It is not Necessarily Bad

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Chang, Sunmee. 2005. It is not Necessarily Bad. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal, 13*(1), 1-18. *Display* questions, one of the frequent forms of inquiry used by teachers, also called Known-Answer questions, have frequently been criticized by researchers for their overuse by classroom teachers because they request information that the teacher already knows and that, sometimes, students are presumed to know. However, this study suggests a different perspective for a couple of reasons. First, *Display* questions are very effective in eliciting responses from the students, because in many cases the students know the answers. Thanks to the less complicated nature of *Display* questions, the students answer with confidence, enabling the teacher to continue and keep the stream of conversation. In addition, *Display* questions often provide linguistic structures that can be models for the students to copy when they design their responses. The students take advantage of them to figure out answers. This study presents a reevaluation of *Display* questions, providing an insight for a new teaching technique.

Key words: discourse analysis, classroom interaction, talk, IRE, IRF, display question

I. Introduction

Based on many previous studies (Cazden, 2000; Consolo, 2000; Hall, 1998; Johnson, 1995; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Patthey-Chavez, 2002; Verplaetse, 2000; Wells, 1993; 1995; 2001), it is assumed that what the teacher mainly uses to control the learners in the classroom is 'talk', which is also a medium of learning for the learners. During the exchanges, IRE (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) or IRF (Initiation-Response-Followup), the teacher uses a certain way of

talking to encourage students' expression of their own ideas, and to guide them to a sophisticated level of understanding. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective of development, we can assume that the teacher facilitates and guides students in the course of extended verbal interaction to let them play an important role in constructing new knowledge and in acquiring new understanding about the world. Through the extended verbal interaction, teachers and students construct practices that form a part of the routine of learning in the classroom.

Teachers in many previous studies on language learning (L1, L2[1]), being aware of the importance of talk in the language learning classroom, tried to make the students participate as much as they could. One prominent strategy they used was asking questions. They usually initiated the interaction with inquiries. They solicited a variety of answers that could correspond to the learning goal of each activity. By asking questions, teachers sometimes elicited from students very simple monotonous information including even what they already knew and sometimes what the students also already knew. This kind of questions is referred to as '*Display* question' (Long and Sato, 1983; Markee, 1995). Some scholars have used this term interchangeably with 'Known-Answer question' (Wood, 1992).

The purpose and effect of this type of questions seem to be getting the students to display knowledge already known to the teacher and recently acquired by the students. Because of their nature of eliciting relatively 'not-new' information, *Display* questions have triggered controversy over their efficiency in facilitating learning among learners. This article, in line with the above discussion, briefly provides background information based on several previous studies dealing with issues related to *Display* questions and presents what has been found in the study I lately conducted, investigating any compatibility or incompatibility

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1) In this study L2 includes both ESL and EFL.

2) In this study, I use *Display* question instead of *Known-Answer* question. *Known-Answer* question is rather treated as a part of *Display* question here. More information is provided in Data analysis section.

between the contentions of previous studies and those of new study.

2. Background

2.1. Perception on the Use of Questions in general Classrooms

Since Lemke (1985) called the three-part verbal exchange structure as 'triadic dialogue,' which is ubiquitous in the classroom between teacher and students, this structure has evolved into famous IRE or IRF structures. According to Wells (1993), it is estimated that this triadic format accounts for some 70% of all the discourse that takes place between teacher and students in general classrooms. Actually, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) already assumed that triadic dialogue is the unmarked mode of classroom interaction. It means that teachers adopt this mode by default unless there is a good reason to behave otherwise. Mercer (1992) added that triadic dialogue is justified as an effective means of: 'monitoring children's knowledge and understanding,' 'guiding their learning,' and 'making knowledge and experience which is considered educationally significant or valuable' (pp. 218-219).

However, a number of researchers have been much more critical of teachers' ubiquitous use of this discourse format. Wood (1992), for example, accused teachers of asking too many questions, particularly of the known-answer variety which asks the information teachers or even students already know. Nunn (1999), citing Long and Sato's (1983) term '*Display* question' instead of 'Known-Answer question', talked about its usual perception as 'purposeless' question because of its limited use for getting the students to display knowledge already known to the teacher and recently acquired by the students. Researchers who are critical of those questions say that if you really want to hear what students think and if you genuinely want to encourage students to ask questions of their own, they should use a less controlling type of discourse, which would give students a greater chance to take on the initiating role, arguing that 'it is overused in most classrooms because of a mistaken belief that it encourages maximum student participation' (Lemke, 1990,

p. 168).

2.2. Questions in L2 Classrooms

Much language learning occurs in L2 classrooms especially through the interaction. The teacher's role is crucial since teachers integrate every element under their rule to create or facilitate an appropriate learning environment in the classroom. Teachers can foster classroom conditions that encourage or restrict successful student participation (Hall, 1998). The teacher is the one who should be aware of differences among learners in order to diagnose their needs, apply the proper level of learning support at any given time, and withdraw it at the right time. We can find the significance of the teacher's role reflected on his/her utterances with the students.

To do that, the teacher usually has to initiate the conversation and to give feedback to students' response. It is vivid in the form of IRE or IRF. He/she not always ask his/her students 'real questions' (Wells, 1995, p. 239) only since they have limited proficiency of their target language. So, in L2 classrooms, teachers ask more *Display* questions than other occasions (Long and Sato, 1983). Since students' simple participations would be considered learning behavior in language classrooms, teachers' pattern of questions to elicit students' response does not seem to matter, or rather would play a significant role facilitating better learning. So it might not be an exaggeration to say that questioning itself is a powerful motivator of engagement with a topic and a way of sustaining and structuring that engagement in the classroom.

Overuse of 'not-real' questions can be interpreted differently in L2 classrooms. However, we cannot say anything definite until there is sound evidence. This study was conducted with an anticipation to find any interesting data providing possibility of considering 'not-real' or '*Display*' question positive in terms of facilitating L2 learning.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Questions

1) What kind of Display questions does the teacher use in L2
   classroom?
2) What functions do they serve in terms of language learning?

3.2. Setting and Participants

This research, carried out during an eight-week summer session, was
conducted in an ESL classroom of eight[2] adult students from four
different cultures. Four of the students were Korean and the other four
were from Japan, Brazil, and Colombia. Their age range was from 19 to
29, but most of them were between 19 and 25 except for one female
Korean student. They were taking an intermediate reading course at a
southeastern American university as a preparation course for pursuing
their higher academic career at the university. During the eight weeks,
the class met five days a week, one hour a day, in a little classroom
which was designed for a formal meeting or class. Their teacher was
an experienced middle-aged male person who had a reputation of
having an open-minded attitude toward international students.

3.3. Data Collection

I used a couple of micro-ethnographical methods. These methods
focus on how the language is used in the classroom, how teachers
maintain classroom order, or how they define knowledge. These
methods, usually employed in micro-ethnography, do not seem to be
much different from those in general ethnography studies, but they
focus on narrow and in-depth aspects. By using these methods, this

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3) Four Koreans (two males and two females), two Japanese (one male and one female), one
Brazilian girl and one Colombian girl.

current research investigated how a teacher and his students use the language in their social interaction in the context of classroom. I focused on the interaction occurring only in that setting, looking at the narrow aspects of participants' talk patterns.

Data was collected for seven weeks, one week short of eight weeks for personal reasons. Seventeen hours of data was collected through two to three hours of classroom observation with video- plus audio-taping per week, and brief interviews with all participants. Interviews were conducted just for finding out basic background information on participants. Field notes were taken during the observation.

3.4. Data Analysis[3]

The total number of data videotapes was 17, and 14 hours of data were selected for analysis. Transcriptions were made selectively after reviewing the videotaped data. Conversations among participants that I considered to be unrelated to the research, such as simple chats, were not transcribed. I also transcribed audio-taped interview data selectively, checking if the content was relevant to the research. Transcribing the data, I singled out 'Display' question-embedded' conversations and recognized each *Display* question with three categories I came up with. The first one is *Knowledge-Display* question which literally makes the students display what they know (directly contents-related).

(1) *Excerpt 1*
1. T: **At the end of the story, what happened?**
2. S: I, I don't know how to explain the end, they come back, come back home?

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4) The data used in this article was already used in other articles I published earlier, but statistic information could be different since the data was re-analyzed here.
5) One hour was a full introduction for the cours, and other two hours were for watching a movie.

The teacher asked a question to a student based on a story they read together. The teacher wanted to check how well the student understood the story by asking her to display what she knows (#1). The student expressed how much she understood the story in the way of asking back (#2)

The second one is *Known-Answer* question which elicits 'so-obvious' answers from the students. The term, *Known-Answer* question, has been used interchangeably with *Display* question as mentioned in introduction. However, I differentiated it as a part of *Display* questions in this study. *Known-Answer* questions seem to be asking the information everybody can provide almost automatically without any further thinking.

    (2) *Excerpt 2*
    3. T: **Ok, when do you eat? When you are cold?**
    4. S: Hungry

The teacher asked a question which seems to be so easy that even anybody who knows very little English can answer. A student could not answer in a full sentence. Instead, he spit out a word, 'hungry' which is good enough to pass his idea to the teacher (#3). It means that the question the teacher used was so easy that even non-native speakers could figure out the answer and spoke it out. This kind of questions was usually used not to cease the flow of talk during the class.

And the last one is *Imitation* question which allows the students to copy or choose what the teacher presents in the question sentences.

    (3) *Excerpt 3*
    5. T: If you are passive, **do you do very much or you don't do anything?**
    6. S: Anything
    7. T: Yeah, then he is very passive.

The teacher provided two choices (#5). Even though the student's response was just a fragment of a choice, she chose and copied a part of what the teacher said (#6).

Short conversations that include these three types of questions were selected and categorized. Each type of questions was counted weekly and analyzed with the consideration of responses from students. Other than three types of *Display* questions I also found two more kinds of questions. I named them as *Information-Gathering* questions and *Authentic* questions. Literally, *Information-Gathering* questions were for gathering and requesting from the students the information not related to learning. And *Authentic* questions were for asking students' original and personal ideas on certain topics. They were also counted for the validity of this research, but were not investigated or analyzed further.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Overall Findings

Three hundred seventy five *Display* questions were found among 629 total questions. Except for them, there were two more kinds of questions: *Information-Gathering* and *Authentic* questions (193 and 61 respectively). These two categories were not specifically investigated in this study.

Table 1. Types of Questions

Types of Qs	Display Qs	Info-G Qs	Authen. Qs	Total
Number	375	193	61	629
%	59.62	30.68	9.70	100

According to Table 1, *Display* questions accounted for approximately two thirds of total number of questions while *Authentic* questions did only around 10%. It is not surprising to see *Information-Gathering* questions occupying relatively a big portion, considering their nature.

Table 2. Weekly Breaks of *Display* Questions

	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	Total
K-D. Qs	19	28	25	43	29	54	57	255 (68%)
K-A. Qs	10	13	11	9	9	8	12	72 (19.2%)
IM. Qs	4	19	1	7	3	5	9	48 (12.8%)
Total	33	60	37	59	41	67	78	375

(K-D: Knowledge-Display, K-A: Known-Answer, IM: Imitation)

The weekly breaks of Table 2 show that *Display* questions were used relatively more during the seventh week but there were no significant patterns in terms of the number of overall *Display* questions. Among three categories of total *Display* questions, K*nowledge-Display* questions were the most prevalent type of questions which occupied the biggest portion (68%). *Known-Answer* questions were the second biggest category (19.2%), which was followed by *Imitation* questions (12.8%).

4.2 Characteristics and Functions of *Display* Questions

4.2.1. *Knowledge-Display* questions

Since this observed course was a reading course, students were supposed to read a certain amount of passages or stories and check how much they understood the contents with their teacher. So, the teacher usually had to ask *Knowledge-Display* questions more than other types of questions.

(4) *Excerpt 4 (After reading a book 'Two Ants')*
8. T: **How many important ants are there?**
9. S: Ah, important! Two.
10. T: Yeah, something about…
           Other ants are all at home right?

11. S: Yes, yes, they are **different.**
12. T: **How? How are they different?**
13. S: They stay all day. Other ants go to the home.
             They think about...something about wonderful.

(5) *Excerpt 5 (After reading an article on 'Ice-man' found in glacier)*

14. T: **What else did they learn? Let's go back.**
             Ok, everybody. Look at, at, Otz, Otze the iceman.
15. S1:   The characters of the body.
16. T: Ok, so when you talk about hair···
             special markings or features···height,
             all of those things···
             what is that? What are we talking about?
17. S2:   Described him.
18. T: Description. Description. Ok. So how his life was,
             what he looked like, (writing on board)...
             Ok···his appearance.

  By asking questions, the teacher tried to let the students follow a stream of the story they just read. One noticeable thing is that the teacher made questions (#10, 12, 14, 16) based on students' answers. Thus, the teacher could check out if his students understood how this story went and what they had to pay attention to. Most questions in Excerpt 4 and 5 show some examples. When a student displayed his knowledge (#11, 15) on the story, the teacher went further and asked for more detailed information the student already had. It must be a good way to dig up what lies beneath students' active knowledge on the contents they studied. The students know something, but might not be able to realize what they know.

(6) *Excerpt 6 (After watching a clip from a movie 'Dead Poets Society)*

19. T: Yeah, his parents wanted him.

His brother went there before him.
Was his brother a good student?

20. Ss:	Yeah.

20. Ss: Yeah.
21. T: Yeah, very very good student. **Does Todd seem to be as good a student as his brother?**
22. Ss: Uhum (negative tone)
23. T: So far, academically maybe not, doesn't necessarily mean everything, but his success academically at school seems to be not quite the same as his brothers. **Um, did Todd like Welton?**
24. Ss: No.
25. T: No, ok.
             What did some of the boys think of Cameron, K?
26. K: Jerk.
27. T: **That he is a jerk. What is a jerk?**
28. Ss: Stupid
29. J: How about flatter, flatter?
30. T: Flattering. Yes, he is also a flattering person.
             Everybody know that word?
             (writing on the board) Flatter, flattering

In another aspect, it seems that the teacher used questions not just to elicit students' answer but also to make his talk flow coherently. Interestingly, those questions were also from students' answers (#19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 30). Their answers provided the teacher with excuses to make new questions with additional comments (#20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29). It is true that *Knowledge-Display* questions played a great role in encouraging students to talk. Considering L2 students' general taciturn tendency, having them speak out even a couple of short words can be regarded as positive.

4.2.2. Characteristics of *Known-Answer* questions

Known-Answer questions were also used significantly in continuing

conversation between the teacher and students during classes. These questions seem to be so obvious that it is hard to acknowledge them as 'valid' ones to help students have meaningful interaction with their teacher.

(7) *Excerpt 7 (Teacher trying to explain a new word)*

31. T:	**What do you do with your nose?**
	What are some things you can do with your nose?
32. Jh:	Smell.
33. T:	Yes, you can smell. Ok. *So what does sniff mean?*
34. Jh:	Ummmm···.running nose?

In Excerpt 7, the teacher brought up a question (#31) and a student answered without any hesitation since it was too easy. The first question in this excerpt (#31) is a typical *Known-Answer* question, but the second one (#33) is not. What relation do they have? They are both about nose. The teacher wanted the student to learn a new word which has something to do with the nose! By asking an easy question (#31), the teacher helped the student apply his knowledge to the complicated level (#33). The result looks successful to a certain extent.

(8) *Excerpt 8 (After reading an article on an actor)*

35. T:	Ok. But the main idea is to be a complete sentence. Right? **Is Tom Cruise an actor?**
36. Sy:	He divorce and life of a movie star and··· and··· general course of his lifestyle and that's all
37. T:	Ok, **so what about the life of Tom Cruise?** Is it exciting, is it fascinating, is it boring, is it full of···
38. Sy:	Really exciting··· just to··· if··· the article include childhood of Tom Cruise and ummm···.

However, even when the teacher tried to use an obvious question

(they talked about Tom Cruise's acting career earlier), students sometimes did not respond appropriately as above (#36). In that case, the teacher had to ask the students again to get them to the right answer (#37), but he still acknowledged their answer with 'ok'.

> (9) *Excerpt 9 (After watching a clip from a movie 'Dead Poets Society')*
> 39. T: **Yes. Is that good mystery meats?**
> 40. J: yea (in a joke mood)
> 41. T: No, if you don't know where the meat comes from, you don't know what it is, what animal, or what thing, that's not good.
>   So, they don't like the food. 5, J?
>   **Does Todd plan to go to study room?**

In Excerpt 9 the students were talking about a movie, 'Dead Poets Society'. High school kids in the movie complained about bad food of their school cafeteria. The teacher asked the students with an obvious question in an amusing way (#39). He asked this kind of laugh-jerking questions from time to time, probably, to relax or smooth the learning atmosphere in the classroom for the students.

When L2 learners face *Known-Answer* questions, they might get motivated as they realize that they are able to respond to teacher's questions without difficulty. At least they can say something for answers.

4.2.3. Imitation Question

Imitation question is the most intriguing type among three types of questions. The teacher actually provided an answer within his question. Students copied it for their answer.

> (10) *Excerpt 10 (After reading an article on car sales in the U.S.)*
>   42. T: OK, successful or not successful. Even more than

that.... **Was it a question of selling or not selling?**

43. J: Not selling.

The teacher gave two choices (#42), and a student chose one of them. The student had to take a risk of selecting the wrong answer, but he did not have to have a hard time for coming up with his own sentence. He only had to copy one of the choices the teacher presented (#43).

(11) *Excerpt 11 (In the middle of finding a topic sentence)*

44. T: Ok⋯topic sentence⋯ **is it the first one?**

45. S: **It's the second.**

46. T: Oh, you said the second sentence

47. Jh: No, he said first one

48. S/J: First one

In Excerpt 11, students showed a different way of copying teacher's sentence. A student took advantage of teacher's question structure (#44). She just changed 'the first' into 'the second.' (#45) The student copied teacher's way of 'ordering' sentences. Virtually, she created a new sentence even if it was very short to be considered a creation.

(12) *Excerpt 12 (After reading a passage on earth)*

49. T: Or excuse me⋯ **What scientists know about the earth or what scientists don't know?**
             Which seems to be the emphasis?.

50. S: **Don't know.**

51. T: What scientists don't know. That seems to be more of the focus, the emphasis. Two, scientists now know a lot about the earth.

In Excerpt 12, the teacher asked what the main idea of a passage is. He gave two possible answers. A student answered, but not perfectly this time. The student was so used to choosing that she just chose small parts of teacher's utterance which made a contrast with others

(e.g. know vs. don't know).

Imitation questions are different from other types of *Display* questions in that they give students with choices with syntactically correct model structures. In other words, students are able to learn new syntactic structures of sentences as they repeat or copy what their teacher says.

5. Conclusions and More

Display questions have been considered relatively negative, as I mentioned earlier, because of their over-use in the classroom. However, overall they are not necessarily negative in that their fundamental nature of eliciting students' response helps the students participate in the classroom activities after all. Now I'd like to conclude with a couple of points concerning each type of *Display* questions.

First, *Knowledge-Display* questions played a great role in encouraging students to talk in the classroom. The teacher needs to check out if the students are following his/her lesson. The teacher is able to carry out the lesson appropriately only when he/she knows how his/her students are doing during the class. It is almost impossible not to use *Knowledge-Display* questions. In fact, considering L2 students' general taciturn tendency, having them speak out even a couple of short words can be regarded as positive.

Second, when L2 learners face *Known-Answer* questions (obvious questions), they might get motivated as they realize that they are able to respond to teacher's question without difficulty. At least they can say something for answers. Being able to be a part of classroom activity is itself exciting to the students. L2 learners, especially from Asian countries, are reluctant to stand out since they have been educated in the contexts that do not encourage risk-taking: Instead they prefer correctness, right answers, and withholding 'guesses' until one is sure to be correct (Brown, 2001). So providing the opportunity of 'risk-free' answering can be considered an effective way of eliciting talk from the students.

Finally, *Imitation* questions are different from other types of *Display*

questions in that they provide standard structures of sentences. In other words, students are able to learn new syntactic structures of sentences as they repeat or copy what their teacher says. They even change some parts of sentences within the structure. Lately, a new perspective on *Imitation* was introduced by Lantolf (2003). He said 'Eventually interpersonal speech takes on a secondary, or intrapersonal function in which the speech is directed not at others but at individuals.' He also added that 'through intrapersonal speech learners are capable of regulating their memory, attention, thinking, and learning'. In other words, *Imitation* can be considered a way of new creation, such as saying 'I want to be a pilot' based on 'I want to be a president.' There is just a word difference, but it is enough to be regarded as a creation. This new perspective on '*Imitation*' has been acknowledged with enthusiastic attentions from many researchers.

You may say that *Display* questions are neither good nor bad. Its merits or demerits depend on the purpose it is used to serve on particular occasions, and on the larger goals by which those purposes are informed. In fact, we can not say which is good and which is bad. In the hands of different teachers, the same basic discourse format can lead to very different levels of student participation and engagement (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

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