

Journal of English Language  
Teaching and Learning  
No.12, 2013

## **A Conversation Analytic Study on the Teachers' Management of Understanding-Check Question Sequences in EFL Classrooms**

**Baqer Yaqubi\***

Associate Professor, University of Mazandaran

**Sedigheh Karimpour**

M.A. in ELT, University of Mazandaran

### **Abstract**

Teacher questions are claimed to be constitutive of classroom interaction because of their crucial role both in the construction of knowledge and the organization of classroom proceedings (Dalton Puffer, 2007). Most of previous research on teachers' questions mainly focused on identifying and discovering different question types believed to be helpful in creating the opportunities for learners' interactions. Drawing on conversation analysis through adopting socio-cultural perspective, this study, however, aims to examine how EFL teachers manage understanding-check questions in their talk-in-interaction. For this purpose, six EFL teachers' discursive classroom practices were observed, video-recorded, and transcribed line-by-line in its entirety. Through the microanalysis of the transcribed data, our findings suggest that EFL teachers vary in their management of understanding-check questions and the teachers' understanding-check questions tend to serve different functions in the different micro-contexts identified. Three major sequential environments emerged to feature understanding-check questions in this study: Activity-boundary environment, post-instruction environment and within-activity environment. The findings of the study indicate that understanding-check questions at activity boundary environment are designed to accomplish dual functions, however those launched in post-instruction and within-activity environments maintain a singular focus on ensuring absolute understanding of the just-given explanation or instruction.

**Keywords:** Classroom Interaction, Conversation Analysis, Understanding-Check questions

تاریخ وصول: ۹۲/۹/۲ تأیید نهایی، ۹۳/۲/۶

**E-mail:** yaqubib@gmail.com

**E-mail:** laodise.harpak@yahoo.com

## **Introduction**

Classroom discourse is typically dominated by question-answer routines, with teachers asking most of the questions as one of the common practices through which they control and manage their classroom interaction (Walsh, 2006). In the second language classrooms, teachers' questions as powerful instructional tools are claimed to contribute to the creation of linguistic and cognitive developments (Gibbons, 2003; Kim, 2010). Moreover, questions provide a potential space for teachers to examine if they systematically create opportunities for learning to emerge. Despite the significance granted to teacher questions in the teacher education literature in applied linguistics (Wajnryb 1992; Richards & Lockhart 1996; Ur 1996; Thompson 1997) only a small portion of the CA work has so far focused on the details of questions (e.g. Lee, 2006; Waring, 2012, 2013). Instead, most of previous research on classroom questions, in general, has focused on categorizing questions into different types and on how questions are used by EFL/ESL teachers (Ellis, 2008). In the following section, we synthesize the body of work on teacher questions which serve as a background to our current study.

## **Prior Works on Teacher Questions**

Teacher questions in general have received a reasonable amount of scholarly attention in the educational and applied linguistics literature (Waring, 2013). However, much attention has been devoted to categorizing questions into different typologies. For example, Brock (1986) categorized questions into display versus referential questions. According to his findings, ESL teachers who trained to ask referential questions ask more of such questions and receive more extended learner responses as a result (Brock, 1986). Based on his classification, questions asked for factual recall or recognition are display and those for evaluation and judgments are referential questions. Long and Sato's (1983) study suggested that display questions ask the respondent to provide, or to display knowledge of information already known by the questioner while referential questions request information not known by the questioner. Their result showed that ESL teachers use more display questions while native speakers use more referential questions

in informal conversational settings. In the same way, Musumeci's (1996) study suggested that display questions served primarily as understanding-check questions. However, more recently teachers' questions have been investigated from the perspective of how they might increase the amount of interaction and thus negotiation of meaning in classroom discourse (Long, 1983; Gass, 1997).

According to Johnson (1995), teachers control what happens in the class through the ways they use the language. In other words, teachers' interactional behaviors have the potentiality to promote or prevent interaction or negotiation of meaning. Donato (2000) argued that, teachers' questions and particularly their understanding-checks and clarification request questions monitors and facilitates learners' comprehension of input. He stated that, teachers used understanding-checks to motivate learner comprehension during the activities. In addition, through checking understanding, teachers work to maintain learner involvement in task. Musumeci's study (1996) showed that not only teachers talk more than their learners in the class; they manage classroom talk through initiating the majority of their verbal exchanges by means of a question most often in the form of an explicit request for information followed by the selection of a particular learner to respond. In other words, display questions constituted teachers' preferred manner of initiating an exchange. Therefore, the length of the learners' turns varied according to whether they were in response to a closed or an open-ended content-based display question and unlike closed display questions, open-ended display questions that are content-based may produce longer and more extensive learner responses. The results showed that teacher-initiated referential questions were rare in the data, but those that did occur were closed and produced much shorter responses than the open-ended display questions. In line with previous studies, Shomoossi's study (2004) showed that the amount of classroom interaction caused by referential questions is much greater than that caused by displays, thus referential questions cause more interaction than display questions. Moreover, according to Shomoossi (2004) while display questions are usually asked for checking understanding, confirmation and request for clarification, referential questions are usually used to fill the information gaps. Therefore, teacher behaviors

such as repeated questions, low language proficiency, and limiting the class to the textbook were among the observed factors leading to the reduction of interaction while misunderstanding, motivation, selection of interesting topics, teachers' attention and information gap might enhance the amount of interaction and negotiation of meaning in the class. More recently, Walsh (2013) found that space for interaction is created through elicitation practices such as increasing pauses, acknowledging contributions, scaffolding turns, minimizing interruptions and allowing extended learner turns. Moreover, his analysis showed that space is also created in relation to the ways in which responses are handled through practices such as shaping, reformulating, seeking clarification, pushing for more information, asking guiding questions.

One teacher behavior which is going to be analyzed in this study is understanding-check questions which are frequently used by teachers both in EFL and ESL contexts. Understanding-check question as one type of question has been defined by Long and Sato(1983) as "any expression by native speaker designed to establish whether that speaker's preceding utterance has been understood by the interlocutor" (p.268) and they are typically formed by tag questions, repetitions, or by utterances which explicitly check understanding of the interlocutor. In this respect, Waring's recent study (2012) on understanding-check questions suggested that learners follow some routines while making responses to teachers' understanding-check questions. In other words, her study attempted to show that teachers' behaviors lead learners to show distinguishing type of responses. In other words, learners have varied types of orientations toward teachers' understanding-check questions.

Most of the previous studies on teacher questions have largely focused on identifying question types. Moreover, while there are considerable amounts of research on teacher questions, most of these studies were conducted in ESL context adapting etc view toward the study of questions (e.g. Koshik, 2002; Walsh, 2006) and they have largely focused on identifying questions types and creating taxonomies (Long and Sato, 1983; Thompson, 1997). Moreover, checking learners' understanding as an essential component of teacher talk has been mostly overlooked in previous studies. Though the

importance of using questions to check understanding is acknowledged in previous studies (e.g. Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Wajnryb, 1992), few studies provided specificity on how understanding-check questions are formulated, their contexts of use, or strategies for effective implementation. In sum, prior work on teacher questions has greatly enhanced our understanding of their taxonomies, relevance to the communicative language classroom, and the work they accomplish in the details of pedagogical interaction. The present study extends the existing literature on teacher questions by focusing on a previously unanalyzed type of question that is understanding-check question. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide an empirical account of how understanding-check questions work in reality of classroom discourse in order to show how such questions are produced, within what sequential environments they are used and other than checking learners' understandings, what other social actions or functions they may serve.

This study takes conversational analysis (CA) as its methodological framework. CA is the unique way of analyzing social interaction. The usefulness of CA as an analytical tool, especially in applied linguistics, has been discussed by many scholars (e.g. Kasper, 2009; Kasper & Wagner, 2011; Long, 2007). According to Walsh (2002), CA forces the researcher to focus on the interaction patterns emerging from the data, rather than relying on any preconceived notions which language teachers may bring to the data. It provides an analytic tool which makes it possible for the researcher to have the micro-analysis of classroom discourse. The underlying philosophy beyond CA studies is that social contexts are not static but are constantly being formed by the participants through their use of language and the ways in which turn-taking, openings and closings and so on are locally managed. In this respect, CA approaches consider contexts as something that mutually constructed between the participants. Wong and Waring (2010) claim that, various interactional practices combine to form conversation as a system: turn-taking practices, sequencing practices, overall structuring practices and repair practices. The perspective that should be taken by CA analysts to analyze the data should be emic perspective which according to Wong and Waring (2010) is "a way of looking at

language and social interaction from an insider's perspective, i.e., stepping inside the shoes of participants to understand their talk and actions." (p. 6). The present study focused on turn-taking system and sequential organization as the core of classroom interactional competence. Thus, this study takes conversation analysis approach, through paying close attention to teacher's use of understanding-checks and the functions which they may serve in classroom discourse.

To sum up, the literature reviewed in this study suggested that there exist few studies on teachers' practice of questions and more specifically their practice of checking understanding in EFL context. In addition, there are few studies on teachers' practice of checking learners' understanding with CA perspective both in ESL and in EFL settings. Moreover, while prior CA studies provided important insights into the nature and functions of understanding-check questions, this study attempts to continue the exploration through providing a rich descriptive data about teachers' management of understanding-check questions in EFL context. In this respect, this study tried to keep an "unmotivated looking" (Psathas, 1995) through the investigation of teachers' understanding-checks to show the relationship between teachers' use of understanding-checks and the functions which they serve in different micro-contexts. Therefore, two research questions, which guide this study, are: 1) How do EFL teachers manage understanding-check questions? and 2) What are the functions of understanding-check questions in three sequential micro-contexts?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were 6 intermediate-level and Farsi-L1 Iranian EFL teachers and their 178 learners from two private language institutes in two cities of Iran. The criteria we developed for selecting the participants in this study included willingness to participate in the study and teaching at intermediate-level. The size of the classes ranged between 5 to 23 learners. Among teacher participants of this study, three teachers were male and three were female. The age of the teacher participants in this study ranged between 23-32 years old. In addition, the most experienced teacher had nine-year experience of teaching in EFL classes, while the least experienced one had two-year experience. As such, the final number of the participants in this study came to be 6 EFL teachers and their 178 learners who will hereafter be referred to as the main participants of the study. All the courses were long-term intensive ones. Besides, the courses aimed to develop learners' four language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing while the focus in all classes was on speaking skill of the learners.

### *Data Collection*

Since the aim of this study is to provide a rich descriptive data about teachers' management of understanding-check questions in naturally occurring interaction, this study used conversation analysis (CA) framework (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Psathas, 1995). As with other CA studies, we first collected spoken data through audio and video recordings and then all lessons were transcribed in detail. Therefore, the data for this study came from video recordings, drawn from EFL classroom lessons involving teachers and learners who were Farsi-L1 speakers. The teachers let us videotape two of their sessions, for a total of twelve 90-minute lessons, totaling approximately 18 hours, a reasonable sample size on which to draw conclusions in the light of evidence from previous studies (Seed house, 2004). A total of twelve lessons and classroom observations were then used for data analysis.

While video recording the lessons, two video cameras were placed in the classes, one recording the teacher and one the learners. The learners were seated in a semicircle; therefore, the two available cameras captured a full view of the classes. In CA studies, researchers could be provided with nonverbal features through analysis of talk in interaction especially in complex settings with more than a few speakers, like classrooms. Such features could be nonverbal behaviors of the participants such as gazing, nodding, hand gestures, irritations and intonations and the like. Moreover, in order to gain a more qualified voice of teachers' talk, MP4 players were placed on teachers' desks. The recordings made it possible for us to go back to the conversation time and time again. In order to mitigate the presence of the two cameras in the classes and to ensure the naturalness of participants' practices, we video recorded each teacher's class two times. Moreover, in order to minimize the observer effect, we tried to place the two cameras at places which were out of teachers and learners' immediate lines of sight.

All 19 hours were transcribed in their entirety using a modified version of the system developed by Gail Jefferson (1983). The resulting understanding-checks of this study came from over and over reading of these 19 hours classroom transcriptions. In order to analyze the data we analyzed turns of talk at immediate local contexts. After analyzing turns for several times, teachers' questions and then more specifically teachers' understating-check questions were subject to detailed scrutiny for the current study.

#### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of the data in this study was conducted within a CA framework. Through taking conversation analysis approach, this study pays close attention to teachers' management of understanding-check questions. In this respect, a line-by-line CA analysis of the entire collection was done which finally resulted in a few observations concerning teachers' understanding-checks. Based on the initial analysis of the data, all the instances of understanding-check questions were *yes/no* questions. Moreover, three major sequential environments emerge to feature the presence of understanding-check questions in this study: (1) activity boundaries occasions (2) post-teacher

instructions/explanation occasion and (3) within-activity occasion. Activity boundary is an occasion where a particular lesson segment is ending and moving to the next section is relevant. Post-explanation or post-instruction is a place where the teacher has already finished explaining a vocabulary item, a grammatical structure or the like, or just completed giving instructions for an upcoming activity (Waring, 2012). Finally, within activity is a juncture where the teacher is in the middle of explanation and activity and during the explanation or activity s/he uses understanding-check questions. Finally, in selecting extracts to be included in this study aside from ensuring that the full range of practices are represented based on the detailed CA analysis of the six cases, we also made an effort to include extracts from all six classes to provide some evidence that the practices were not unique to individual teachers or learners. It would be relevant here to note CA's treatment of deviant cases (ten Have, 2007). According to Waring (2012) when it comes to cases that do not fit the general pattern being proposed, they are subject to even closer scrutiny rather than being neglected. Therefore, in order to show that the particular instance is not unique to especial teacher participant, it would be better to provide more than one example for each of the cases in the data.

In the remainder of this paper, we aim to show how teacher participants of this study manage understanding-check questions in different ways: in the activity-boundary cases, the understanding-check questions are in part produced as a possible activity-closing sequence prior to transitioning to the next lesson segment, where *no problem* responses are welcomed and taken as a basis for sequence closing. However, in the post-explanation and within-activity cases, on the other hand, *yes problem* is treated and pursued as a real possibility, where the teachers display a reluctance to move on without absolute assurance of learner understanding.

## Results

Since the analysis of data in this study was conducted within a conversation analysis framework, we provided the data analysis with thick descriptions to ensure the validity of the analysis and findings. Though, the qualitative results will shape the core findings of our study, we included some quantitative findings first because, EFL teachers tend to utilize understanding-check questions in their lessons. Second, although qualitative results shape the core findings of this study, numerical findings are as important as non-numerical findings. And third, because we regarded this study (a CA study of teachers' management of understanding-checks) as a kind of new study in Iran as EFL context, we felt it was necessary to report any findings related to the topic including numerical findings.

This section reports on distribution of understanding-check questions used by participant teachers of this study. As shown in Table 1, the participant teachers used total number of 2224 questions altogether (28%) of which were understanding-check questions. In other words, these six teachers had tendency to use understanding-check questions in their classes. With reference to Table 1, teacher A asked total number of 638 questions, teacher D asked 316 questions; however, both of the teachers (teacher A and teacher D) used the same percentage of understanding-checks in their lessons (40%). As Table 1 illustrates, teacher B used the least percentage of understanding-checks in his lessons (7%), although he asked 497 questions. However, it should be noted that the number of understanding-check questions used by teacher participants is not considered in this study, what matters in this study is the way participant teachers manage understanding-check questions. In this respect, the presence of this table serves two aims: first, to show the routine nature of understanding-check questions in EFL classes, second, to show that though understanding-check questions have routine presence in EFL classes, they serve different aims by the teachers and could be managed differently by teachers.

Table 1  
*Number and Percentage of Understanding-Check questions*

Teachers	Number of Questions	Understanding Checks Number (N)	Percentage (%)
TA	638	256	40%
TB	497	39	7%
TC	186	60	32%
TD	316	127	40%
TE	280	80	28%
TF	307	69	22%
Overall	2224	631	28%

Concerning the qualitative results of this study, it has been found that teachers are varied in their management of understanding-check questions. In other words, understanding-check questions serve different functions in different sequential environments. The preceding talk is included to show what leads up to the question in three sequential environments and the subsequent talk to show how the questions are managed by the participant teachers. These understanding-check questions extract then constitute a collection of cases subject to detailed scrutiny for the current project.

#### *Activity-Boundary Environment*

Activity boundary is a juncture where a particular lesson segment is drawing to a close, thereby; sectioning transition to the next segment is relevant. Previous research (Waring, 2012) has shown that at activity boundaries, understanding-check questions perform a dual function. First, through use of interrogative forms, teachers provide learners with an opportunity to voice any unresolved understanding problems; thereby, inviting them to engage in checking understanding. Second, it seems that they also serve to launch a possible activity-closing sequence before transitioning to the next activity can take place. In other words, the closing down of the current activity allows for the beginning of the next. As it will be explained in extracts 1 and 2, some understanding-check questions are launched at activity

boundaries, where a prior lesson segment is coming to its completion. As Waring (2012) argued, the sequential slot is prepared for moving on to the next stage. Moreover, most of understanding-check questions found at activity-boundary environment take the syntactic form of “*any question*”, thus; according to Waring (2012) this marks the question as seeking-agenda type items that have not yet been covered, but are related to the current activity.

### Extract 1 for analysis

- 412 T ↑you don't pay attention to(..)this po::int, yo::u(..)will  
fall, over, yea::h? >It's hard
- 413 to<carry your, back pack, sorry (0.3)“ ↑don't make  
your pack too:: heavy at the
- 414 to::p, or bottom” there should be a balance between  
(0.1)them, ↑“it's best to keep,
- 415 the heaviest items, close to your... ba::ck” near to  
you::r...back, “yes(...)have
- 416 → fun, >that's the only reason to do it<” (0.6) any  
question::n? (0.4) everything is
- 417 clear to you? (0.2) yes?=  
(L1 raised her hand)
- 418 L1 =excuse me::?>Bag?< bagging? °Bagging?°Mea::ns?

In extract 1, the class has been practicing and discussing a reading activity and the teacher has just finished reading and explaining (indicated in line 416) and then the understanding-check question is launched in lines(416) and (417) in which she used the word “*clear*”. The closing nature of teacher's understanding-check question could be seen in teacher's subsequent talk. Note that, In line (417), after the brief (0.2) two-second gap, the teacher explicitly seeks *no problem* via the “*yes?*”. The use of the word “*clear*” in teacher's understanding-check question as well as the second *yes/no* question that she used after a (0.2) two-second gap “*everything is clear to you?*” makes evident her pursuit to secure *no problem* response from the learners that would facilitate transitioning to the next lesson segment. By using

this form, it shows that the teacher expects the learners to find all the explanations and activity clear enough not to have any questions.

### Extract 2 for analysis

- 350 T    ↑aha:: in >January<January fiftee:::nth, ↑very good,  
ok:: thank you, ↑now talk
- 351            about:t >other people's birthdays<, (ideas) your  
brothers sisters your father
- 352            → (... ) any question::n?(0.1) No?  
                  ((The learners moved their heads to show negation))
- 353            ↑ok:: , page forty two, reading=
- 354 L1        =°excuse me° eeee today i::s (...) first July::!
- 355 T        ↑first?

In extract 2, the teacher has just finished discussing different learners' birthday time (indicated in line 350) and she is about to switch the activity to a new one. The teacher launches her understanding-check question after a short gap marked by (...) in line (352). Then after (0.1) second gap, the teacher asks another question with "No?" in line 352. Note that the format that she uses to ask understanding-check question ("*any question::n?*") is often used in pre-closing sequences (Beckett & Wilkes, 2007). In line (352), after the brief (0.1) second gap, the teacher explicitly seeks *no problem* via use of "No?" Also note that in line 354, after an "ok:" the teacher proceeds to close the activity and start a new activity by referring learners to page (42) (indicated in line 353). Besides, teacher's "ok" in line 353 as well as the form of understanding-check that she used "*any question*" indicates that she expects no responses from the learners. Moreover, by using "ok" the teacher also treats *no problem* response as favorable, which constitutes further evidence for the closing nature of the sequence.

In both of the extracts presented, the possible closing nature of understanding-check question is made evident in the teacher's subsequent talk. In other words, what understanding-check question launch is not only an understanding-check but also a possible activity-closing sequence? However, in the preceding talk, we depict how

understanding-check questions launched in post-instruction and within-activity environments maintain a singular focus on ensuring absolute understanding of the just-given explanation or instruction.

#### *Post Instruction/Explanation Environment*

Post-explanation or -instruction is an occasion in which the teacher has already finished explaining a vocabulary or grammatical item or just completed giving instructions for an upcoming activity. Unlike activity-boundary environment in which teachers seem to use more *yes/no* questions in order to check learners' understandings, in post-instruction/explanation environment teachers use a variety of different forms of understanding-check questions. Thereby, while understanding-check questions in activity boundary environment serve two functions of implementing understanding-check as well as possible activity closing, in post instruction environment they seem to have a singular orientation to gauge learners' understandings.

#### **Extract 3 for analysis**

**074 T** = ↑although >they< they mean negatively, somehow for example you say that my

**075** father is a workaholic person or I am a workaholic person me:ans I'm working a

**076** lot, ye::s? >For long hours< but somehow a ting یعنی یک  
ا ذره a ting of or a (0.1)

**077** or (0.2) a very small negative meaning is going to be extract from that, °so it's

**078** going to°, listen! when you say I'm workaholic, me::ans you find it a little bit

**079** difficult to do, >you're nagging about that<, so you're nagging you're just (0.3)

**080** → about that, you don't just like to work long hours(...)  
Am I clea:::r? =

**081 L2** =yeah=

**082 T** ↑so:: workaholic i::s(...)but some words are neutral::l, for example the word (0.1)

**083** strange

In extract 3, the teacher is about to finish his explanations about the meaning of “*workaholic*” for the learners as indicated in lines (074-079). He provides some examples for the learners in order to help them understand the meaning (indicated in lines 074-075). The understanding-check question (“*Am I clear?*”) is launched in line (080) after a short pause marked by (...). Note that, in this extract the teacher does not aim to close the activity and switch to the next one, instead, he aims to check learners’ understanding of his previously explained parts. The teacher in this extract demonstrates his pursuit of learner’ comprehension by seeking an explicit confirmation of understanding (“*Am I clear?*”). Immediately after the teacher’s explanation, several learners utter “yeah”, thereby, claiming understanding of teacher’s explanations. Note that when the learners answer his understanding-check immediately (marked by =), the teacher provides more explanations for the meaning and usage of the word “*workaholic*” in line (082). Also note that, understanding-check question is produced with the direct object (“*Am I clear?*”) which refers back to just-completed explanation, thus specifying the target of understanding.

Unlike activity-boundary environment, in the extract presented above, the teacher’s understanding-check question served one function of gauging learners’ understanding of the explained parts through seeking an explicit confirmation of understanding from the learners. In the following extract, another example of teachers’ management of understanding-check question in post-instruction environment will be presented.

#### Extract 4 for analysis

- 130 T =↑use more or less °adjectives° that has >more syllables< and don’t end in... y,
- 131 ok?(...) Some adjective::s end in y::, °for example° what? Prettyok::?(...) Y هستش
- 132 ::دیگه,pretty for example(0.3) plus er prettier, ok::? (0.3)Even when the word or
- 133 adjective consi::sts of more than one syllabl::e ok::? (0.1)But it ends in y, you can

- 134 → add er in order to change i:t to comparative form,  
oka:y(...) Did you g:t it?(0.1)  
135 Oka:y?(0.4) °pretty°=  
136 L2 =°agai:n°=  
137 T =wha:t?  
138 L2 again which ( )  
139 T agai:n?=  
140 L2 =ye:s,[توضیح بدین]

In extract 4, the teacher ended explaining the structure of comparative adjectives with more than one syllable in lines (130-134). Then in line (134), the use of “oka:y” by the teacher before launching an understanding-check indicates that the teacher just decided to finish the explanations. Finally, it is after a short gap indicated by (...) that the teacher launches an understanding-check (line 134) that targets the just-completed explanation with the anaphoric “it”. Consider that unlike questions containing the negative polarity device “any”, this question is designed to seek a “yes” response. Note that (0.1) second gap in line (134) is treated by the teacher as implicative of *yes problem*, as seen in his following question (Oka:y?) in line (135) that raises the possibility of “you didn’t get it”. Thus, in line (136) one of the learners shows *yes problem* after (0.4) second gap. Note that teacher’s use of “it” in understanding-check indicates his aim to check learners’ understandings of his just-completed explanations/instructions and the two gaps (0.1) and (0.4) after each of his questions shows that his understanding-check question just serves checking of learners’ understandings and do not aim to switch the activity. In other words, learners’ *yes problems* were welcomed in this extract by the teacher.

In both of the extracts presented in post instruction/explanation environment, the teachers pursue a singular goal of ensuring that the just-given explanation or instruction has indeed been adequately understood. Since learners’ understanding of instructions is integral to successful task completion, teachers use understanding-check questions in order to check learners’ comprehension of just-completed instructions or explanations. In the same way with post-instruction environment, the next following section aims to show teachers’

singular focus on learners' understanding of the just-given explanation or instruction through their use of understanding-check questions.

#### *Within-Activity Environment*

Apart from activity boundary and post explanation occasions, one of the participant teachers (TB) entered within-activity environment while asking understanding-check question. According to Waring (2012), when it comes to cases that do not fit the general pattern being proposed, they are subject to even closer scrutiny rather than being dismissed as outliers. In the same way, Wootton (1989) argued, "infrequently occurring responses would be as significant as those of frequent occurrence to the task of specifying forms of conversational organization which are in some sense shared and accessible to members of the society under investigation" (p. 243). Within-activity environment is a juncture where the teacher is in the middle of explanation in the activity and during the explanation, s/he uses understanding-check questions. It has been depicted in the previous extracts that teacher's use of understanding-check question served the single function of checking learners' understanding in post-instruction occasion. Therefore, the following extract, taken from teacher B's class shows how in the same way with post-instruction occasion, the teacher uses understanding-check question in within-activity environment.

#### **Extract 5 for analysis**

284 T ↑yea::h, here the word ones was used to refer to shoes, so °it's° an it's a pronoun,

285 ضميره ديگه! "soprepare for modest clothing, eee>what about Egypt?< Summer

286 time is ho:t in Egypt, so pack light clothing but be sure to bring warm clothing

287 → that is also °modest°(...) it's clear, (0.2) isn't i::t?=  
 288 Ls =ye::s (0.2)

288 Ls =ye::s (0.2)

289 T "warm weather clothing, if you visit a ma::sque; shoes are definitely out of the

- 290 question, >out of the question< mea::ns? Not plausible or not allowed, ok:::؟ جای
- 291 °shorts° are not allowed or out of question::n, or out of مجاز نیست, بحث نیست
- 292 question, (0.5) for both me::n and women, in masques women should wear a
- 293 longer ski::rts, and a head covering, usually a scarf, and >the upper part of their
- 294 arms< should be covered by slee::ves, آستین ok:::؟ sleeves, the upper part of their
- 295 a::rms should be:: covered b:y slee::ves for touri::ng other wo::nderfulsi::ghts or
- 296 °historical places°, causal and comfortable clothing is fine for bo:::thee w men
- 297 and >women<, >by wonderful sights< we mean some excellent places, wonderful
- 298 sights, sights here means eeeاماکن دیدنی ok:::؟ جاهای دیدنی, sights

In extract 5, the teacher has been reading a short story written in learner's book and the class has been listening to teacher's explanations for each of the sentences. In lines (284) and (285), the teacher tries to help learners understand the reference for each of the propositions mentioned in the reading. The teacher starts his explanations with rising intonation indicated by (↑) in line (284). It is in the middle of her explanations that the teacher launches an understanding-check question in line (287) "it's clear, isn't it?". Although the teacher does not finish the activity of reading and explaining the story for the learners, in the middle of her explanations she uses an understanding-check in order to check learners' understandings of her previous explanations. This is indicated in line (289) in which the teacher continues reading the story and provides explanations for the sentences of the story. Moreover, the teacher uses the last word in line (287) in lowered voice "°modest°". Finally, teacher's understanding-check question emerges after a short pause indicated by (...) in line (287). Note that, in this extract, the teacher aims to check learners' understanding of his previous explanations

and he does not want to switch the activity to serve any closing function. The teacher in this example, demonstrates his pursuit of learner' understanding by seeking an explicit confirmation of understanding "*it's clear, isn't it?*". Also note that, the use of tag question by the teacher in form of understanding-check question shows his pursuit and attempt to check learners' understanding of his previous explanations. This is indicated in line (288), in which learners answered teachers' check of understanding by signaling *no problem*. As it is shown in line (289), the teacher continued explaining the short story.

In this extract, the class has been practicing an activity of reading a story included in their syllabus. When the teacher was in the middle of explanation, she launched an understanding-check in order to check learners' understandings of her previous explanations. Therefore, the extract presented here shows teacher's pursue of a singular goal of ensuring that the just-given explanation or instruction has indeed been adequately understood.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This article has tried to demonstrate how understanding-check questions are managed by EFL teachers in their classes. The analysis of the data attempted to show that teachers' use of understanding-check questions serves different functions in variant sequential environments or micro-contexts.

Concerning the distribution of understanding-check questions, the quantitative findings based on Table 1 indicates that out of total 2224 questions, 6 EFL participant teachers of this study asked 631 (28%) understanding-checks. Unlike the study by Foster and Ohta (2005) which reported low amount of understanding-check questions used by teachers, the quantitative results of this study show that teachers have tendency to check their learners' understandings in the classes. In the same way with the quantitative results of this study, the study by Cabrera and Martinez's (2001) found that understanding-check questions are common practices in classroom lessons. On the other hand, the qualitative findings of this study showed that teachers tend to

practice understanding-check questions in three different types of sequential environments in order to check learner's understandings. First, some teachers entered activity-boundary environment where a particular lesson segment is drawing to a close and sanctioning transition to the next segment is relevant. Second, some participant teachers launched their understanding-check questions in post-instruction environment in which the teacher has already finished explaining a vocabulary or grammatical item or just completed giving instructions for an upcoming activity. Finally, the third environment which only one participant teacher entered was within-activity environment in which the teacher was in the middle of explanation and activity and during the explanation; he used an understanding-check question.

Since the qualitative analysis shaped the core findings of the present study, in the preceding section we discuss the findings concerning the second research question. The major findings of this study showed that teachers' use of understanding-check questions in activity-boundary environment serves the dual function of checking learners' understanding and the possible activity closing. This can be seen in the transition-relevant slot in which these questions are produced, the summative and formulaic nature of the questions and the teachers' subsequent talk that moves closer to activity closing. In the post-explanation and within-activity cases, however, the teachers maintained a singular focus on their check of learners' understandings. As mentioned by Waring (2012), understanding-check questions "are formatted with certain specific targets of understanding and teachers search explicit learner acknowledgment or display of understanding." (P. 24).

Waring (2012) argued that teachers in activity-boundary environments seek two purposes while asking understanding-checks. Through using understanding-check questions, in some cases teachers check learners' understandings and in some other cases, they use understanding-check questions to switch the activities. In the same way, the findings of this study showed that whereas teachers seek learners' understandings in post instruction/explanation environments, in activity-boundary environments they tend to close the sequence through using understanding-checks besides checking learners'

understandings. Besides, in within-activity cases, teacher's understanding-checks served the function of checking learners' comprehension.

While Extracts 1 and 2 in this study deal with teachers' management of understanding-check questions in activity-boundary slots, Extracts 3 and 4 deal with teachers' understanding-check questions in post instruction/explanation environments. As illustrated in Extract 1, teacher's understanding-check question shows her pursuit for *no problem* response in order to facilitate transitioning to the next lesson segment. In other words, teacher's use of words to form the understanding-check and the following questions such as *yes/no* questions which she used after such question confirm that the teacher in this extract expects her learners to signal *no problem* and to have no questions thus she can close the discussion and activity. As Sacks (1987) argued, the answer to "*yes questions*" expected to be "*yes*" however; the answer to "*no questions*" such as "*any questions?*" expected to be "*no*" even in ordinary conversation. Additionally, responses to *yes/no* questions, according to Raymond (2003), also exhibit a type-conformity. In other words, those *yes/no* questions which begin with *yes/no* are preferred over those that do not. In the same way, in extract 2, the teacher explicitly seeks to hear *no problem* from his learners via usage of *yes/no* question; therefore, the teacher treats learners' *no problem* response as favorable, which constitutes further evidence for the closing nature of the sequence. Through launching *yes/no* question after understanding-check question, the teacher implicitly conveyed to the learners that he seeks *no problem* from the learners. Likewise, Koshik (2002) found that *yes/no* questions are used by teachers in second language writing conferences to convey negative assertions. However, the findings in this study occurred in activity-boundary occasion show that teachers use *yes/no* questions following their understanding-checks to convey their expectancy for *no problem* response from the learners in order to move on to the next activity. The form of question which the teacher used in Extract 2 shows that there creates an agreement between the questioner (teacher) and the answerers (learners) of to operate agreement to move on to the next activity. In Extract 3, teacher aims to check learners' understanding of his previous explanations and he does not want to switch the activity to serve closing function. The teacher in this example, demonstrate his pursuit of learner's understanding by seeking an explicit confirmation of

understanding through use of the direct object which refers back to the just-completed explanation, thus specifying the target of understanding. Finally, in Extract 4 and 5, teachers' understanding-checks followed by two gaps indicates that the teachers treated learners' silence as signal of *yes problem*. Therefore, teachers' understanding-checks aim to check learners' understandings of their just-completed explanations/instructions and do not aim to switch the activity. Moreover, unlike the questions containing the negative polarity device "any"; Koshik (2002), this question is designed to seek a yes response.

To sum up, micro-analyses of the extracts demonstrated that while in post instruction/explanation occasion teachers produced understanding-check questions to check learners' understandings; in activity-boundary occasions teachers used understanding-check questions not only to check learners' understanding but also to switch the activity and move on to the next one. In the same way with post-instruction environment, in within-activity environment teachers used understanding-checks to check learners' understandings. In this respect, they conveyed their expectations for *no problem* to their learners through their use of understanding-checks.

The findings of this study have implications for research into teacher questions and more specifically teachers' understanding-check questions. Through detailing the use of understanding-check questions in performing possible activity closing and checking comprehension, the findings of this study extends the existing work on the functions of understanding-check questions. In addition, the information about teachers' understanding-check questions will help the teachers become aware of all the possibilities in deciding the appropriate interactional practices during interaction with learners. In other words, this study tried to provide the opportunities for the teachers to be aware of their practice of checking learners' understandings. Besides, the findings of this study contribute to the literature on teacher questions in second language pedagogy. As stated, teachers' understanding-check questions can accomplish different interactional tasks or functions in different sequential environments. Finally, understanding the double function of understanding-check questions at activity boundaries allows for removal of some sources of ambiguity in teacher questions, and that understanding can become the basis for modifying instructional practices.

## References

- Brock, C.A. (1986). The Effects of Referential Questions on ESL Classroom Discourse. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 47 – 5.
- Cabrera, M. & Martinez, P. (2001), the Effects of Repetition, Comprehension Checks and Gestures on Primary School Children in EFL Situation. *ELT journal*. 55(3).
- Dalton-Puffer, C., & Smit, U. (eds.) (2007) *Empirical perspectives on CLIL classroom discourse*. (pp. 7-24). Frankfurt: Lang.
- Donato, R. (2000). Sociocultural contributions to understanding the second language classroom, In J.P. Lantolf (ed.) *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning* (pp.25-40). Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R.(2008). *The Study of second language acquisition*. (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, P, & Ohta, A. (2005). Negotiation for meaning and peer assistance in second language Classrooms. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(3), 402-430.
- Gass, S. (1997). *Input, interaction and the second language learner*. Mahwah, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gibbons, P. (2003). Mediating language learning: Teacher interactions with ESL students in a content-based classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(2), 247–273.
- Heritage, J., Robinson, J., Elliott, M., Beckett, M., & Wilkes, M. (2007). Reducing patients' unmet concerns in primary care: The difference one word can make. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 22, 1429–1433.
- Hutchby, I., & Wooffitt( 1998). *Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Jefferson, G. (1983). Notes on some orderliness of overlap onset. Tilburg, Netherlands: Tilburg Papers in Language and Literature No. 28.
- Johnson, K.E. 1995. *Understanding communication in second language classrooms*. New York NY: CUP.
- Kasper, G. (2009). Locating cognition in second language interaction and learning: Inside the skull or in public view? *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 47, 11–36.
- Kasper, G., & Wagner, J. (2011).A conversation analytic approach to second language acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative*

- approaches to second language acquisition* (pp.117–142). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kim, Y. (2010). Scaffolding through questions in upper elementary ELL learning. *Literacy Teaching and Learning*, 15, 109-137.
- Koshik, I. (2002). A conversation analytic study of yes/no questions which convey reversed polarity assertions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34, 1851–1877.
- Lee, Y.A. (2006). Respecifying display questions: Interactional resources for language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(4), 691–713.
- Long, M. (1983). Native speaker/non- native speaker conversation and the negotiation of meaning. *Applied Linguistics*, 4, 126–41.
- Long, M. (2007). *Problems in SLA*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Long, M., & Sato C.J. (1983). Classroom foreigner talk Discourse: forms and functions of teacher's questions in Seliger and M.H. Long (eds). *Classroom – oriented research in second language acquisition*. (PP.268 – 285) Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Musumeci, D. (1996). Teacher–learner negotiation in content-instruction: communication at cross-purposes. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(3), 286–325.
- Raymond, G. (2003). Grammar and social organization: Yes/no interrogatives and the structure of responding. *American Sociological Review*, 68, 939–967.
- Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Psathas, G. (1995). *Conversation analysis: The study of talk-in-interaction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sacks, H. (1987). On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation. In G. Button & J. R. E. Lee (eds.), *Talk and social organization* (pp. 54–69). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Seedhouse, P. (2004). *The interactional architecture of the language classroom: A conversation analysis Perspective*. Blackwell Publishing: University of Michigan.
- Shomoossi, N. (2004). The effect of teachers' questioning behavior on EFL Classroom interaction: A classroom research study. *The Reading Matrix*, 4(2).

- Ten Have, P. (2007). *Doing conversation analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Thompson, J. (1997). Training teachers to ask questions. *ELT Journal*, 51, 99–105.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wajnryb, R. (1992). *Classroom observation tasks: A resource book for language teachers and trainers*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Walsh, S. (2006). *Investigating classroom discourse*. Cambridge. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Walsh, S. (2013). Conversations as space for learning. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2(2), 1-20.
- Waring, H. Z. (2012). Any Questions?: Investigating the Role of Understanding-Checks in Language Classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*.
- Waring, H. Z. (2013). How was your weekend?: developing the interactional competence in managing routine inquiries. *Language Awareness*. 22(1), 1–16.
- Wong, J., & Waring, H. Z. (2010). *Conversation analysis and second language pedagogy: A guide for ESL/ EFL teachers*. New York: Routledge.
- Wootton, A. J. (1989). *Remarks on the methodology of conversation analysis*. In D. Roger & P. Bull (Eds.), *Conversation: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 238– 258). Philadelphia, PA: Multilingual Matters.

## Appendix

### Transcription Notation

Conversation Analysis Transcription Conventions (adapted from Jefferson, 1983):

(.)	untimed perceptible pause within a turn
underline	stress
CAPS	very emphatic stress
↑	high pitch on word
.	sentence-final falling intonation
?	yes/ no question rising intonation
,	phrase-final intonation (more to come)
:	lengthened vowel sound (extra colons indicate greater lengthening)
=	latch (direct onset or no space between two unites)
→	highlights point of analysis
[ ]	overlapped talk; in order to reflect the simultaneous beginning and ending of the overlapped talk, sometimes extra spacing is used to spread out the utterance
°soft°	spoken softly/ decreased volume
><	increased speed
( )	(empty parentheses) transcription impossible
(words)	uncertain transcription
(3)	silence; length given in second
\$words\$	spoken in a smiley voice
(( ))	comments on background, skipped talk or nonverbal behavior
{{(()) words.}}	{ } marks the beginning and ending of the simultaneous occurrence of the verbal/ silence and nonverbal; absence of { } means that the simultaneous occurrence applies to the entire turn.
L1: L2: etc.,	identified Learner
"words"	words quoted, from a textbook for example