

CHAPTER

5

Self-Questioning Strategy Training: Voices From Students in Indonesia

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Moving Beyond the Textbook

For a long time, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Indonesia has reflected a teacher-centered approach focusing mostly on grammar rules and vocabulary with little opportunity for student interaction in class. In 2004, a new national curriculum was introduced that focused on a competence-based model (Lie, 2007). Even though this approach emphasizes the integration of the four language skills, most classroom teachers still focus on reading skills. Students are expected to comprehend various types of passages such as narratives, descriptions, expository pieces, reports, and news articles. As a result, teachers have a strong preference for using authentic reading passages and teaching strategies in English reading lessons that emphasise comprehension.

In our recent study (Sunggingwati & Nguyen, 2013b) to investigate reading instruction in Indonesia, we found that teachers heavily depended on textbooks to design their lessons. By observing classes, we discovered that the reading passages used for lessons were rarely challenging and relatively short, meaning students were not able to engage their critical reading skills. The comprehension questions provided in the textbooks were often simple factual questions that rarely required higher levels of thinking.

In our assessment, the textbook provided limited opportunities for students to actively engage with texts and achieve high levels of reading comprehension. Based on the results of this study, we looked for ways to encourage teachers to move beyond the textbook in their reading lessons. One particularly effective strategy we found was the use of self-questioning, so we conducted training on self-questioning strategies for selected English teachers and their students. In this chapter, we present the students' perspectives on self-questioning based on the results of this training.

Teaching Reading Through Self-Questioning

Self-questioning is defined as an ongoing process in which readers produce questions related to the information in a passage they read. Readers generate questions on the basis of clues found in the passage. As students pose questions for themselves, they develop interest in the topic, which guides their thinking while reading (Rosenshine, Mesiter, & Chapman, 1996). This strategy is commonly used in inquiry-based learning approaches (Caram & Davis, 2005).

Teaching reading through the use of self-questioning is an effective approach to improve students' levels of reading comprehension, recall of written information, and incidental vocabulary acquisition and retention (Taboada, Bianco, & Bowerman, 2012; Wood, Browder, & Flynn, 2015). Self-questioning also fosters cognitive development, enhances the potential for self-directed learning, and allows students to become more independent and critical readers.

Several scholars (e.g., Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996) have emphasized the need to train students to use the self-questioning strategy while reading. There has been a dearth of research on its application in EFL, especially in the Indonesian context, so we were therefore eager to demonstrate to teachers how to apply this strategy training and explore its impact on their students.

Training Indonesian Teachers and Students in Self-Questioning

We conducted a series of seven workshops on the self-questioning strategy for three English teachers and their students in Grade 11. The classes represented three different schools with a total of 101 students ages 16–18 years. During the workshops, the teachers learned how to vary the level of their questions based on Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956), and they practiced the self-questioning strategy with each other. They later applied the strategy with the students in their classrooms.

After explaining to students the purpose and importance of self-questioning for reading comprehension, the teachers distributed cards containing different levels of questions to each student. The students highlighted key words for each level and formulated their own questions using the highlighted key words. They then practiced asking different questions in pairs and in groups. The teachers also modeled how to generate questions during reading and demonstrated the reciprocal peer-questioning strategy, which involves pairs of students helping each other monitor the comprehension of a reading passage.

Students' Voices

In order to learn the students' perceptions on the self-questioning strategy, we interviewed 19 selected students after the workshops were completed. We present below the themes we found in the interview responses.

General Perceptions About Self-Questioning

The students in general perceived that the self-questioning strategy was quite useful for their learning. For example, one student emphasized that, "Self-questioning should have been given not only to the research participants. As the aim was very useful for students, it should be taught and emphasized to other students. So, all students should have learnt self-questioning" (Afdel, School 2). He was advocating that teachers implement this strategy training across the institution.

Another student complained that self-questioning was taught to students too late in the program:

“ I think self-questioning helped students be more critical but it came too late. We learned this when we were already at Grade 11. Why it was not given earlier? It should have been taught from kindergarten or elementary levels, moreover when we were kids we had lots of questions. ” (Yunita, School 2)

The implementation of the self-questioning strategy produced several important benefits. Students were able to develop more complex questions beyond the ones available in their textbooks, improve reading comprehension, and increase their ability to link the passage to their previous knowledge and experience (Anthony & Raphael, 2004; Fordham, 2006; Handsfield & Jiménez, 2008).

The Role of Self-Questioning in Developing Active Learning

The students also learned specific skills from the implementation of self-questioning such as improved reading comprehension, development of critical thinking, and awareness of language features. Most students reported that after learning self-questioning, they had gained a better overall understanding of English reading passages because their focus changed from learning vocabulary in isolation to constructing meaning from the entire passage.

Students indicated that self-questioning was valuable for developing their ability to think critically; for example, one student said, “It made me more critical about the passage so that we did not only accept what the passage was written for example the passage said that female should become a career women . . . we did not accept this immediately” (Helmi, School 2). Self-questioning made this student more aware so that he could think about the information presented rather than reading passively and simply accepting the writer’s opinion. Clearly, these higher order reading and thinking skills assist students in generating deeper comprehension of reading content.

Language Features

Students also reported that self-questioning developed their oral language skills and knowledge of vocabulary and grammar:

“ Self-questioning helped me to improve my speaking skills. ” (Yunita, School 2)

“ It . . . added more vocabularies so that made me understand more ” (Fika, School 2)

“ It was very good because it trained me how to generate questions. This also trained me in grammar. ” (Putri, School 1)

Real-Life Applications

Most students across the three schools reported that they were able to transfer the skills that they learnt from self-questioning to other subjects and to make use of them in their life. It appears that self-questioning encouraged more interaction with peers and less dependence on textbooks in class, thereby promoting active engagement in class activities as the reflections below indicate.

“ . . . we had to be independent to search for information, discussed with friends and then clarified this with teachers. As we had to write report projects that required our own thinking and not rely on the passage books. ” (Afdel, School 2)

“ I was happy, made me cleverer. What I meant here was that I wanted to be a journalist. And of course a journalist had to make a list of questions, so that self-questioning helped to do this. I had some experience. ” (Adi, School 2)

“ From different levels of questions we could generate better questions and in order to answer the questions we could get information from the real life. ” (Helmi, School 3)

The students created and pursued related personal strategies to more actively engage in learning. They became more independent learners and had opportunities to take more responsibility for the learning process (Brown, 2003; Schuh, 2004).

Teacher Voices

When asked to reflect on the implementation of the self-questioning strategy within their classes, all teachers said that the students who were able to generate questions could understand more fully what they had read. They also indicated that self-questioning helped students with vocabulary development. The teachers also reflected on the immediate impact of the self-questioning strategy on their pedagogies.

For example, teacher 1 realized that she seldom asked students to draw conclusions about what she had taught, while teacher 2 wondered if her students did not answer her questions because they did not understand them. Teacher 3 recognised that self-questioning strategies would provide more opportunities for students to express their opinions and ideas. Moreover, all teachers reported being more confident in teaching reading by applying the self-questioning strategy with their students (Sunggingwati & Nguyen, 2013a).

Conclusion

Self-questioning was a valuable strategy for developing critical thinking skills and for transferring the learning of particular language features to broader aspects of learning. Self-questioning helped students to develop a deeper understanding of other subjects and apply this understanding to the real world.

Overall, students identified positive outcomes from participating in the self-questioning training. The adoption of the self-questioning strategy meant that they did not focus on the words and translations alone to understand a reading passage, but they were still able to construct meaning in English. Therefore, their center of attention shifted from a shallow to a deeper understanding. As their knowledge developed, the students perceived that their critical and analytical thinking skills were enhanced.

The use of self-questioning can be quite beneficial for teachers in EFL contexts such as Indonesia, where large classes with 30–40 students are common, and there are limited opportunities for student involvement and interaction. Student-generated questions can facilitate exchange of information, increase the level of negotiated interaction, and maximize the amount of comprehensible input being produced in the classroom (Baleghizadeh, 2013).

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