

Impact of Referential Questions on Students' Oral Participation and Academic Performance in English

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ABSTRACT

Referential questions are designed to elicit open-ended responses, allowing students to express their understanding in a way that is meaningful to them. This paper investigates the impact of the teachers' use of referential questions on the students' oral participation and academic performance in an English class. Using a quasi-experimental research design, the study investigated the Grade 10 students' level of oral involvement in terms of frequency and fluency. It used a researcher-made oral participation rubric and class records to gather the necessary data. The study's results revealed improved student oral participation after the teacher consistently used referential questions. Additionally, an increase in the student's grades in English was also seen in the class record after one grading period of using referential questions in the classroom. Finally, the statistical data showed a positive relationship between the students' frequency of oral participation and academic performance in English but no direct correlation between the quality of their oral participation and their academic performance in English. This study recommends that teachers incorporate referential questions regularly in English classes to enhance students' oral participation and engagement.

Keywords: Academic performance, English, oral participation, referential questions

INTRODUCTION

Classroom questioning is a fundamental pedagogical tool that stimulates student engagement, critical thinking, and language proficiency. Among the types of questions teachers use, referential questions—those that elicit genuine responses and personal opinions rather than fixed answers—are believed to influence student interaction significantly. Referential questions greatly impact how students adapt information that is presented and discussed in the classroom, and more importantly, they foster students' ability to process the world from a broader and bigger perspective. This ability to process information from diverse perspectives is crucial, particularly in language learning environments where students acquire linguistic skills and develop the cognitive and social capabilities necessary to communicate effectively.

Previous researchers (Alghamdy, 2023; Astrid et al., 2019) claimed that using effective questioning techniques has improved academic performance, enabling students to reinforce comprehension and retain information more effectively. When students are prompted to analyze, evaluate, and express their thoughts, they engage in deeper cognitive processing, leading to better understanding and retention of the material. This interaction enhances language proficiency and builds students' confidence in their communication abilities, empowering them to express their views more openly and accurately (Banuag, 2022; Trila & Anwar, 2019).

In the Philippine educational setting, teachers view questioning strategies in the classroom as essential tools. Lingan et al. (2019) found a strong correlation between the teachers' use of effective questioning and students' academic performance. Meanwhile, Giosop and Lumapinet (2023) analyzed the types of questions teachers used in Philippine classrooms. They found that teachers employ referential questioning techniques as their questions encourage students to elaborate on their knowledge, share their learning experiences, and provide

examples from their perspectives. However, the present study discovered that the research gap lies in the limited studies exploring the direct impact of referential questioning on specific student outcomes, such as the quality and frequency of students' oral participation and academic performance in English. This study addressed these gaps by exploring how referential questioning can be optimized to improve these skills, particularly in a multilingual and multicultural classroom like the Philippines.

In particular, this study answered the following questions:

1. What are the student's levels of oral participation in an English class before and after exposure to referential questions?
2. What are the student's academic performance in English before and after exposure to referential questions?
3. Is there a significant relationship between the students' levels of oral participation and their academic performance in English?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quasi-experimental design is a research approach that aims to examine the effect of an intervention or treatment without randomly assigning participants to control and experimental groups. Unlike true experiments, which randomly assign participants to different conditions, quasi-experiments use naturally occurring groups, making them practical for educational settings where random assignment can be challenging. In this study, the quasi-experimental research was carried out among the two heterogeneous sections of Grade 10 students in one public school in the City of Valencia, Bukidnon.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in one national high school in the City of Valencia, Bukidnon. At present, the school has 676 enrollees, 14 classrooms, 1 H.E. room, 2 computer laboratories, and 23 teachers. It has four sections in grades 7-8 and three sections in grades 9-10. It also has additional buildings and laboratories in preparation for the school's offering of courses for the senior high school classes. The sectioning of all grade levels in this school is mixed or heterogeneous.

Research Participants

The participants in this study were 88 Grade 10 students (two sections) from a high school in Valencia, Bukidnon. Among these students, 48 were female, and 40 were male, with most students ranging in age from 14 to 15. A few students, precisely five PEPT passers, were older, aged between 17 and 19. Most of the students' parents work as farmers or tenants in rice paddies, with only a small number of parents employed in private offices or owning a business. In Grade 10, this high school has four sections, where heterogeneous sectioning is used. Most students in the school reside within the barangay where the school is located or in neighboring barangays.

Research Instrument

This study employed an oral participation rubric designed by the researcher, which a panel of experts tested for content validity. It was used to assess students' levels of oral participation—specifically, the frequency and quality of their responses—both before and after exposure to referential questions. Additionally, the teacher's class record served as a secondary instrument, providing a basis for measuring students' academic performance in English before and after implementing referential questioning techniques.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed certain ethical protocols, such as informing the participants of the study's purpose. The students were also asked to sign a Consent Form together with their parents. They were also informed of their rights to discontinue the study if they felt uncomfortable at any point in the process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Levels of Oral Participation

Table 1 reflects the results of the students' levels of oral participation in terms of frequency before and after one grading period.

Table 1 Students' Level of Oral Participation in Terms of Frequency

Levels	Before		After	
	N	%	N	%
Never	49	55.7	31	35.2
Seldom	27	30.7	52	59.1
Sometimes	2	13.6	2	2.3
Always			3	3.4
Total	78	100	88	100
Mean	1.47		2.00	
Levels	Never		Seldom	

Table 1 illustrates that before the intervention, the students' frequency of oral participation was at the "Never" level, in which the mean of their scores was only 1.47. This further illustrates that out of 88 respondents, more than half of them participated at least only once in every discussion. Also, 10 students were considered missing because they were absent in the class or present but chose not to participate in discussions. On the contrary, the frequency of their participation when the teacher already used referential questions in the classroom is different. It can be noted that those who were considered missing in the previous sessions already participated during the intervention phase for one grading period. Furthermore, it can be observed that the percentage of those who belong to the "Never" level has decreased, for two-thirds of the class already belongs to the "Seldom" level.

The broader implications of these findings suggest that integrating referential questions into classroom discussions not only improves participation but also fosters a more equitable learning environment where students feel empowered to share their ideas without the fear of being judged for language inaccuracies. In multilingual classrooms, where students often possess varying levels of language proficiency, such questioning techniques can level the playing field by emphasizing the value of ideas and perspectives over linguistic perfection. This approach aligns with student-centered teaching practices, where the focus shifts from rote memorization to critical thinking and expression.

Results of the study indicate that the majority of the students did not engage in oral participation before the teacher used referential questions. Operating on the belief that the quantity of students' responses is associated with learning, the result is a negative indicator of what the students have gained in the discussion. The result is in accord with the idea of Azeez (2023) and Wonder (2021), who posited that oral participation provides teachers with feedback on the extent of the student's understanding or comprehension of the lesson. So, when students do not fully comprehend the lesson, the teacher's questions will be met with silence and reticence. The students cannot simply give or impart what they do not have. Most of the time, the students' non-

participatory and passive behavior creates a frustrating classroom, especially for the teacher who wants to meet the lesson's goals.

Thus, the result can be an evaluative tool for teachers to reflect on how well they have conducted the lesson or how extensive their means of eliciting student responses are. Learning may vary from one educational environment to another and from one learner to another; nonetheless, the main goal of every classroom discussion should be to increase the students' involvement in the different forms of verbal activity (Puno, 2021).

Meanwhile, Table 2 shows the students' oral participation quality before and after one grading period.

Table 2 Students' Level of Oral Participation in Terms of Quality

Levels	Before		After	
	N	%	N	%
Unacceptable	0			
Developing	61	69.3	65	73.9
Proficient	17	19.3	22	25
Exemplary	0		1	1.1
Missing	10	11.4		
Total	78	100	88	100
Mean	2.27		2.39	
Levels	Developing		Developing	

The table illustrates that before the intervention period, the mean of the student's scores was 2.27, which could be classified as "developing." Based on the rubric, more than half of the class answered with single, isolated words or memorized phrases. Also, no student belongs to the "unacceptable" and "exemplary" levels based on the scores given by the raters. Although the quality of their answers did not belong to the "unacceptable" level, no answers were rated as "exemplary." This result implies that no student could consistently respond in multiple complete sentences. The raters even noticed that some students would write their answers first in their papers and read them during recitation. The broader implications of these findings emphasize the critical role of creating a classroom environment that prioritizes both cognitive engagement and linguistic development, particularly in multilingual settings.

The same observation was made by Trila and Anwar (2020), who noted that one of the strategies students use in answering questions is writing them down first and then reading them later. This makes students more confident when answering the teacher's questions.

The findings could indicate that respondents did not have a good command of the language and could not think and speak simultaneously using English. Santos et al. (2022) termed it "limited proficiency," or the low ability to speak the second language, which usually results in students' insecurity and self-consciousness when speaking in front of classmates and peers. Indeed, orally producing multiple complete sentences is a problem for many students, especially those in lower-level classes. Ozaki (2021) observed that speaking in class is a difficulty commonly faced by ESL and EFL students, which could be attributed to several factors.

After the intervention period, the mean increased to 2.39. However, the quality of their answers belongs to the developing level because the difference between the two means is only 0.12, which is not enough to qualify

them for the next level. It is important to note that this study was done only for one grading period, which might not be enough for the students to enhance their speaking and participation skills.

Looking at both the frequency and quality of the participants' involvement, it could be noted that they were not interested in participating in oral discussions in class. This could be attributed to their low English competence, which, according to Pontillas (2021), is the primary factor that hampers students' participation.

The same observation was made by Rayla and Sonsona (2021) on the participation level of students. According to them, when oral production involves the use of a language that is not their mother tongue, it causes a debilitating anxiety that causes students to assume an avoidance attitude and tend to break away from the task. This is particularly true in Philippine classrooms, where most students have bright ideas but cannot express them in English. Thus, those who want to participate usually ask permission to express their thoughts in vernacular, while others opt to keep quiet and be passive observers of the discussion. The students' limited vocabulary in English, a language they do not commonly use at home, restrains them from sharing their thoughts, asking questions, and getting clarification.

Another reason for their lower participation level is that during this phase, the majority of the questions asked by the teacher require only one concrete answer. Thus, students did not have an opportunity to share more than what was expected of them (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020). Students' opinions or ideas regarding the topic were not asked, so they saw no need to impart them to the class.

The result also supports the claim of Azeez (2023) that students in EFL classes were least likely to participate in an oral activity because of the type of questions the teacher asks. So, if teachers ask only for the "what" and the "how" of the reading text, students will only look for the answers in the material and will not bother to expand or elaborate on their answers. However, if teachers try to engage the students more by asking them questions such as, "Why do you think..??" or "If you were, ..." they would be propelled to think and give reasons as they see fit to the situation. This way, their levels of engagement increase, and they will not be highly dependent on the words in the reading material.

The same was confirmed by Bulling and Guzman (2020), who explained that using questions is a controlling factor that engages students' attention in producing comprehensible verbal responses. A large part of students' exposure to oral participation and other forms of interaction happens at school; thus, they acquire the vast proficiency of expressing themselves by observing and/or copying the people they judge to be more expert than them. Usually, it is the teacher the students view as the "fountain of knowledge" in the classroom. Therefore, the teacher's types of discourse, especially when asking questions, primarily affect the students' type of discourse.

Students' Academic Performance in English

Table 3 displays the students' academic performance in English before and after their exposure to referential questions.

Table 3 Students' Academic Performance in English Before and After the Use of Referential Questions

Descriptors	Before		After	
	n	%	n	%
Advanced	0		2	2.7
Proficient	9	10.2	18	20.4
Approaching proficiency	37	42.1	32	36.6
Developing	29	32.9	31	34.9

Beginning	13	14.8	5	5.4
Total	88	100 %	88	100 %
Mean	79.44		80.61	
Std. Deviation	4.46		4.52	
Descriptor	Developing		Approaching Proficiency	

As illustrated, the mean of their grades is only 79.44, which implies that most have grades below or higher than 79. Based on the Department of Education descriptors, less than half of the class belonged to the "approaching proficiency" level before the intervention was made, and more than a quarter belonged to the "Developing." Furthermore, no students have grades on the "advanced" level, and only a very few also belong to the "beginning," which explains why the standard deviation is only 4.46. It implies the student's academic performance was not scattered or distributed exceptionally far from the mean. The standard deviation clearly reflects that the students' English grades are higher than the passing rate of 75.

After the intervention period, the student's academic performance increased for the mean is already 80.61, and the standard deviation has also increased by 0.06, meaning their grades are already scattered far from the mean. This implies that some of the students have grades that are far from 80. Two have a grade of 90, while others have 88 and 85. As seen in the table, the number of students who belong to the "proficient" level has increased while those who belong to the "approaching proficiency" decreased. Those who belong to the "beginning" level decreased by almost half as the number of those in the "developing" level increased.

However, a few participants' grades are the same before and after the intervention. This result is unsurprising because academic performance is a multi-faceted construct with different domains, and oral participation is just one part (Calixtro, 2022). For example, one factor that contributed to the increase in students' grades during this period was the extra points their English teacher gave because they joined the debate competition as part of their extracurricular activities.

Aside from extracurricular activities, other factors could contribute to the increase or decrease in students' academic performance. According to Nicolas (2022), these factors may involve family background, teachers, and the students themselves. The combinations of these three causal factors determine how a student performs in the classroom. However, these factors may vary from one learner to another and from one academic and cultural setting to another.

Relationship between Students' Oral Participation and Academic Performance in English

Table 4 presents the relationship between oral participation and the frequency and quality of answers regarding students' academic performance in English.

Table 4 Correlation of Oral Participation and Academic Performance

VARIABLES	Pearson r-value	p-value
Frequency	-0.59	.001**
Quality	-0.34	1 ns

**Significant at $p < 0.05$ level

ns= not significant

The table shows that frequency of involvement has a significant linear relationship with academic performance with $r = -0.59$ and a p -value of 0.001. Based on the result, this study's second null hypothesis should be rejected. On the other hand, the quality of students' oral participation showed a value of $r = -0.34$ and a p -value of 1, which is not significant at the 0.05 level. It means that the quality of students' oral participation does not directly relate to the students' academic performance in English.

However, it should be noted that although the students' scores in the quality of their answers after the intervention period were not enough to qualify them for the next level, which is "Proficient," nor enough to affect their academic performance in English directly, still it is noticeable that the mean of their scores before and after exposure to referential questions has a difference. It simply showed that their scores after the intervention increased, which indicates their improved performance.

The results further imply that those students who participated more and had good-quality responses had higher grades in English. The data support the claim that students who have been found to earn higher grades as their participation increases. It is because, through constant oral interaction, students learn to adopt the right skills, concepts, and knowledge that are useful in improving the other components of academic performance, such as exams and other co-curricular factors. In schools where oral participation is not graded, students still feel the need to participate in the discussions, believing that it would be a tool to improve their academic performance.

The result is also in accord with Ekvall and Seif (2021), who observed that students actively involved in classroom discussions reported higher exam rates and scores. The same result was confirmed in the findings of Bekkering and Ward (2021), who concluded that students with higher oral communication proficiency also have higher grades, especially in subjects under the social sciences. This is because these subjects usually give higher importance to effective communication. The inability to communicate effectively may lead to dysfunction in exchanging ideas and opinions of the lessons, affecting comprehension and academic performance. In the same way, Atifnigar et al. (2022) found that low oral participation is correlated with low academic performance. Those students who are not interested in sharing their ideas, making queries, and asking questions are the same students who are not performing well in class and have low grades.

CONCLUSION

The students' levels of oral participation changed after their exposure to referential questions. The students' levels of oral participation regarding the frequency and quality of their answers improved and showed a significant difference after the teacher employed referential questions in the classroom discussions.

There is an improvement in the students' academic performance in English after their exposure to referential questions.

There is a positive relationship between the students' frequency of oral participation and academic performance in English, but there is no direct correlation between the quality of their oral participation and their academic performance in English. Students who increase their frequency of oral participation also increase their academic performance in English.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Limitation/s

The primary limitation of this study is its short intervention period, which may not have been sufficient to fully capture the long-term effects of referential questions on students' oral participation and academic performance. While the study observed improvements within one grading period, a longer timeframe would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention's sustainability and impact. Therefore, the author suggests that future researchers conduct longitudinal studies, include larger and more diverse samples, and perform a more in-depth analysis of response quality to enhance the study's conclusions and practical applications.

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