Teacher Questions as Scaffolded Assistance in an ESL Classroom

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How teachers use questions during whole-class instruction has generated myriad discussions on the nature and role of this fundamental discursive tool for engaging learners in instructional interactions, checking comprehension, and building understandings of complex concepts (Cazden, 1988; Chaudron, 1988; Hatch, 1992; Long, 1981; Mehan, 1979; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wells, 1996). Previous classroom-based studies have identified various question types, for example, closed- and open-ended questions (Barnes, 1969), display and referential questions (Long & Sato, 1983), forced-choice questions (Long, 1981), assisting and assessing questions (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), and clarification requests (Chaudron, 1988; Gass, 1997; Pica, 1987). If, as Postman (1979) stated, “all our knowledge results from questions, ... [and] question-asking is our most important intellectual tool” (p. 140), then continued research into this tool can potentially improve instruction.

While providing insight into the nature of questions itself, much second language (L2) research has focused on identifying question types and taxonomies (cf. Chaudron, 1988). More recently, based on input-oriented theories of second language acquisition (SLA), questions in the form of clarification requests have been investigated from the perspective of how they might promote the modification of interaction (Long, 1981) and negotiation of meaning. Thus, it is claimed that through the process of asking for clari-
Over the past years, scaffolding has been introduced into the SLA litera-
ture by several researchers (cf. Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Ellis, 1998;
Hatch, 1992; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Oxford, 1997; Scarcella &
Oxford, 1992; Slobin, 1982). In many of these discussions, particularly
among L2 research studies not situated within a sociocultural framework
(cf. Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Oxford, 1997), the original concept of
scaffolding, as operationalized by Wood et al. (1976), has been simplified
and invoked to represent, in a general sense, interlocutor collaboration,
graduated assistance, or cued help.

Although not entirely inaccurate, these reduced and simplified defini-
tions of scaffolding often neglect or fail to capture the various moves and
functions of discourse, including questions, as verbal assistance unfolds
across time during learning interactions. Additionally, as Wells (1998)
argued, scaffolding requires explicitly or implicitly acknowledging the
transfer of responsibility from an expert to a novice for carrying out vari-
ous parts of the task. Thus, not all forms of assistance qualify as scaffold-
ed interactions. Finally, underlying the concept itself is the metaphor of
learning as participation—one that contrasts sharply with the more com-
mon metaphor of learning as acquisition and the accumulation of knowl-
dge in the individual (Sfard, 1998). We base our study of questions,
therefore, on the flagship article of Wood et al. (1976) in which they intro-
duce the metaphor and identify several well-defined functions and
requirements of scaffolded interactions.

Scaffolding is the process by which experts assist novices to achieve a
goal or solve a problem that the novice could not achieve or solve alone
(Wood et al., 1976). Six functions constitute this process and are deployed
dynamically as experts negotiate task definitions with novices (Wertsch,
1985), assess their level of competence, and determine what type of assis-
tance they need to accomplish a particular part of the task:

1. Recruitment (R)—Drawing the novice’s attention to the task.
2. Reduction in degrees of freedom (RDF)—Simplifying or limiting
the task demands.
3. Direction maintenance (DM)—Maintaining motivation and progres-
sing toward the goals of the task.

In terms of L2 learning, task refers to any interaction during a class whereby students
are expected to participate in speech or writing, generate a solution or answer, or derive an
understanding from new material. Specifically, a task can take the form of expressing one’s
opinion in a group discussion about a video or text, engaging in form-focused exercises or
problem-solving activity, or arriving at generalizations about the L2, target language cul-
tural information, or the meaning of new vocabulary.
4. Marking critical features (MCF)—Calling the novice's attention to important aspects of the task.
5. Frustration control (FC)—Decreasing the novice's stress.
6. Demonstration (D)—Modeling the preferred procedures to achieve the goals. (Wood et al., 1976, p. 98)

Limitations of the metaphor of scaffolding have been identified in the literature and the debate continues concerning the usefulness of this construct (cf. Stone, 1993). For example, a persistent problem has been the lack of specification of the communicative and linguistic mechanisms that constitute the various functions of the scaffolding process. In this study, we attempt to address this limitation by examining closely one communicative mechanism during scaffolded interactions, namely the use of questions by the teacher. Specifically, we examine how one discursive feature of classroom life, teacher questions, develops class participation; learner comprehension, and comprehensibility.

Teacher Goals

To identify the scaffolding functions of questions in classroom events, the goals of the teacher cannot be overlooked. Wells (1996) contended that “classroom events are best understood as [goal-directed] actions” (p. 76). He suggested two different goal processes: (a) goals can be preestablished, a priori, and constant (i.e., no change over time) throughout instruction; and (b) unplanned and spontaneous goals may emerge and be negotiated and renegotiated during classroom tasks as a result of the coconstruction process. If instruction is understood as goal-directed actions, and teacher questions are a common part of instruction, then to understand the role of questions requires knowledge of the goals they are trying to achieve.

Woods (1996) described the conceptual structure of a course by identifying four levels of goals and units: (a) overall conceptual goals (course goals), (b) global conceptual units (skill and subskill goals), (c) intermediate conceptual units (task goals), and (d) local conceptual units. During scaffolded, teacher-fronted activities, teachers select and maintain course goals until the learner adopts the goals of the teacher or the learner pursues self-selected goals. Attention to a priori teacher goals is in keeping with Wood et al. (1976), in that the teachers must attend to the “theory of the task or problem and how it may be completed” (p. 97). A teacher's a priori instructional goals are, therefore, an integral component of the theory of the task or problem and may drive the selection of instructional tools, in this case the use of questions, needed to complete the task.

THE STUDY

Research Questions

The research questions of this study ask how an English as a second language (ESL) teacher's questions serve to scaffold learning during teacher-fronted activities and how these questions reflect the six specific functions of scaffolding already discussed. Imbedded in these research questions is the need to connect the teacher’s use of questions and her expressed instructional goals as previously discussed. For the purpose of this chapter, we limit the discussion to teacher questions related to her expressed a priori course goals of ensuring student comprehension, student comprehensibility when speaking in class, and student ongoing participation in the social setting of the classroom.

Methodology

Context. The data were collected from a semester-long integrated skills ESL class in a university setting. The course, offered two evenings a week for 2-hour class meetings, is designed to meet the needs of students who want to improve global English skills, but cannot attend an intensive English program or who have daytime obligations. Students must have a minimum score of 450 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language or 70 on the Michigan Test of English Proficiency. In some cases, students with scores lower than the minimum attend the class, but only with permission from the academic advisor and the instructor. The participants were the ESL teacher and the seven students enrolled in her class.

Class Materials. The text for the course was Time: Reaching for Tomorrow (Schinke-Llano, 1994), which is a collection of Time magazine articles, analogous listening texts, and activities. To supplement the text and add variety to the materials used in class, the teacher introduced materials that she created based on listening segments from National Public Radio programs and written texts from the local newspaper. In choosing

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Data and analysis for this study were taken from a larger study by McCormick (1997).
the additional material, the teacher selected topics that related to those in the commercial text, were requested by the students, and were culturally pertinent to the students' interests and experiences.

Participants. The instructor, a native English-speaking female, had earned a bachelor's degree in English/Creative Writing and a Master's degree in linguistics with a certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). At the time of the study, she had taught English as a foreign language (EFL) in Africa and ESL in the United States for a total of 11.5 years. The teacher had previously taught the evening class before the semester during which the data were collected for this study. She did not share the native languages spoken by the students and only used English during the class studied.

Her seven students, the other participants in this study, spoke Chinese or Japanese. All seven ranged in age from 25 to 40 and had studied English in their home countries before coming to the United States. All seven were working at the time of the research and had less than 1 year of English study in the United States before the research began. Five were female and two were male. Each pseudonym used in this chapter was chosen by the participant.

Data Collection Techniques. A variety of data collection techniques was used in this study. The researcher audiotaped one interview with the teacher before and one interview after the period of in-class data collection. Each interview followed a semistructured interview format. The interview questions focused on the teacher's expressed goals for the course, skill and subskill goals (i.e., reading comprehension, writing, listening comprehension, speaking, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and culture), and her instructional techniques for achieving these goals. In addition to interviews with the teacher, 20 of the 24 2-hour classes were videotaped. During the taping, field notes were taken to record all occurrences of teacher-fronted activities and when in the lesson they occurred, information written on the board, speakers, and occasions of specific teacher-student questioning segments and when in the lesson they occurred. After each of the 20 videotaped classes, the teacher wrote journal comments about her goals for that particular class, whether she had achieved these goals during instruction, and, if so, how, and any additional comments she chose to make. Five times over the course of videotaping, and no more than 24 hours after the actual class had occurred, the teacher and researcher viewed and discussed their reactions to a videotape of the class. Questions about the teacher's goals and how she tried to achieve them, as well as questions about why specific instructional practices were chosen, were asked. The teacher was not told that the focus of the research was teacher questions; however, she was aware of the researchers' interest in her goals because of the researchers' questions in the interviews and the guidelines for the journal comments. Each discussion was audiotaped and notes were made. The final data collection technique used was the collection of existing written documents that included information about the teacher, the students, the course, and the institute.

In sum, the data collection techniques employed in this study were interviews, verbal reports, teacher journals, videotaping, field notes, and the collection of existing information. The interviews, verbal reports, and journal comments were the sources of data on the teacher's expressed goals. The videotapes provided data of the teacher's use of questions and the field notes provided the researchers with information on the context of the teacher's questions.

The Teacher's Expressed Goals. A course goal was defined as a goal that spanned the semester and motivated the choice of classroom activities. The data sources for the teacher's course goals were her interviews, her journal notes, and the verbal reports. Teacher goals were noted by the researcher only if they were included in two or more of the data sources. Using multiple sources of data addressed the issue of the validity of the teacher's account of her goals and decreased the chance that the researcher would misrepresent the teacher's self-reports. Each of the three course goals discussed in this chapter—student comprehension, student comprehensibility, and student participation—was mentioned in the initial interview, the final interview, the journal notes, and the verbal reports, thus increasing the likelihood that the self-report data on goals were credible (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Silverman, 1993).

Classroom Data. After viewing the 20 videotapes, Videotapes 4, 9, 12, 16, and 20 were selected for analysis because they were accompanied by the teacher's verbal reports and they were found to be the most representative of the recurring routines for the course. They also contained an adequate number of teacher-fronted presentations for analysis. From the five videotapes, the classroom data were reduced to teacher-fronted activities, or only those "interactions controlled and directed by the teacher" (p. 182) as defined by Rulon and McCreary (1986). These segments were then displayed (i.e., transcribed) and indexed. Teacher-fronted activities, rather
than tutorial sessions or small group work, were chosen as a context boundary for examining teacher questions because it has been documented that teachers use questions frequently as an instructional tool when interacting with the entire class (cf. Chaudron, 1988; Mehan, 1979; Mollica, 1994; Nunan, 1991). A total of 15 teacher-fronted segments were identified. Indexing the data included noting information about the context and content of each activity. Transcription methodology included identifying speakers, indicating overlapping and latched utterances, briefly describing nonverbal behavior, marking falling and rising intonation, and indicating syllable and word stress. All 15 teacher-fronted activity segments were transcribed for a total of 15 protocols. Questions were functionally identified in the corpus as requests for verbal or nonverbal responses following Tharp (1993) and Ervin-Tripp (1976, 1977), and structurally identified by rising intonation, question syntax, or occurrences of wh- words (Forman, McCormick, & Donato, 1993; Wong, 1991).

After the questions were identified, they were coded for a specific scaffolding function; that is, R, RDF, DM, MCF, FC, and D. A total of 829 questions in the data were coded. The coding was verified (Miles & Huberman, 1994) by reviewing the field notes, the teacher’s journal comments, the interviews, and the teacher’s verbal reports. Three passes through the data were made to verify the coding of scaffolding functions. An additional rater coded the questions of five randomly selected protocols (out of the 15 protocols). The researchers and rater reached 88% agreement across all question functions within the five protocols.

During the coding of the data, questions were identified that are commonly referred to in the foreign language or second language literature as comprehension checks (e.g., Is everything clear?) and clarification requests (e.g., Could you explain what you said in another way?; cf. Long & Sato, 1983). Because the comprehension checks related specifically to the teacher’s expressed goal of comprehension building and the clarification requests related to the teacher’s expressed goal of comprehensibility, they were considered subfunctions of DM and were coded DM-CC and DM-CR, respectively.

Findings

The findings are explained in reference to each scaffolding function and the goals for the course. In some cases, discourse segments are included in the explanation to illustrate the scaffolding functions of the teacher’s questions as they relate to the teacher’s goals.

R Questions. The teacher used questions to recruit the students’ attention to classroom tasks only three times in the data. In one case, the teacher asked, “Why don’t you guys give one of your questions?” to encourage students to start asking each other questions that they had written about a reading text. In the two other cases, the teacher used R questions before any other discourse to start an activity and invite student participation in the activity (“Does anybody have any questions about the papers I gave you, returned to you?”; “Are you following the main story?”). Most often the teacher used directives to recruit students into the task.

DM Questions. DM-CC questions and DM-CR questions existed across text topics, skill areas, and the semester (i.e., time). During teacher-fronted activities, the teacher was responsible for orchestrating the classroom discourse. Her comprehension check and clarification request questions monitored and facilitated the students’ comprehension and comprehensibility.

All instances of comprehension checks (n = 248) occurred as the teacher and student worked though classroom tasks. The teacher used comprehension checks to monitor student comprehension during the activities (i.e., checking “online” comprehension). Segment A is one example of the teacher’s use of DM-CC questions. In Segment A, taken from a postreading discussion, the teacher used comprehension checks (Lines A4–A8) about vocabulary introduced during teacher–student interaction. Students had read an article in their textbook called “Living Happily Near a Nuclear Trash Heap” by Dick Thompson. The article presented information from research studies on the employees of the nuclear plants mentioned in the article. (Note: In all protocol examples presented in this document, scaffolding function codes are in capital letters in parentheses):

Segment A

A1. T: (7-second wait) In other words, I guess what Sally is trying to ask is what were some of the flaws with the studies? (DM)
A2. SA: Yeah.
A3. T: Can I say that? (DM-CC) What were some of the flaws? (DM-CC)
A4. T: (teacher looks at students, moves toward board) Flaws? (DM-CC)
A5. (writes the word flaw on board—Snufkin enters class) Singular,
A6. flaw. Hi Snufkin. Does everybody know this word? (DM-CC)
As we see in Lines A4, A5, A7, and A8, the teacher uses a series of DM-CC questions to ascertain whether her students understood the word *flaw*. In addition, by checking comprehension, the teacher is working to maintain student involvement in the task. Throughout the semester, the teacher used DM-CC questions to establish the students’ comprehension of task demands, other-student discourse, teacher discourse, and vocabulary used in texts or during class discussions.

In addition to DM-CC questions, the teacher used DM-CR questions to increase comprehensibility by encouraging students to clarify, expand, elaborate, or reiterate some aspect of their discourse (n = 130). Examples of teacher DM-CR questions can be found in Segment B (also taken from the previous postreading activity).

Segment B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1.</td>
<td>T: Let’s just go with the questions that we have.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2.</td>
<td>SA: I want to, I want to see the, this study’s statistics, statistics,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3.</td>
<td>scientific statistics, that is, is good study, like that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4.</td>
<td>T: You mean you want to ask if the studies were scientific? (DM-CR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5.</td>
<td>SA: Yeah, scientific, and the statistics, like that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6.</td>
<td>T: And if the statistics were accurate? (DM-CR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B7.</td>
<td>SA: Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B8.</td>
<td>T: Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B9.</td>
<td>SA: I want to ask.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Segment B, the teacher directs clarification request questions in Lines B4 and B6 to Sally’s (SA) question. In this case, the teacher scaffolds the comprehensibility of Sally’s questions (“you want to ask if . . .?”; “if the statistics were accurate?”), the teacher’s comprehension of Sally’s questions, and it could be argued, potentially the other students’ comprehension of Sally’s questions.

DM-CC questions and DM-CR questions were present and robust throughout the transcripts. DM-CC questions accounted for 30% of the teacher questions coded and DM-CR questions accounted for 16% (percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number). The frequency of DM-CC and DM-CR questions in this study attests to the teacher’s efforts to realize her course goals of comprehension and comprehensibility.

As the preceding segments illustrate, DM questions were a pervasive discursive tool for building student participation, comprehension, and comprehensibility. With regard to course goals, the teacher used DM questions to invite students to participate and to express their ideas clearly in a way that was comprehensible to the group (n = 322). DM questions also helped the teacher work toward and achieve her goal of comprehension building during reading and listening activities. Segment C, which occurred immediately after Segment A in the same postreading discussion, contains examples of DM questions tied to comprehension and comprehensibility goals.

Segment C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1.</td>
<td>T: Anything else that was a problem with these studies? (DM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2.</td>
<td>RO: Question is this number three?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3.</td>
<td>T: Ah-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4.</td>
<td>RO: Similar question?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5.</td>
<td>T: Yeah, that’s a very similar question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6.</td>
<td>RO: Yeah, [So-]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7.</td>
<td>GE: So I believe this, this contribution is true but is not scientific.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8.</td>
<td>T: It’s not scientific, it’s not accurate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9.</td>
<td>GE: Yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10.</td>
<td>T: Right, OK. Were there any other problems? (DM)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Lines C1 and C10, the teacher asks the students to comment on problems with the research studies mentioned in the reading text. The students’ responses to her questions allow the teacher to assess the students’ comprehension of the text. We can see that in Line C7 Gemma (GE) provides a correct and appropriate answer that demonstrates her comprehension of the text and the teacher’s question. In addition to maintaining direction toward her course goal of comprehension, the teacher’s DM questions also encourage more students to participate, also a course goal. Because her questions invite a response, they provide students with an entryway to participation.

**RDF Questions.** The teacher’s use of RDF questions (n = 64) was based on her notion of the progress of the task, or usually, the lack of progress. When students could not answer a DM question, the teacher changed or modified her questions until the students could more actively participate in the discussion. The manner in which the teacher reduced the degrees of freedom of the task at hand (i.e., simplified the task demands) included asking a more specific question or a forced-choice question, changing vocabulary in the question, or focusing on a subpart of the question.

The following example is taken from a postlistening activity in which the teacher used RDF questions to help students understand a new vocabulary item encountered in a cloze activity.
During the review of the cloze text vocabulary, Jenni (JE) asks about the phrase “global explanation” in Lines D1 and D2. Beginning in Line D5, the teacher scaffolded the task of understanding new vocabulary, in this case “global explanation,” by simplifying the task. The first subtask is for Jenni to identify the part of speech of global (Line D6), and the second subtask is to identify the word it describes (Lines D8 and D10). The teacher then returns to the original task of defining global in Line D12. Gwen (GW) provides the definition in Line D13 for the benefit of the class comprehension. In addition, later in the activity, Jenni indicates to the teacher her comprehension of worldwide as a synonym for global and her comprehension of the meaning of the word worldwide. Most often, the data revealed that RDF questions function in two ways. First, they help the teacher realize the goal of comprehension; second, they facilitate participation by making questions easier for students to answer. Jenni had an opportunity to participate in the construction of the meaning of the vocabulary item because the teacher’s use of RDF questions provided her with manageable subtasks to perform. The completion of these subtasks contributed to the full solution of the task. In this way, we see how a question aimed at redefining and restructuring the problem space for the learner provides a venue for the learner to participate in the social setting of the classroom and build new knowledge.

MCF Questions. Similar to RDF questions, MCF questions allowed the teacher to mark critical features of a task when problems arose during tasks. MCF questions (n = 46) called attention to text information, vocabulary, errors, and semantic and linguistic features when students were challenged by tasks or were not working toward the preferred responses and the teacher’s goals. For example, in the following segment, the teacher uses an MCF question to focus the students’ attention on a characteristic of a vocabulary word, palace, during a review of vocabulary they would encounter in a movie.

In this example, the teacher’s marking of a characteristic of the word palace in Line E5 calls attention to a feature of the word that facilitates comprehension. Collectively, prior to the teacher’s MCF question, the students demonstrated that they understand that a palace is like a castle (Line E2), or is a special, good (Line E3), and a very nice place (Line E4). After the teacher’s question, they added that a palace is where kings live (Line E6). Throughout the course, the teacher used MCF questions to realize her expressed goal of comprehension. When breakdowns in language learning and communication occurred, both RDF and MCF questions acted as scaffolding repair tools.

D and FC Questions. In contrast to other scaffolding functions of questions, D questions and FC questions were limited in the data. D questions, which occurred 12 times in the data, were used to model appropriate question forms, thus facilitating the teacher’s goal of comprehensibility. For example, in Segment F, the teacher demonstrates an accurately formed question.
After the teacher models the accurate question form (Line F2), she tells
the student to repeat the model (Line F2). When the student does not
repeat the complete model, the teacher demonstrates the part of the ap­
propriate form omitted by the student (Line F4). Modeling question forms
specifically related to the teacher's course goal of improving student com­
prehensibility. Additionally, in this particular class, requests for direct rep­
etition of an accurate sentence occurred rarely. Teacher recasts and follow­
up questions asking for a direct repetition were not frequent feedback
moves in this classroom (see Lyster, 1998, for a similar finding).

FC questions, which only occurred four times in the data, were located
at times when the teacher asked if students needed help ("Do you want
some help, Gemma?") or if repetition was needed for the purpose of compre­
hension ("Do you want the question to be repeated?"). On one occasion
the teacher invited a student to participate in a class activity by asking
him to comment on a topic that was in his field ("How's your
computer there, Stan?").

CONCLUSION

Based on this analysis, scaffolding is a viable framework for investigating
teacher questions. The concept of scaffolding originated by Wood et al.
(1976), including the six scaffolding functions, demonstrates how teacher
questions function as symbolic linguistic tools to achieve goals. In turn,
the teacher's use of questions in this study reflects characteristics and
functions of scaffolding as described by Greenfield (1984) and Wood et al.
(1976). Her questions created supportive conditions for comprehen­
sion, comprehensibility, and participation of the students in the language
lesson.

Specifically, in this study the teacher's questioning process expanded the
students' learning during difficulties with text comprehension. For example,
RDF and MCF questions assisted students during difficulties with complex
classroom tasks, and DM questions maintained focus on the task and guided
students through the comprehension of texts. The teacher's (expert) ques­
tions, when effectively used, enabled the students (novices) to achieve tasks
they were not able to achieve alone. For example, understanding a vocabu­
lary item occurred, in some cases, through the scaffolded assistance that the

teacher's questions provided. When students struggled to express them­
selves, the teacher's questions served to increase the comprehensibility of
their utterances by asking for clarification, expansion, and elaboration.
When breakdowns occurred, MCF and RDF questions operated as repair
tools. Finally, the teacher selectively chose questions to build participa­tion.
DM questions were frequently used as a means to keep discussions alive.
Thus, the scaffolding functions of her questions appear to match her
planned tasks and her self-reported goals for the course.

Further, when understood as semiotic tools that function in myriad
ways to assist thinking, speaking, and learning (Brooks, Donato, &
McGlone, 1997), the social and cognitive value of a question becomes
apparent. Questions, as we have tried to show, are more than elicitation
techniques. Additionally, they need to be understood as tools for shared
cognitive functioning in the social context of tasks, courses, and goals
(McCormick, 1997; Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991) rather than
restricted to the clarification and elaboration of linguistically encoded
messages that are sent and received (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Brooks et
al., 1997; Platt & Brooks, 1994; Reddy, 1979). Questions play a much
broader role in L2 learning than has been acknowledged in previous
research. They function as dynamic discursive tools to build collaboration
and to scaffold comprehension and comprehensibility (Donato, 1994;
McCormick, 1997; Swain, 1997) during language lessons. Rather than
simply assigning a static function to a question type (e.g., display infor­
mation, express new information, assess knowledge, provide a choice for
an answer in a question, etc.), we have shown that a more valid under­
standing of a teacher's question can be achieved by anchoring them with­
in the framework of scaffolding and in reference to a teacher's goals. This
approach is consistent with sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that
learning is a collaborative achievement situated in the discursive interac­
tions that take place in communities of practice (Forman, Minick, &
Stone, 1993; Haneda, 1997; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Lave & Wenger,
1991). That is, knowledge is a coconstructed process uniting social and
individual processes mediated through semiotic systems, notably lan­
guage. Questions are one highly productive and frequently invoked semi­
otic tool at the teacher's disposal for uniting these individual and social
processes and for scaffolding L2 learning.

The genetic method (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1990) of investigating
the scaffolding process of teacher questions, starting outside the class­
room with goals and working our way into classroom tasks, highlighted
the role of teacher goals as explanations for how she used questions. One
implication for teacher education, consistent with sociocultural theory, is to make teachers aware of the critical role goals play in and across all aspects of instruction—planning, presentations, and postlesson evaluation. It has long been recognized that goals can drive instruction and that accomplished teaching is dependent on the teacher’s ability to be aware of, articulate, and enact her goals. Although teachers may be operating in their classroom based on unconscious and automatic goals (Leontiev, 1981), they must raise these goals to a level of conscious and controlled action to act as a reflective practitioner (Wallace, 1991). Further, by understanding one’s instructional goals more clearly, a teacher’s pedagogical choices become more transparent and amenable to control (Nunan & Lamb, 1996). In particular, the work with this teacher for this longitudinal case study made her more aware of her goals for instruction by articulating them. She was better able to understand her use of questions when matched with her expressed goals.

Investigating teacher questions within a scaffolding framework has provided insight into one communicative mechanism during scaffolded instruction (Stone, 1993). In this study, teacher questions scaffolded her overall course goals of participation, comprehension, and comprehensibility. Investigating question functions in this way moves beyond the literature on question types and taxonomies and enables us to better understand how questions operate as semiotic tools for achieving goal-directed instructional actions within the context of teacher–student classroom interaction.

REFERENCES


