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# Teachers' Questioning Patterns Versus Learners' Responses

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*Keywords:* *classroom, questioning, questioning patterns, response, english lessons.*

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# Teachers' Questioning Patterns Versus Learners' Responses

Rasel Babu [α] & Shamnaz Arifin Mim [σ]

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*Keywords: classroom, questioning, questioning patterns, response, english lessons.*

## I. Background: Framing the Research Stage

Asking questions in classrooms is a common tradition (Klein, Peterson & Simington, 1991). It is mostly used in teaching-learning strategies and is one of the bases of effective and outstanding teaching practices (Callahan & Clark, 1982; Frazee & Rudnitski, 1995; Freiberg & Driscoll, 1996; Hamilton & Brady, 1991; Nunan & Lamb, 1996). Even the use of questioning as an assessment strategy is widely found from many years (Gall, 1970; Koechlin & Zwaan, 2014). In a classroom, teachers design such questions to involve the learners in thinking, to challenge their own assumptions, to engage, and to join larger dialogues which can be practiced as a critical way of examining the content at hand (Yang, 2010). According to Tienken, Goldberg & Dirocco (2009), Socrates introduced question-answer method of teaching-learning in pedagogical process. The earliest evidence of using questions in education was found in the time of Socrates as well. He used searching questions to teach his students and his aim was to make them think, understand and justify their assertions (Newton, 2002; Harrop & Swinson, 2003). Questioning as a teaching method is, therefore, crucial to develop learning and understanding (Myhill & Dunkin, 2005).

Over the years the scholars had explored different patterns of questions that exhibit various dimensions. Some of the scholars classified questions as open and closed questions (Koechlin & Zwaan, 2014). Some others, on the other hand, categorized questions in simply yes-no patterns (Tausi, 1985). Sometimes scholars also differentiate questions as factual, conceptual and provocative questions (Erickson, 2007). Researchers from different geographical locations have shown that, classroom questioning played a vital role in classroom practices. Majorities of such kinds of researches are found to be conducted in the developed countries mainly. The importance of such researches in developing countries like Bangladesh is also in demand since both the teachers and students face several problems in daily classroom interactions (Babu & Mim, 2013). Research on the patterns of questioning can possibly provide a space to think about the ways of reducing the existing barriers in classroom interaction and also will allow to understand the classroom practices in ensuring quality education.

This paper thus aims to investigate the patterns of questioning practiced in Bangladeshi schools by focusing on how the learners response towards those patterns of questioning. It is expected that the study findings would help the associated stakeholders to improve their classroom practices since this study has adopted questioning as a teaching and assessment approach in a classroom setting. It is worth mentioning that, this particular study will not limit its scope within investigating question types only rather the analysis will contribute in opening windows to understand the relationship of learning with the different patterns of the questioning practices e.g. types, cognitive dimensions and sources of the questions. The findings of this study will therefore help the practitioners to use questions in classrooms more effectively.

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## II. Research Objectives and Questions

The objective of this empirical study was to understand teachers' questioning pattern and its role in shaping grade VI-VIII learners' response in Bangladesh.

To achieve this objective, two research questions have been investigated:

a) What are the different patterns of questioning practiced in classrooms?
b) How do the learners' responses vary according to the daily practiced questioning patterns in classrooms?

## III. Methodology

Many studies had shown that questioning is such a phenomenon that requires both qualitative and quantitative investigation to be explored in a holistic manner (Creswell, 2011). Hence qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously providing equal importance which can ensure a concurrent triangulation approach of mixed method research (Creswell, 2009). For collecting data five secondary schools from a semi urban sub-district of Bangladesh were selected using typical sampling strategy of purposive sampling process to secure the maximum accessibility (Creswell, 2011; Kvale, 1996). Such sampling process allowed us to analyze the classroom practices of those schools which had typical/representative school characteristics in Bangladesh context. The reason behind such small number of schools was that the issues of classroom questioning demand in-depth exploration, the sample size of five schools allowed us to collect data from the actors such as students, teachers and from classroom observation in a manageable way (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007).

Since classroom questioning serves as one of the purposes of classroom interaction, we purposively selected English classrooms where communicative language teaching approaches were used according to the national curriculum (NCTB, 2012). Concentrating only on English classrooms thus provided us better scope than other subjects to understand the questioning patterns. Two English teachers were found in each of the schools who participated willingly in this study. To satisfy the conditions of data triangulation (Creswell, 2011) we collected data from multi groups of respondents as questioning was experienced by all of them.

To explore the salient features of questioning pattern and its impact on learners' responses, data were collected using different methods as well which served the purpose of methodological triangulation (Creswell, 2011; Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2011). Of the methods, video observation was used to capture the holistic scenario of the classroom teaching-learning process. It is noteworthy that, two English lessons from each grade were videoed. For observation we did not video the lessons only rather we took detail notes on the overall activities of the classrooms. In a school we observed six lessons (2*3grades) and the number was 30 for five schools. From each lesson on an average 10 questions were obtained that served academic purposes. Therefore total 300 questions were selected for analyzing.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also organized to investigate on learners' views, perception and opinion regarding the central issues; questioning. In total, ten FGDs were conducted in five schools. Of them three were with grade VI, three with grade VIII and four FGDs were conducted with grade VII learners. All the mandatory issues of FGD were strictly followed while conducting the FGDs. Intensive interviews were carried out with each of the English teachers to learn their opinion regarding various issues of questioning (Yin, 2014).

To analyze the data, we used both qualitative and quantitative ways. Around three hundred questions from the 30 lessons were categorized according to the types, sources and learning domains. Quantitative analysis, more specifically descriptive statistics was used in this section. The qualitative narratives generated from observation, FGDs and interviews were analyzed through the proper process that included transcribing, translating, organizing, coding, identifying the themes and triangulating (Creswell 2011). Finally the train - gulated findings had been presented under different themes based on the research questions and emerged from the data.

## IV. Teachers' Questioning Pattern in Shaping Learners' Response: Results and Discussion

### a) *Types of the Questions Asked*

Teachers were observed to ask three types of questions inside the classrooms; open, closed and yes-no questions. The current questioning practice revealed that more than half (55%) of the questions were closed whereas 40% of them were yes-no questions. Percentages of asked open questions were only about 5%. The detailed analysis with an extensive use of primary data and narratives followed by the illustration of numerical data in Figure 1 are presented below.



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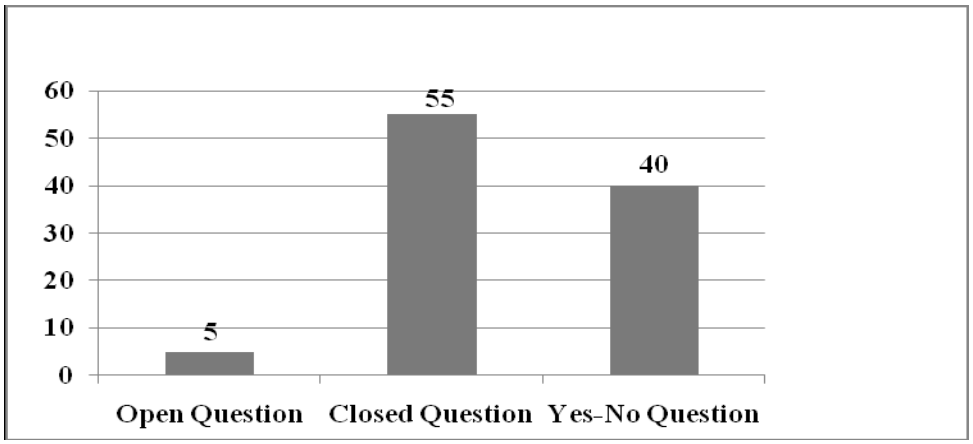


*Figure1:* Percentage distribution of different types of classroom question

i. *Open Questions*

Open questions refer to such questions where the learners are expected to reply elaborately by not fixing themselves to answer in one or two words (Koechlin & Zwaan, 2014). Findings from classroom observation revealed that teachers hardly asked such sort of questions which could encourage learners to response in an elaborative way. In a classroom where a teacher took lesson on 'National Memorial' was observed to ask two open questions;

*"What you feel about the National Memorial?"*

"*The National Memorial is built with brick but created with blood.*" -*What do you understand by this statement?*

The following open question was asked by a teacher in another lesson called 'A Village Fair': *"Suppose you want to arrange a fair in your school. How will you arrange that?* In FGDs, the learners gave some examples of open questions asked by their teachers which they termed as 'Narrative Questions'. For instance, *how will you take preparation for the upcoming annual exam?*

Although the data depicted that very few questions of such kind were exercised in the class, these questions could not enthuse the learners to response properly. They could hardly produce two-three words which did not complete the answer. This observation was supported by data from interviews with teachers who affirmed that they usually did not expect from all levels of learners to response towards open questions whereas they asked these questions to some selective and/or meritorious learners. According to one of the teachers' words, *"....the meritorious students, who can form sentences, feel comfortable to answer the narrative questions. So I ask narrative questions to the meritorious students."* Such data also revealed teachers' perception on students' ability to response open questions. This inability in responding towards open questions had marked by the teachers as a strong reason to exercise fewer amounts of open questions inside classrooms. On the other hand, learners affirmed in the FGD that they liked open questions despite being unable to properly response against it because such questions foster them to think critically. Our argument here is consistent with Essenburg's (2006) who noted the importance of questions in learners' creative thinking and analysis skills. Practicing such questions thus can be taken as an opportunity for the teachers to nurture the learners' intellectual development by creating a space for them to response elaborately.

ii. *Closed Question*

The teachers were mostly found to ask questions that usually had a fix answer. These types of questions are called closed questions which is consistent with Koechlin & Zwaan (2014). The teachers usually asked word meaning, definition and specific information and grammatical solution through the closed questions. It was observed that the learners tended to reply those questions in one to three words, in some cases they formed maximum a sentence. According to the learners, multiple choice questions, word meaning, filling the blanks and knowledge checking questions were those closed questions which were frequently exercised in the classrooms. This pattern of questions mentioned by both teachers and learners were also supported by the observation data, for instance:

*Teacher: What is the Bangla meaning of garden?*

*Student: Bagan (asking word meaning)*

*Teacher: What is called article?*

*Student: a, an and the (asking definition)*

*Teacher: What does Sabina's father do?*

*Student: Farmer (asking specific information)*

*Teacher: "Teacher gave him a book" Which tense it is?*

*Student: Past Indefinite (grammatical solution)*

The aforementioned question types were termed as "Easy Questions" by the learners. Both teachers and learners affirmed some of the benefits of those questions. Learners believed that their confidence in responding towards teachers' questions increases if the teacher starts with an easy one which gradually allows them to response towards the difficult questions as well. This opinion by the learners is consistent with the teachers'. The teachers also mentioned that, since



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most of the learners felt comfortable and encouraged in responding towards closed questions, the regular classroom practice of this can at least help them in developing their speaking and communicating ability. Although the teachers believed that exercising open questions could lead to ensure proper learning, closed or short questions provided with the possibility to ask more questions by checking learners understanding within the short period of class time. The importance of such question has revealed in Hussin's (2006) study as well who showed that since the learners need to answer a number of closed questions in exam, practicing those as a part of exam preparation is crucial. By drawing on Yang's (2010) concept on assessment in this study, the data indicated that both the teachers and learners were highly enthused in exercising more closed questions which not only motivated learners to response simultaneously but also ensure a way of good assessment technique.

iii. *Yes-No Questions*

The questions that only have either yes or no in the answers were asked by the teachers widely in the classrooms which is consistent with Tausi (1985). This was also supported by the data from FGDs with learners who talked about their comforts in responding through yes/no answers which was one of the dominating patterns in evaluating learners on their daily lessons. Such domination of yes-no question patterns is not very uncommon in global context as well (Tausi, 1985; Hussin, 2006). It was also observed that those questions basically consisted with information where the learners just need to say yes or no in response. For example, one of the teachers asked some yes-no questions on a paragraph called "A Village Fair" like the following way:

*Teacher: kokhono gramer melay geso tomra? (Have you ever been to a village fair?)*

*Ss: Ji sir (Yes, sir.)*

*Teacher: Onek moja hoisilo taina? (You enjoyed a lot, isn't it?)*

*Ss: Ji sir (Yes, sir.)*

*Teacher: Mitu, tumi bolo, melay ki anondo lage? (Mitu tell me, did you enjoy the fair?)*

*Mitu: Ji sir. (Yes, sir)*

Though it was an English classroom, the teacher was found to ask questions in Bangla for the learners' better understanding on the lesson. Sometimes teachers engaged all learners together to provide feedback to any specific individual learner which also provided a space to exercise yes-no questions. By this way teachers often helped learners to learn how to form a question. Following is an example of such on a grammar lesson:

*Teacher: Look at the sentence with the underlined mark. "Once there lived a clever fox". For which question the answer will be a clever fox? (Asked to a girl)*

*Girl: Who lived there once?*

*Teacher: Do all of you have the same answer?*

*Ss: Yes, sir.*

*Teacher: Do all of you agree that her answer is okay?*

*Ss: Yes, sir.*

The data revealed the ways in which yes-no questions were used by the teachers but it did not encourage the learners to be analytical. The reason behind this was, the maximum number of questions did not touch the upper level domain of Bloom (1956) taxonomy.

b) *Domain of the Questions*

The exercised questions provided the space to analyze how the learners responded towards different domains of knowledge by categorizing those questions according to Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (1956). Interview data revealed that the teachers did not have any idea about the learning domain, not even about the taxonomy of educational objectives. According to them, questions can only be categorized in easy questions, difficult questions, multiple choice questions and descriptive questions. Data depicted that all the questions asked by the teachers were under the Cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy covering the sub-domains of knowledge, comprehension and analysis. Figure 2 below is showing the percentage of domains from which the questions were asked in the classrooms.

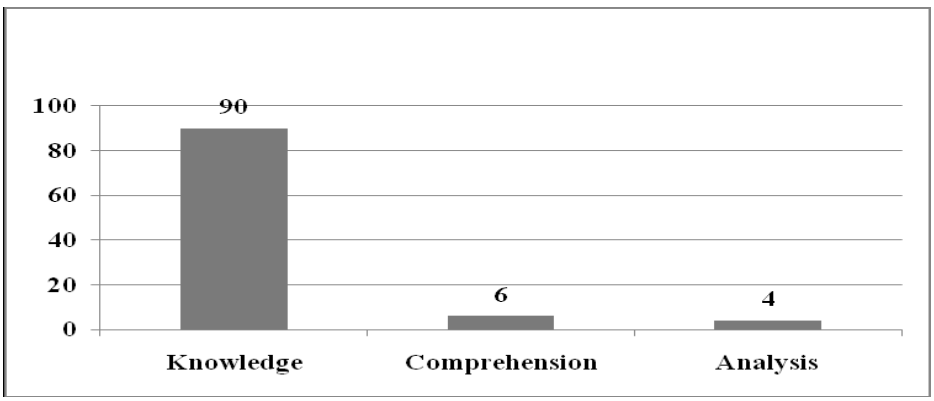


*Figure2:* Percentage distribution of learning domain in classroom questioning



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Maximum (90%) number of questions was asked from the knowledge area which can also be found in other classroom based studies (Ahsan, 2009; Yang, 2010; Babu, 2015). The percentage of questions from comprehension and analysis zone was 6% and 4% respectively. The following analysis will shed light on the examples of such domain and questions.

i. *Knowledge Sub-domain*

Data depicted that the teachers asked for various kinds of information from the learners through knowledge based questions mainly. It was found as the dominant type of exercised question in the classrooms. Examples of some of those questions are as follows,

- *Asking word meaning: What is the meaning of 'solvent'? (Grade VI)*
- *Asking definition: What is called article? (Grade VIII)*
- *Asking specific information: What is Sabina's father? (Grade VII)*
- *Grammatical questions: What is present indefinite tense? (Grade VIII)*
- *Closed Questions: What is the name of your school? (Grade VI)*
- *Yes-no question: Do you have ever been to a blacksmith shop? (Grade VII)*
- *Multiple choice question: Choose the best answers from the alternatives*
- *What is the national animal of Bangladesh?(Grade VI)*
- *(a)Lion (b) Tiger (c) Deer*
- *Filling the Blanks: Dhaka is the ..... city of Bangladesh.(Grade VII)*

These knowledge-based questions demanded very low thinking effort to response. The importance of such questions particularly lies when teachers want their learners to focus on specific data, to gauge learners' knowledge of basic information already covered for a given topic (Orlich et al., 1994; Myhill & Dunkin, 2005). The learners were observed to response using one or two words which was echoed by most of the learners during FGD as well. Our argument here is consistent with Myhill & Dunkin's (2005) idea of questioning where the data indicated that being dominating in number; this pattern of questions mainly requires memorization skill to respond. But Orlich et al. (1994) provided us with the notion that such questions bear the possibility in progressing to higher level thinking

ii. *Comprehension Sub-domain*

Teachers asked very few questions (6%) from the comprehension area of cognitive domain by which learners had to construct a level of understanding to rightly respond. Data depicted that such questions basically engaged learners to identify any grammatical features or to bring any grammatical changes according to the rules and to find out some inner meaning of given statements. For instance:

- *Identifying grammatical feature: "Honey tastes sweet". What kind of voice is it?*
- *Making Questions: "Suddenly he fell in a trap". For what question the answer will be a trap?*
- *Grammatical transformation: Change the sentence into passive form "Don't laugh at the poor".*

At a glance such questions might seem to belong from the comprehension sub-domain but as the questions were available in the textbooks it had the possibility to provide a space to the learners to memorize the answers. Thus if the learners memorize the answers before responding to the teachers in classroom, this will certainly not serve the purpose of asking a comprehension based question which helps to stimulate critical thinking according to Essenburg (2006). If we particularly analyze the third example above, it clearly demonstrates the scope to think from a comprehensive level because a learner would require applying a rule to solve this. Since the learners were found to memorize the answers given in the textbook, the questions might appear as knowledge based questions to them. Therefore, the nature of learners' response basically determined whether those questions were under the comprehension sub-domain, even though the questions' structure told that those were.

iii. *Analysis Sub-domain*

Although the least number (4%) of questions were asked from analysis sub-domain, it was observed as the uppermost hierarchical domain in the classrooms. Such questions are basically characterized to claim for critically explained answers (Essenburg, 2006). The teachers were found to ask these sorts of open and analytical questions focusing on any event. For instance, while conducting a lesson on "A Village Fair" for grade seven, a teacher asked relevant questions to the learners demanding narrative explanation about a village fair. The question-answer discourse was as follows.

*Teacher: (asked in Bangla) Tumi ki melay geso? (Have you ever been to a village fair?) (To a particular learner)*

*Student: (replied in Bangla) Ji sir (Yes, sir.)*

*Teacher: (asked in Bangla) Gramer jei mela hoy tar boishishto gulu bekkha kore bolte parba? (Can you explain the features of a village fair?) (Analytical question)*

*Student: (replied in Bangla) onek manus ase. Onek khelna... (Many people came there and there were a lot of toys.*

*Teacher: Suppose, you want to arrange a fair in your school. Can you describe what kinds of work you need to do?*

*Student: Yes.. I have to... (could not complete)*

The aforementioned last two examples showed that the learners left their responses incomplete. Such observation was supported by data from interviews with teachers who mentioned that students felt uncomfortable while responding to analytical questions which led the teachers to avoid exercising those



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questions in the classroom. But such question can create scope for the learners to think about a variety of upper level responses (Essenburg, 2006). The necessity of analytical questions even for weak learners have clearly been mentioned by Kauchak and Eggen (1998), who depicted that such questions provide the learners with exposure to higher level thinking and to stimulate development of their thinking skills.

One interesting feature of the questions revealed that the percentage of questions decreases very rapidly with the increase of domain's order, the higher the domain, the lower the number of questions. Here we assume that teachers' lack of knowledge regarding taxonomies lead to practice less questions from higher level which is consistent with Hussin (2006). Simultaneously, ability and quality of students' response decreased when the learning domain shifted to higher one like analysis sub-domain.

*c) Sources of the Questions*

The teachers were observed to ask questions to the learners from three sources; like,

i) exercise of textbook,
ii) content of textbook; and
iii) from connection between content and real life

This was supported by the data collected from teachers' interview and students' FGD. Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of questions asked from the aforementioned sources where most of the questions were from textbook's exercise (45%) and the least were asked from the real life context of the students (15%).

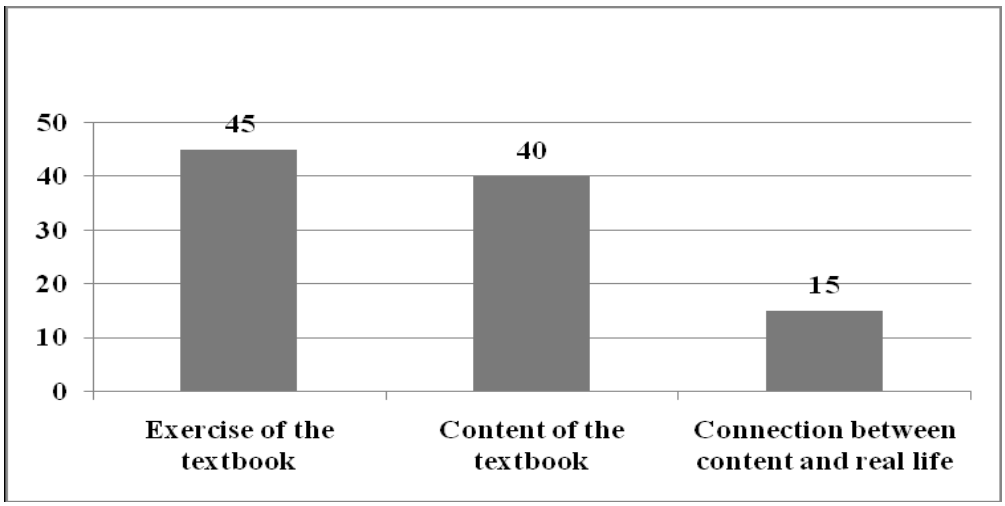


*Figure3:* Percent distribution of sources of classroom question

i. *Exercise of Textbook*

In the classes, majority (45%) of the questions were asked from the exercises given on the textbook. It is noteworthy to mention some of the examples of such questions. For instance, while conducting a class on the lesson named "The Diary of Anne Frank" from English textbook, the teachers asked the following questions from the exercise part of that lesson. *Who is Anne Frank and why is Mrs. Brown looking sad?*

Apart from such pattern of questions, teachers were observed to assess the learners by asking if a statement is true or false. In case of false statements, learners were instructed to provide the correct statements. Some of the learners in FGDs reported that they liked responding towards those questions asked from the textbook's exercises in the classroom. However, some of the teachers shared that they mostly experienced the weak learners to like those questions asked from the textbook's exercises where the answers could be memorized beforehand. Relating the issue with a grammar lesson one of the teachers opined that, *"The dull students who have less grammatical knowledge tend to like the bookish questions and they try to memorize those questions"*. The students in general were observed to memorize the answers of the questions provided in the textbooks and were found to willingly respond those questions in the classroom. In contrary, studies also revealed that asking questions from the textbook can be boring for the learners which fostered the teachers to be creative in questioning (Hussin, 2006).

ii. *Content of textbook*

About 40% of the total number of questions was exercised from the contents of the textbook. The teachers were found to ask those content specific questions when they delivered any lesson. For instance, while a teacher conducted a lesson on "Sabina's Family" from grade six English textbook, s/he was observed to translate the passages in Bangla for students' better understanding of the content and asked the following questions from a specific passage.

*Teacher: Who digs the soil?*
*Student: Sabina's father digs the soil.*
*Teacher: Thank you.*



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This finding was strengthened by data from interviews with teachers who affirmed that they asked such kinds of content related questions to understand whether the students were listening to them or not. Asking such kinds of questions, therefore, allowed the teachers to comprehend students' attentiveness and learning from the content which is consistent with Myhill & Dunkin (2005). According to the students, such instant questions from the texts helped them to keep engaged with the lessons.

iii. *From connection between content and real life*

The teachers were found to less emphasize on students real life. The results revealed teachers' consideration of textbook as the prime sources of the exercised questions, where in total about 85% of the questions were from the content and exercises of the textbook. Only about 15% of the questions were asked from out of textbook which they formed by linking the content with the real life of the learners. For example, conversation between teacher and student of grade eight is given below where the teacher was conducting an English lesson on accident.

*Teacher: did you see any accident?*
*Student: yes sir*
*Teacher: where?*
*Student: in the main road beside our home*

According to the teachers, the learners liked responding to such questions where they can relate their own lives rather studying books. This data lead us to draw on Essenburg's (2006) argument that those questions relating to real life experiences provide learners the space to stimulate critical thinking from a practical level. The findings also revealed that such real life based questions potentially can promote the learners to get more engaged in classroom activities by understating the pedagogical content which is consistent with Christenbury & Kelly (1983).

## V. Learners' Overall Performance

Observation data revealed that the learners could respond to more than half (67%) of the questions, though majority of the questions were asked from the lower level of knowledge which led them to respond without thinking much. About 55% of the questions were being responded correctly by the learners whereas 20% of the responses were partially correct which is illustrated below in figure 4.

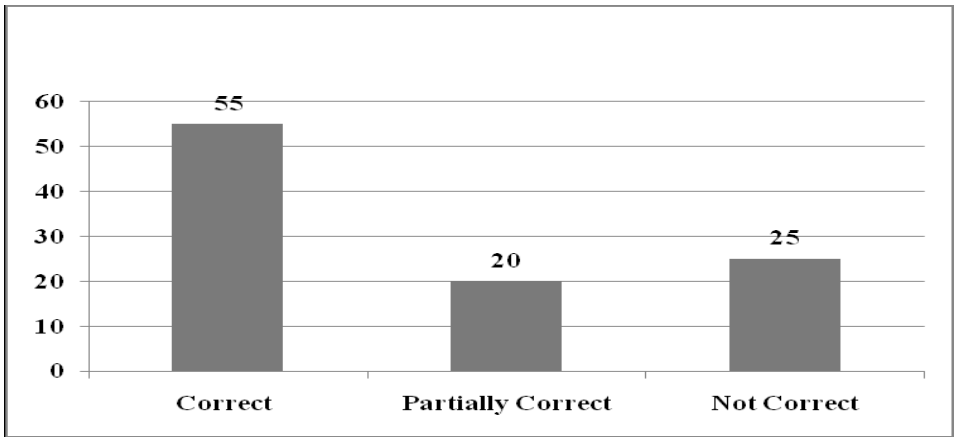


*Figure4:* Percentage disturibution of correctness of learner's reply

Learners were found to answer confidently against 65% of the questions in the classroom though some of the learners (37%) experienced problems in understanding the questions asked by the teachers. In spite of the difficulties in understanding the questions, the learners were not observed to interact with the teachers for the clarification. Our idea here is consistent with Gall (1984) and Dillon (1990) who argued that, learners can feel awkward about seeking explanation from the teachers because it might be misconstrued as a criticism of the teacher. Gall (1984) and Dillon (1990) also affirmed that due to Asian culture and upbringing, the learners participated less in questioning process where it has been believed that even logical arguments can be considered as disrespectful to their teachers. However, majority of the learners in this study could reply to most of the questions whereas those questions did not demand for much intellectual effort rather memorizing which ultimately could not provide a space to the learners to become rational. Apart from the statistical findings, some FGD data revealed what types of questions were difficult according to the learners' experience. For example,

*What is the English of "guri guri brishti hocche"?*
*What is your aim in life?*

For the first question, learners affirmed that the English term of "*guri guri*" was unknown to them that is why it was difficult. For the second one, learners mentioned that they still had not determined their aim in life which made the question difficult. Thus the learners' overall performance in responding towards the questions asked by the teachers not only depended on the levels of questions but also on their prior knowledge



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regarding vocabulary and life interests. Apart from that, since a clear downward difference on learners' performances was found while the pattern of questions shifted from knowledge to analysis sub-domain, their ability to answer questions of more advance learning domains like synthesis, evaluation or creation could be assumed. Most of the teachers possessed the idea that the questions mentioned in the textbook were already difficult for the learners from semi-urban context since they were not enough advanced like the urban students. Here our argument is supported by Klinzing & Klinzing-Eurich (1987) and Sahin et al. (2002) who opined that sometimes teachers do not practice what they know; rather they practice what they believe they know pertaining to questioning. More often than not, those believes led the teachers of this study to ask simple textbook based questions but whenever they realized that the learners got a clear understanding about the content, they increased the difficulty level of questions for the meritorious learners mainly.

## VI. Ending Remark

Results and discussion in this paper have revealed that questioning lies in the heart of teaching-learning process which is why it is difficult to carry on classroom pedagogy keeping questioning behind. Questioning at a time enhances classroom interaction and helped the learners to think critically and express their thoughts logically. A good question determines what sort of communication culture would grow in a classroom. The study illustrated that, classroom questioning was leaded by the teachers and their questions most of the time could not stimulate the students to think critically rather these inspired for rote memorization because most of the questions were asked from the text and exercises of the textbook. As students knew the answers they did not face any challenges that required higher order thinking to overcome. Additionally, these questions hardly touched the upper level domains of knowledge. Being closed in nature such questions produced a very little amount of words from the learners. The scenario clearly showing that questioning in Bangladeshi classrooms was not meeting the expected standard. In turn, a generation of learners are passing the examinations but not growing up as creative and critical thinker. As learners of Bangladesh still depend mainly on classroom teaching-learning for their education, the practice of questioning should be improved as early as possible. Teachers should master the art of asking thought provoking questions, so that their questions could inspire and encourage the learners to analyze the facts and then to answer. Apart from that, the association of students' real life and the questions they response is crucial; otherwise classroom questioning would not bring any effective change in students' sustainable learning. This study had shown that learners responded from the surface level of knowledge as the questions were taken from the lowest level of knowledge. When the questions were open or from the upper level of knowledge they could not response those. Learners are not responsible for their failure rather its teachers' limitations that they could not make the learners habituated in responding to such questions. Immediate steps thus need to be taken in improving our teachers' question-asking skill in more effective way. The trainers and policy makers should keep in mind that when the teachers would create scope for upper order learning the learners will adjust their thinking level with that as well. Questioning in this regard can serve greatly to enter the world of higher order learning. Therefore teacher development projects should focus on enhancing teachers' capacity to ask questions.

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