
THE USE OF INSTRUCTION CHECKING QUESTIONS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract: This study explores the use of Instruction Check Questions by trainers and trainees during the CELTA course and the effect this technique has on Pre-Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate levels. The aim of the study was to emphasize on the necessity of EFL teachers to decide when and when not to use ICQs and to better teachers' understanding of how instruction-check after setting a task strategy might affect learning opportunities of their learners. As this study is a reflection on the CELTA experience, it includes a reflective journal, four interviews and CELTA documents. The critical reflection revealed opposite views but correlation between how adult learners feel about ICQs and their background, circumstances when ICQs help the learning process and situations when they are less relevant, as well as the different amount of ICQs that Upper- and Pre-Intermediate levels need to be asked. Implications for professional practice are provided for EFL teachers and CELTA trainers and trainees regarding the use of ICQs and the way they influence language acquisition.

Keywords: teaching, classroom, management, instruction, innovation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, World Englishness and English as an International Language (EIL) have significant linguistic implications. Graddol (2006) suggests that English spreads so rapidly that by 2025 there will be two billion more English language learners. Consequently, as English is becoming one of the dominant languages in the world and it is the preferred language in a wide range of fields such as business, music, marketing, aviation and communication, English language education “has assumed greater importance in adult education” (Smith & Strong, 2009: 12). Due to the fact that adult language learners are “unique, complex individuals” (Williams & Burden, 2015: 23) and have “multifaceted identities” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998:48), it is challenging for the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher to establish effective rules and procedures in the classroom (Lemov, 2014; Fay and Funk, 2000; Hill & Jones, 2012; Marzano, Marzano and Pickering, 2003). Those effective rules and procedures are also known as classroom management or “the actions teachers take to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning” (Evertson and Weinstein, 2011: 44). As effective learning and teaching cannot occur in poorly managed classrooms (Torenbeek, 2011), it is crucial to have knowledge of effective classroom management strategies (CMS). One of these classroom management strategies is giving and checking instructions (Richards & Lockhart, 2010; Fisher and Frey, 2014; Widdowson, 1987).

Mastering effective CMS is a capability that every teacher should have (Klamer-Hoogma, 2012). Therefore, in order to be a competent teacher, a wide range of CMS is needed. Moreover, teacher training programmes should provide new teachers with a toolbox of CMS (Klamer-Hoogma, 2012). However, the specific strategies that should form part of this toolbox in adult education is still unclear due to the fact that the literature used during teacher training is outdated or simply not practical (Lemov, 2014). During the Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) course I observed and experienced the importance of instruction-giving and checking learners' understanding. Both of these classroom management elements have an impact on the learning process and are crucial in the EFL classroom. For instance, if students do not understand what they are asked to do, an activity becomes chaotic and the whole lesson is at risk of failing. Even though during the CELTA there was plenty of information provided on good and clear instruction-giving, there was little advice on what to do after giving instructions and how to check whether students have fully understood those. This part of the lesson seemed neglected even though how to check whether students have understood teacher's instruction is an area that deserves attention because it has a big effect on how learners carry out task and therefore how well they learn. There are several reasons why this study was necessary. Firstly, there are polarised opinions on whether Instruction Check Questions (ICQs) should be part of the previously mentioned toolbox. The second is critical reflections on the usage and presentation of ICQs during the CELTA and suggestions for improvements. And thirdly, the researcher's personal interest on how to check whether students have understood correctly the instructions given before a task.

Questions are a common way to create successful communication (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013) and lifelike situations. Therefore, an essential interaction tool in any EFL classroom is the teachers' questioning practice (Walsh, 2006). According to Chaudron (1998) questions have an important role in any EFL classroom and form 20-40 per cent of the talk. There are three types of questions I observed being asked by teachers during the CELTA: the first one help teachers elicit information, the second one keep students' attention and the third one check learners' understanding (V. Cook, 2008: 56). ICQs help teachers to “exert control over learners” (Hall, 2011: 11). Therefore, ICQs are

display questions (Long and Sato, 1983) and teachers already know the answer to the question they are asking. As ICQs are a quick way of checking understanding, usually they have one acceptable answer. These types of questions are also known as closed. Usually when using ICQs an IRF pattern is followed. Even though IRF is often used by teachers as it creates interaction that is expected by both students and teachers in the classroom, Initiation-Response-Feedback is accused of being teacher-centered and arguably increases Teacher Talking Time (TTT) (Hall, 2011: 56), which is very criticized by teachers who have adopted the Communicative Approach (Nunan, 1987). However, it is exactly the Communicative Approach that is encouraged by the CELTA teachers as the most suitable for the acquirement of English in the classroom. Considering the information gaps, it was found that instruction check questions have not been widely discussed in the academic literature.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to look into ICQs as a classroom management technique and investigate their use during the CELTA course. The analysis will be conducted by looking into the collected data from observing two experienced teachers and watching six DVD lesson observations, which were shown to the trainees during the input sessions. More data was composed during teacher practices when trainees had the opportunity to teach Pre-Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate levels and monitor the rest of the trainees while they were teaching. In this study the term trainee refers to teachers who are in the process of obtaining their qualification and the word trainer indicates the already qualified teacher who is helping the trainee to get their certificate. Moreover, to reinforce these observations I have used official papers and knowledge gained during the MA in Kingston University, London. Furthermore, there were four interviews carried out, two of them with trainees and two with learners from Pre-Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate levels.

To understand how the data was collected and the setting where it was gathered, a brief description of the CELTA course is needed. The course is 4 weeks, Monday to Friday 9 am until 5 pm and its main purpose is learning how to teach English to speakers of other languages. On the first and third Monday of the course, the trainees observed an experienced teacher. Each day was divided in two stages. In the mornings the trainees attended input sessions with more theoretical focus. The second half consisted of teaching practice, observations and feedback..

As previously stated due to the data collected, the chosen approach is qualitative. All the data is in textual form hence language based analysis is conducted. Also, the entire process is iterative and moves back and forth between collection, analysis and interpretation (Dornyei, 2016). As can be seen there is subjective intuition as the procedure is reflexive and individual, not structured (Dornyei, 2016). Moreover, the theoretical approach applied to the interviews is emotionalism as the purpose is to elicit authentic accounts of subjective experiences and emotions are treated as a key (Silverman, 2011). The analysis of the data began when transcribing the interviews where possible themes and connections were noticed rather than conducting a mechanical transcription.

As no study is without flaws, there were some problems anticipated before the research process started. The main ones were not enough participants and that the data may not be relevant to the study. The measures taken to avoid these were interviewing more people than necessary and having six more back up interviews and collecting all the possible data or in other words collecting documents and notes on all topics and linking them to ICQs (if possible) later. With regards to the ethical considerations participants' privacy and confidentiality is protected. All the participants have signed a Consent Form and have been informed about the aims of the study. Participants were made aware that their participation is voluntarily and they can withdraw at any time. That is why all names in this study have been converted into numbers and everyone's identity is kept confidential. The data collected during this research can be used only for this study and the only person having access to it is the researcher. This study follows the ethical guidelines stated by Kingston University and the considerations outlined by Dornyei (2007). Some of them are anonymity, the amount of shared information and the handling of the data collected. Finally, all participants were told that they can see the final draft of the study, but changes would not be made.

3. RESULTS

The research indicates that using ICQs is not a straightforward technique and there are various views on how and when to use them. In this section of the study two aspects will be discoursed. As trainees or inexperienced teachers had two roles during the CELTA course, as learners and teachers, both of these will be discussed. Only in this section the term learners refers to both the trainee teachers and the students from Upper- and Pre-intermediate levels. The trainees' views on ICQs were mixed. Most of them did not know that this was a teaching technique but had an opinion about it as Trainer 1 was constantly using them during the input sessions. Even though some of them said during feedback sessions that they "don't mind them" (Journal, Ref. 8) and believed that this was another Communicative Language Teaching approach where the teacher is trying to engage with the students, two of the trainees had very strong opinions on ICQs. According to the interviews Trainee 1 finds ICQs "useless" (Interview,

Ref. 1), “out of order” (Interview, Ref. 2) and “offence to her intellectual capacity” (Interview, Ref 3) whereas Trainee 2 thinks ICQs are “useful” (Interview, Ref.4), “helpful” (Interview, Ref. 5), and “make you feel confident” (Interview, Ref. 6). It is important to mention that both of these trainees have had exactly the same learning experience during the CELTA course which includes the same input sessions, teacher and feedback sessions.

As stated by Trainee 1, they encountered ICQs when they were teaching children aged three-six and that is why Trainee 1 finds ICQs in the classroom “annoying” (Interview, Ref. 7) and “an offence to her intellectual capacity” (Interview, Ref. 8). As advised by Fisher and Frey (2014) and Smith and Strong (2009) to find out where do these feelings originate from, knowing the learner and their background is essential. Therefore, Trainee 1 feelings might be explained by using Swan’s hypothesis that every student has a mother tongue, common-sense, world knowledge and implicit knowledge of the L2, which is procedural and intuitive. As Trainee 1 is not a native speaker, it can be argued that they felt that their fluency of English has been questioned because they repeat 4 times during the interview that their English is fluent and they can understand instructions (Interview, Ref. 9). Another interviewee who uses exactly the same sentence structure is Student 1. They say that sometimes they get lost due to various reasons but “not because I don’t speak English” (Interview, Ref. 10). This relates to the idea of teaching functions and notions such as greeting and apologising. If giving and understanding instructions is perceived as a notion just for the purposes of this study, than it can be argued that Trainer 1 felt uncomfortable and as if their language proficiency is examined because as Swan (Widdowson, 1985: 159) claims students already know how “to do those things” because of common-sense and their own experience. Also, Swan (1985: 32) argues that this process, also known as “transferring skills” is innate and automatic, like the nod. Therefore, skills such as guessing, predicting and understanding instruction are transferable from the mother tongue and the learners will put them in use to L2 without realising it. Consequently, there is no need to check whether students in the EFL classroom have understood the instructions as they have the skill set needed from their mother tongue. Furthermore, to support my argument I can claim that Trainee 1’s statement that ICQs “offend her intellectual capacity” (Interview, Ref. 11) and Swan’s affirmation that certain practices in the EFL classrooms “treat the learner as a sort of linguistically gifted idiot” (1985: 11) argue similar points. This view is also confirmed by my reflective journal where during week 1, I had put an entry stating: *Trainer 1 just gave us instructions and told us which task to do. A series of questions followed. Is she checking how concentrated we are or our level of English?!* (Journal, Ref. 9). The rhetorical question in the end of the journal’s entry shows annoyance and misinterpretation of why these questions are made. It can be argued that due to the fact that I am a non-native speaker myself, I experienced similar emotions as Trainee 1. This supports the argument that when using some EFL classroom practises such as ICQs, teachers need to take into consideration who are the students and to make sure they do not offend anyone.

On the contrary, Trainee 2 feels confident after answering teachers ICQs because they are sure that they have understood the instructions and can proceed to the task (Interview, Ref. 12). The emotion of confidence is also mentioned by Student 2. They say that: *It [the exercise] look[ed] very difficult but it was easy after you [the teacher] ask[ed] the questions.* (Interview Ref. 13). This could mean that before the teacher asks ICQs (“questions”) to the class, the student does not feel confident enough to continue with the execution of the task. The literature widely holds that the three learning factors motivation, ability and confidence are directly linked and impact each other. Butler and Lumpe (2008) argue that if one of the elements declines due to negative experience, the other two will go down as well. Likewise, if one of the elements improves due to positive experiences so will the other two factors. Dornyei (2005) presents a framework where the idealized English speaking self of the learner is grounded on real-life encounters, therefore the role of the EFL teacher is very important in order to shape this self. That is why it can be argued that making students feel confident and able to express their self is crucial in any classroom. Hence, ICQs are an important part of the lesson if they make students experience positive feelings

4. DISCUSSIONS

This research shows that ICQs are an important technique for new teacher. According to Trainer 1 same as in real-life situations, every given instruction in the classroom needs to be checked as well. When asked why Trainer 1 prefers to use ICQs, they gave as an example an imaginary situation where two people are carrying a couch. If one of them says: “We need to get to the yellow door and leave the couch next to the TV”, they need to make sure they have been heard and understood. Therefore, a series of questions would follow such as “Which door are we going to” and “Are we leaving it next to the TV”. If the other person has the information, they will give correct answers. Otherwise, a repetition is needed. Trainer 1 explains that the same rules apply in the EFL classroom. Trainer 1 argues that inexperienced teachers should use ICQs as often as possible because it is harder for new teachers to “read” the students and “what they have understood or not” (Field Notes, Ref. 1). This view relates to Canale and Swain’s argument (1980) to being able to understand students’ reactions. This argument is supported by Student 1 as well. Student 1 says: *Teachers [trainees] talk a lot and fast and I get lost sometime* (Interview, Ref. 14). Moreover,

Trainer 1 claims that “new teachers usually like yes/no questions” (Field Notes, Ref. 2) as they are easy to formulate and do not need preparation in advance. By reviewing all of these points, it can be argued that ICQs are essential part of the lesson of every new teacher.

Also, ICQs are crucial part of pair work. This argument is supported not only by Trainer 1 but also by Student 1. Student 1 talks about their experience when they needed to play a team game where time was essential. However, due to the fact that their teammate did not understand the rules, Student 1 had to “spent time ... to explain the rules” (Interview, Ref. 15). Afterwards, Student 1 admits they were feeling angry and were blaming the other student for losing the game. On the contrary Student 2 has a positive experience from doing the same exercise. The only difference was adding ICQs before giving the task to the students. Student 2 says: *I did not know how to write it but you ask questions and I understand. [...] It was easy after you [the teacher] ask the questions to the class [ICQs].* (Interview, Ref. 16). Trainee 2 favours this argument as well. They state: *ICQs give you a sense whether the students have completely understood the task.* (Interview, Ref. 17) This supports Fisher and Frey’s (2014) argument that if the teacher does not check the instructions given, it is very hard to know what the students have understood. As Trainee 2 has a basketball coach background the example he gives is using ICQs before the students start “dribbling” (Interview, Ref. 18). He mentions that dribbling creates noise and unless you check that the students have understood the task given before you give them the ball, you will not be able to do it later. The noise from the ball when someone is dribbling can be used as a metaphor for the speaking when students are doing group activities. Therefore, it can be argued that ICQs are a very important component of instruction giving.

Moreover, it can be argued that ICQs are key for lower levels as those learners “familiarise themselves with the language” (Rodgers, 2015) and the questions can be perceived as input by the teachers. Also, as previously claimed ICQs help to reinforce the triangle of motivation, confidence and ability. According to the researcher’s journal, after ICQs had been introduced to the trainers and put into practice, students from Pre-intermediate were doing the exercises 2 to 5 times quicker than before (Journal, Ref. 11). It can be argued that this is due to the more confidence that students had as stated by Student 2 “you [the teacher] say easy words and use ... (gestures) but sometimes I lost” (Interview, Ref. 20) but after ICQs have been asked “I understand more” (Interview, Ref. 21), which leads to happiness and positive experiences. The positive experiences reinforce the motivation, confidence and the abilities. As mentioned before ICQs are used to check whether students have understood the instructions of a given task. However, if the teacher is familiar with the group of students and the same type of task has been previously introduced, there is no need of ICQs as it can create confusion. Another example when ICQs hindered the learning process was observed during Trainee 1’s lesson. After giving a task, Trainee 1 would ask the students a series of questions, but what can be found in the field notes states: *Not very effective as the students didn’t engage with the questions. They did not know the instructions have finishes as she kept talking and didn’t let the students answer the question.* (Field Notes, Ref. 6). It can be argued that this links to what Teacher 1 said about inexperienced teachers during a feedback session: *New teachers are likely to fail at signalling to the students what is a statement and what is a question.* (Field Notes, Ref. 7). This leads to students not being able to distinguish between the teacher giving an example, or exemplifying, asking a question and providing an explanation. As a consequence the input becomes incomprehensible to learners and the language problematic (Krashen, 1977). Even though Trainer 1 argues the opposite, the researcher’s findings show that ICQs can be avoided in monolingual classes as well. This is supported by the opinion of the majority of the trainees who believed that Trainee 1 was questioning their “intellectual capacity” and English proficiency during the input sessions and were very confused why Trainer 1 was asking those questions as everybody’s level of English in the classroom was native or native-like. As previously mentioned Pre-intermediate and Upper-intermediate level students have different need of the amount of ICQs used in the classroom. As Upper-intermediate level students have usually spent more time learning the language and have done more exercises it is crucial not to ICQ every single exercise. However, new and creative tasks need to be ICQed.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The data analysed in this section revealed the different opinions on the matter and why is the use of ICQs considered an issue. Teachers 1 and 2 have different views on whether ICQs should be used. The opinions and feelings among the students, which include the Pre-intermediate and Upper-Intermediate learners and the trainees, were mixed as well. It all leads to the conclusion that due to different backgrounds and experiences, it is the teacher who needs to make choices when or whether to use ICQs in their classroom. The aim of this research was to investigate Instruction Check Questions and to analyse the perception that trainees and students have of them, as well as how are they used by experiences teachers and the impact that ICQs have on the EFL classroom. The critical reflection looked into several thought provoking matters. Firstly, the fact that both CELTA teachers had different opinions regarding the usage of ICQs and their views were polar. Even though both of them were able to provide an explanation to why they prefer to use or avoid ICQs and to introduce ICQs in a clear manner, neither was aware of

the origins of ICQs or the pedagogical rationale behind them. Moreover, there was little information provided on ICQs during the CELTA course. Secondly, the following research question was answered: How do learners perceive ICQs? This section was divided in two parts: positive and negative experiences. Both of the sections look into both trainees and students perspectives as trainees had two roles during the CELTA course, as teachers and learners. Data relevant to this research question was mainly obtained through the interviews as it looked at students' feelings and thought. There were also conclusions drawn from the researcher's reflective journal as the researcher was also a participant and their thoughts and feelings were described with plenty of details. The second research question that was answered was when do ICQs facilitate the learning process. This section argued three main points: ICQs are crucial for new teacher, smooth pair work and keep the motivation levels up in a classroom with lower levels of English. Most of the data collected for this section was from the reflective journal as they were coded themes and from the interviews due to the experience that different trainees had had. After presenting how ICQs enable the learning process it seemed logical to look into the negative sides of ICQs or when are they not needed. For instance, in a monolingual classroom, when the task is already familiar to the students such as a gap fill or when the ICQs are exactly the same questions after every instruction given. The last research question that was looked into was How are ICQs used by trainees and experienced teachers at Upper- and Pre-intermediate levels. This section mainly analysed the researcher's field notes and the interviews. The feelings of students of different CERF levels are described by examining their experiences. Afterwards, the research looks into the amount and the structure of ICQs when they are used in Pre-intermediate and Upper-intermediate classrooms. Even though it is important to keep the same sentence structure in order to ask ICQs, the field notes show that due to students' facial expressions which indicated boredom when too many ICQs are asked the amount with Upper-levels should be less and two identical ICQs should not be occurring during the same lesson.

This paper offered multiple methods for gathering data and the information was detailed in order to look into ICQs as a complex issue. Moreover, this study creates openness and opens up new areas for research which were not initially considered. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this research will be of use to anyone interested in instruction check questions as a teaching technique, their use in the classroom and how they impact the learners.

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