) in 2018, English teachers are now mandated to nurture students' abilities to learn, apply, and analyze problems, as well as to engage in critical thinking (MOE, 2018). Regrettably, implementing HOTS has not been widely adopted in Chinese higher education (Huber & Kuncel, 2016). According to Nagappan (2001), teachers' HOTS questions serve as an effective instructional strategy for stimulating language learners to engage in higher-order thinking. Limited research has explored teachers' questioning types and the impact of questioning techniques on students' HOTS engagement in the Chinese college EFL educational setting. In light of the significance of HOTS and the role of teachers' questioning, the researcher conducted a study to examine the question types used by EFL teachers and the correlation between teachers' questions and students' HOTS engagement in Chinese college EFL context. This paper seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of teachers' use of questions in Chinese college EFL classrooms?
2. How do teachers' questioning techniques impact students' HOTS engagement?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Classification of Teacher Questions

According to Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), teachers' questions can be organized from lower to higher levels and classified into six types: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Lower-level questions include knowledge, comprehension, and basic application, while higher-level questions pertain to those requiring advanced application skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This straightforward categorization of questions is both helpful and accessible for EFL teachers. When emphasizing fostering students' higher-order thinking, higher-level questions are utilized during instructional sessions. This study examined the questions posed by classroom teachers within Bloom's Taxonomy framework.

Teacher's Questioning and Students' HOTS

According to Zepeda (2009), questions have the potential to prompt a variety of student responses, ranging from simple recollection of information to the more complicated processes of applying, synthesizing, and evaluating information. The questions posed in classrooms serve as an important way of stimulating students to engage in HOTS (Mustika *et al.*, 2020). According to Khan and Inamullah (2011), asking insightful questions in the classroom was a foundational skill of effective teaching. Orlich *et al.* (2013) proposed that as teachers consistently improved the cognitive level of their questions, students were inclined to elevate the cognitive level of their responses accordingly. Ali and Daud (2003) investigated the potential impact of higher-level cognitive questions on developing students' HOTS by analyzing the use of such questions in language classrooms. Based on their findings, the experimental group exhibited superior HOTS engagement and performance compared to the control group. Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding of the different levels of cognitive questions during the teaching process is crucial for competent EFL teachers.

Teachers' Questioning in Language Teaching Context

In traditional English classroom practices, teachers often dominate interactions with rapid-fire questions and responses; this rapid exchange tends to place students in passive roles and stifle their engagement in higher order thinking (Fisher, 2011). Over the last decade, there have been many studies into teachers' questioning practices in language classrooms (Shen & Yodkhumlue, 2012; Shafeei *et al.*, 2017; Yulia & Budiharti, 2019; Tyas *et al.*, 2019; Mustika *et al.*, 2020; Fenyi & Jones-Mensah, 2022). Yulia and Budiharti (2019) did a qualitative case study to investigate teacher questioning in Indonesian EFL classrooms and to identify the most dominant types of questions. Their study indicated that teachers tended to concentrate on the remembering and understanding levels of questioning, with limited attention to higher order ones, subsequently diminishing their interest in language skill enhancement and hindering students' cognitive development. Shafeei *et al.* (2017) conducted mixed-method research on HOTS questions in an ESL context. Based on the research, there was a tendency for teachers to prioritize remembering and understanding levels of questioning, with minimal emphasis on higher-order thinking. Similar results can also be found by Yulia & Budiharti (2019) and Mustika *et al.* (2020). Their studies showed that English teachers applied both higher-order questions and lower-order questions in their language teaching process. But it was found that low-level questions, especially the understanding level ones, dominate the language classrooms that could not stimulate students to engage in HOTS. The previous empirical studies in the literature indicated that in ESL/EFL classrooms, teachers showed a preference for lower-level questions rather than higher-level ones.

Cultivating HOTS has been emphasized as a crucial necessity in the study of foreign languages (Din, 2020). An effective infusion of HOTS needs to provide HOTS questions and teach students to make thinking visible with teachers' proper guidance (Siti, 2016). However, few studies have investigated teachers' use of HOTS questions in Chinese college EFL context and examined the influence of teachers' questioning on students' HOTS engagement. And research has shown that in China's universities, EFL classrooms are mostly controlled by instructors who do the majority of the talking (Chen, 2021). Therefore, after conducting a comprehensive review of teachers' questioning practices, the researcher tends to work out their relevance to the Chinese college EFL teaching context.

3.0 METHOD

Given that the research aims to explore the types of questions posed by the Chinese college EFL teacher and how they impact students' HOTS, a qualitative approach was applied for investigating the two research questions. This qualitative study was designed as a case study.

Research Instrument

Classroom observation provides an opportunity to record live information in an educational setting. It is a beneficial and effective method to reveal the instructional and learning strategies utilized in the classroom (Creswell, 2005). Therefore, conducting an observation was crucial for this research as it allowed researchers to witness the utilization and application of HOTS questions in EFL classes. Furthermore, the researcher not only observed teachers' questioning techniques but also students' responses to teachers' higher-cognitive questions. Five lessons taught by the responding five Chinese college EFL lecturers were

observed. To ensure a diverse range of lessons, the researcher selected lessons covering various language instructional course types, including English listening and speaking, English writing, comprehensive English, advanced English, and language theory. A diverse group of Chinese college English teachers was observed, including individuals with varying years of teaching experience, professional titles, and educational backgrounds, to ensure diversity among the teacher respondents. For the purpose of data display, a pseudonym was given to each teacher using the codes T1, T2, T3, T4 and T5.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researcher recorded video observations of five Chinese college EFL lessons, each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Before observing, the responding lecturers were informed that the observations were used only for learning the normality rather than evaluation so as to avoid any adaptation of the teaching module. During the observation, only questions on the instructional contents were collected. Both video recording and note-taking were employed to capture the teacher's questions and students' interaction and response to teachers' questioning.

Following the data collection from classroom observations, a transcription was made of the video recordings related to the observed teachers' questions and students' responses. As a result, 62 content-related questions were collected. Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) served as the theoretical framework for examining the question categories, including six levels. Data from class observations was analyzed using content analysis, and the questions posed by teachers were categorized into two groups - HOTS and LOTS. Additionally, percentages were used to calculate the frequency of different question levels utilized by the responding Chinese EFL teachers in Bloom's Taxonomy.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teacher's Use of Questions

Data from class observations in Table 1 revealed that all the observed teachers presented questions related to knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in the classes. The five observed teachers raised both LOTS and HOTS questions, albeit with variations in the distribution of questions

Table 1 Number and frequency of different levels of questions

Teacher	LOTS			HOTS		
	Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
T1	5	4	-	-	1	1
T2	6	3	-	2	1	-
T3	-	8	3	2	1	1
T4	4	6	-	1	-	1
T5	6	2	4	-	-	-
Total	21 (33.9%)	23 (37.1%)	7 (11.3%)	5 (8.1%)	3 (4.8%)	3 (4.8%)
	51 (82.2%)			11 (17.8%)		

It can be concluded from Table 1 that both HOTS and LOTS questions covering knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation were applied by the observed teachers during their EFL teaching process. However, out of the 62 questions posed by the teachers, only 11 were categorized as HOTS questions (17.8%), while the remaining 51 (82.2%) fell into the low-level category, particularly knowledge and comprehension questions. Regarding question frequency, it is clear that the majority of questions asked by participating teachers in the observed classroom were low-level. Table 2 presented some sample questions under each cognitive domain proposed by the five observed teachers in their lessons.

Table 2 Samples of Questions of Each Category

Category	Examples of questions asked by observed teachers
Knowledge	1. What are the benefits of legalization? (T1) 2. What are Mark Twain's major works? (T2)
Comprehension	1. What is the solution to the drug problem proposed by the author? (T1) 2. What is the contribution of Mark Twain? (T2)
Application	1. What do you think good customer service is? (T3) 2. Which of these pairs of words are examples of converse antonyms? (T5)
Analysis	1. Why was Twain said to be adventurous, patriotic, romantic, and humorous? (T2)
Synthesis	1. How does the author use specific supporting details and dialogues? (T4)
Evaluation	1. Since the author did not propose a possible solution to the drug problem, what solutions can you propose? (T1)

As shown in Table 2, there were many sample questions related to factual or specific information in articles or related to previous knowledge. These questions consistently necessitated students to locate answers directly from memory or textbooks without engaging in higher-order thinking processes. For instance, the question "What are Mark Twain's major works?" posed by T2 can be considered as an example. When the teacher asked about the writer's background information or major works, she knew the answers. An example of a series of LOTS question came from class observation of T3. The following Extract 1 exemplified a variety of lower-cognitive questions testing students' comprehension of the reading material.

Extract 1 (T3)

T: Ok. Thanks.... OK, so the first question is --- what is customer service mainly about? Where is the answer?

S: It's about ultimate contact between people.

T: And? In the first paragraph?

S: It's about offering solutions that are best for each customer.

T: Yeah. (some explanation here). So next question ---what kind of circumstances may complaints arise? Second paragraph?

S: ...

T: OK, next one-- why is important for companies to thrive to return their old customers?

According to the cognitive domain theory (Conklin, 2011), students are only need to retrieve facts from memory when engaging in LOTS questions. If questions are at a basic cognitive level, demanding that students remember or repeat information that has already been given, then one can expect such

responses. Therefore, based on the observation of the excerpt from T3, the answers to these questions were readily available in the background materials presented to the students. Consequently, she assumed that all students knew the correct answers since they had been included in the reading materials. For instance, when she asked, “What is customer service mainly about”, she anticipated that all students would provide the correct response, as it could be easily located in the reading material that was provided to them. The HOTS question was absent observed from Extract 1 because T3’s questions did not necessitate students to incorporate higher order thinking into their responses, and additionally, only brief answers were anticipated from them.

However, the following Extract 2 (T1) presents a good example of HOTS questions to encourage her students to give suggestions about drug problems based on what they have gained from the text.

Extract 2 (T1)

T: Since the author did not propose a possible solution to the drug problem, what solutions can you propose? I will give you three minutes to consider about it.

... (time for students to think and prepare)

T: Ok..... so anyone wants to say something?

S: I think schools can have some drug education to educate students about the risks and consequences of drug use...

T: em, very good. And? Anybody else?

S: I think we should implement stricter regulations on drugs to curb misuse.

T: Yeah. (some explanation here).

S: I think we should invest in research to better understand the root causes of addiction and develop more effective prevention methods...

T: OK, very good ideas.

As evidenced by the excerpt from T1, when the teacher posed open-ended questions, she did not know the answers and expected open ideas from students. The researcher observed that students who responded to these questions did so thoughtfully by outlining their thoughts and expressing their perspectives on how to address drug-related issues. This aligns with the assertion of Onosko and Newman (1994) that answers to HOTS questions are not always readily available and require analysis, interpretation, and manipulation of information. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) also highlighted the need for learners to break down concepts into components and understand their relationships when dealing with HOTS questions. Emphasizing the development of students’ HOTS in classroom instruction entails the use of higher-level questions.

However, as illustrated by the data in the provided Table 1 and Table 2, the instructors’ provision of HOTS questions was constrained in quantity and variety, thereby falling short of effectively boosting students’ higher-order thinking. There was only one type or two HOTS questions, with a limited number in every class being observed, indicating the cultivation of HOTS was not put in the first place. It indicates that because of the volume of questions, the teacher’s questions could not enhance the students’ higher order thinking; rather, they could simply help them to think critically. Other researchers have also demonstrated that students lack exposure to high-level questioning. This viewpoint finds support in the studies conducted by Yulia & Budiharti (2019) and Mustika *et al.* (2020), which highlighted that EFL teachers asked a higher proportion of LOTS questions compared to HOTS questions. Repetitive use of

basic questioning by teachers in Chinese college EFL classrooms suggests that the potential of instructional language to stimulate learners' HOTS is not being fully realized.

Findings from the class observations in this study also align with that of Shafeei *et al.* (2017), who concluded that most teachers preferred LOTS questions to HOTS ones because they perceived questions regarding knowledge or comprehension to be quicker to complete teaching tasks and assess the student's comprehension of the teaching contents. Additionally, the researcher also found that the instructor initially put forth a significant proportion of these LOTS at the beginning of the lessons to recollect prescribed information directly. The findings from this observation extract are also consistent with Dwee *et al.* (2016), who observed that language educators excessively emphasized questions that elicited factual responses, such as "what", "how many", and "where".

Teacher's Questioning and Students' HOTS Engagement

Based on the literature review, teachers' questioning in classrooms serve as an important way of stimulating students to engage in HOTS. Therefore, the researcher will analyze and discuss the impact of the observed teachers' questioning on students' HOTS engagement. The following class observation extract (Extract 3) is an example of a teacher's questioning to engage students in higher-order thinking.

Extract 3 (T2)

T: ok, very good. So when did he adopt his pen name?

S: err... when he was a river pilot on the Mississippi river

T: En, can you tell me what's the meaning of Mark Twain's pen name?

S: Two Fathoms deep

T: Yeah, you have previewed well. Do you think the name is interesting?

S: I think it is interesting, very attracting.

T: Em, can you guess why did Mark Twain use this pen name?

S: ... errr... maybe to attract readers' attention?

T: Em, I agree with you, can you explain it further? Any other reasons? After you have read the whole passage, can you get some implications?

S: ...em... I think maybe because the experience on the steamboat has a deep influence on Mark Twain. So he wants to use a word he once met.

The observation from Extract 3 demonstrates a series of questions and answers exchanged between the teacher and students. Sellappah *et al.* (1998) proposed that questions should be systematically structured to prompt a series of reasoning, facilitating the development of higher-order thinking. The questioning sequence in Extract3 commenced with a lower-cognitive question aimed at assessing students' comprehension of Twain's experience: *When did he adopt his pen name?* The teacher used this question to jog the students' memories and activate their prior knowledge. Once she had covered the knowledge and comprehension aspects of the instructions, she posed a subsequent question, classified as an evaluation-level question, which required students to assess and articulate their opinions about the significance of the writer's pen name: *Do you think the name is interesting?* The teacher asked this question to elicit the student's critical thinking and personal reflection. Following the students' responses, the teacher continued to delve deeper by posing another question: *Can you guess why Mark Twain chose this pen name?* This question prompted the students to offer reasons based on their knowledge of the

topic. Through this question, the teacher aimed to prompt the students' analysis of the writer's decision. Once the students had shared their initial ideas, the teacher continued to pose further probing questions: *Can you elaborate further? Are there any other reasons?* In posing these questions, the observed teacher sought to promote critical thinking and inspire the students to delve further into the subject matter. Throughout her questioning, the teacher consistently urged the students to vocalize their thoughts and utilize their HOTS. She actively interacted with the students, eliciting their viewpoints until reaching a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This approach facilitated a deeper comprehension of Twain's experiences and cultivated the students' HOTS.

According to Shen and Yodkhumlue (2012), students' HOTS can be enhanced by answering HOTS questions, which need independent thinking such analysis, evaluation, and problem-solving. If teachers actively encourage deeper investigation by asking additional probing questions or giving students enough time to think, the chances of receiving thoughtful and analytical responses from students will greatly improve. From the class observations Extract 3, it can be inferred that proficient use of questioning techniques by the teacher can effectively encourage students' HOTS engagement. The results of this observation are consistent with Mustika *et al.* (2020), who found that EFL teachers' questioning skills can foster HOTS in students, which in turn helps teachers successfully accomplish their teaching objectives. However, in this study, teachers' questions might not have a deep impact on students' HOTS engagement in the classroom since there are fewer high-order questions than low-order ones as shown in Table 1. Moreover, it requires careful planning before class sessions to question students in a thought-provoking manner. In many cases, teachers cannot wait for students to discover answers independently, as they must adhere to the teaching objectives at the knowledge level.

Consequently, based on the observation of five classes in this study, not all teachers employed effective higher -order questioning, and the frequency of their utilization was relatively low. Based on the assessment of the teacher's approach to questioning, it is recommended that language educators undergo training in asking questions effectively, especially those related to HOTS. The findings in this study further support Gall's (1970) claim that teachers need to possess the skill of effective questioning and know how to employ questioning strategies. The following are potential explanations for why LOTS questions predominated in this study:

Firstly, the lack of awareness regarding HOTS questions can be attributed to the fact that it is a relatively recent addition to the Chinese EFL education system (MOE, 2018). Therefore, Chinese college EFL teachers were not well-equipped for proficient HOTS implementation in classes. There is no guarantee that higher order thinking skills would naturally develop through maturation (Nickerson *et al.*, 2014). Hence, teachers need to acquire experience and knowledge regarding HOTS beforehand to implement it in their classrooms effectively. Secondly, the education system in China is focused on exams, and this emphasis has significantly influenced EFL teaching in higher education (Yu & Suen, 2005). Teachers under such climate prioritize low-level questions to align with what is expected in assessments, which also limit the time and inclination for teachers to delve into HOTS during regular classroom interactions. It was time-consuming to effectively engage the majority of students in meaningful discussions, analysis, and the generation of innovative ideas or materials. Teachers prioritize ensuring the achievement of knowledge objectives rather than focusing on developing HOTS.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from class observations in this study showed that Chinese college EFL teachers tended to ask more LOTS questions rather than HOTS questions. It was observed that the limited use of HOTS questions could impede students' development of higher-order thinking. The study also revealed weaknesses in the teachers' effective questioning approach that can promote students' HOTS engagement, such as few probing questions and insufficient time for students to think when asking HOTS questions. Therefore, the case study suggests that teachers should prioritize HOTS questions following a series of LOTS ones to create a conducive environment for fostering higher-order thinking. Moreover, teachers need to be provided with training on how to effectively and appropriately ask questions, particularly higher-level cognitive questions. It is hoped that this study can help bridge the gap between theoretical discussions and empirical evidence in implementing HOTS questions in Chinese college EFL classrooms.

Although the research has achieved its objectives, there were still some limitations that need further study. Firstly, the study was limited to the observation of five individual EFL lessons conducted by five different teachers. It is important to note that observing a single class of a teacher may not accurately reflect their implementation of HOTS questions. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies include classroom observations over an extended period of time to assess the consistency and effectiveness of teachers' questioning practices. Additionally, based on the research results, future studies can conduct an experimental study on a framework or model of HOTS questioning techniques that would maximize the use of HOTS questions and stimulate higher order thinking among EFL learners.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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