

4 Form, Purpose and Grammaticality of Teacher Questions

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1 INTRODUCTION

Classroom discourse has a crucial role in the language teaching and learning process and teachers' questions are a major aspect of classroom discourse. Stevens (1992) cited in Brualdi (1998) stated that "approximately eighty percent of a teacher's school day was spent asking questions to students". Moreover, Leven & Long, (1998) report that teachers ask around 300 to 400 questions daily. The many questions asked in the typical classroom have different purposes, and types of questions vary in their effectiveness in promoting learning. There is no reason to think that this is not the case here in Oman. Moreover, in Omani English language classrooms, the teachers are not native speakers of English. There appear to be many teachers who concentrate on the meaning of the question rather than on the form and consequently they may use inaccurate question forms.

As an administrator sharing responsibility for ensuring standards in schools I have become more aware of and more concerned about the type and purpose of questions asked, their usefulness in promoting learning, and their grammatical accuracy. The amount of teacher talk during the lesson and the number and type of questions asked in the classroom affect the learners' understanding and learning of the second language. Moreover, teachers of English as a foreign language in the Omani classroom are frequently the only models for the learner and consequently the teachers' use of English with the learners should be accurate and classroom questions should be formed properly. For these reasons I decided to investigate problems with teachers' questions in the English classroom.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Referential and Display questions

In real life, to communicate with other people we frequently ask questions to initiate interactions. However, according to Ur (1996), questioning in the context of

teaching can be defined as what teachers actually say to learners to elicit oral responses. Questions are very important for communication in the classroom and there are different types. An important distinction is that between display and referential questions.

Both Tsui (1995) and Thornbury (1996) define display questions as the questions used by teachers when they know the answer in advance and want learners to display their knowledge. Lightbown & Spada (1999) state that, in contrast to display questions, referential questions are used when teachers seek information from learners but do not know the answers. Furthermore, Thompson (1997) refers to referential questions as communicative questions because these seek personal information or opinion from the learners and therefore the learners have to communicate with teachers to answer the questions.

2.2 Purposes of Teachers' Questions

Most writers seem to agree that teachers' questions are mainly used to check learners' comprehension and to determine what learners have actually learnt (Brown & Wragg 2001; Peacock, 1990; Tsui, 1995). Kerry (1982) says that the main purpose for teachers in using questions in the classroom is to recall information as well as to check basic comprehension and evaluate and analyze learners' skills and performance.

Ur (1996), Tsui (1995), and Peacock (1990) all argue that teachers sometimes ask questions because they are interested in the learners' answers – i.e. they seek information that they do not have - but this seems a less common purpose in asking questions in the classroom. This suggests that questioning in the classroom differs from real-life questioning, which appears to include more referential questions (Ellis, 1984). There are other reasons for teachers to ask questions in the classroom, for example "to stimulate recall, to deepen understanding, to develop imagination and to encourage problem-solving" (Brown & Wragg 2001: 6). In addition, Brown & Wragg (2001) mention other reasons concerning class management. They also identify some other possible functions of questions such as to motivate children, to focus attention on one particular aspect of language, to increase interaction between groups and to present tasks and activities.

Long & Sato (1983), cited in Brock (1986), found that ESL teachers tend to ask more display questions than referential. Although Brock (1986) looked at the effect of referential questions on adult ESL classroom discourse, some of the conclusions might be relevant to TEYL classrooms. Brock (1986) researched two teachers trained in using referential questions and two who were untrained and found that teachers usually ask more display questions than referential. However, the researcher found that teachers who had been trained in using referential questions asked more referential questions than the other teachers. Consequently the target learners' responses were longer and more complex in the groups taught by the trained teachers than in the groups taught by the untrained. This seems to be a significant finding and implies that teachers should be trained to use referential questions in order to develop learners' speaking skills.

2.3 Question Forms

The relation between the question form and the purpose is strong; for example yes/no questions are normally straightforward to answer. Teachers can use this type of question to encourage weak learners to respond and to check their understanding before using wh- questions to get more details and information (Gower, 1995 cited in Thompson, 1997). According to Thompson (1997), the purposes of the questions could be display or referential depending on the lesson content. For example, the purpose of yes/no questions could be display when the content is about outside facts, and referential when the content is about personal information.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

The aim of my study is to investigate the grammaticality of Omani English teachers' questions. My main question was: What grammatical problems are there with teachers' questions in Omani classrooms? Sub-questions I examined were: What are the teachers' purposes for using different types of questions? Do Omani teachers prepare their questions before the lesson? and Is there any relationship between using incorrect question forms and the purposes of the questions?

3.2 Participants

The two Omani male teachers in this study taught in a Basic Education Cycle 2 school. The first teacher (Subject A) had been teaching for 13 years and was a graduate of the University of Leeds BA TESOL programme. He had three years' experience in teaching in Basic Education and was teaching Grades 6 and 7 at the time of this study. The second teacher (Subject B) had been teaching for two years since he graduated from Sultan Qaboos University. He started his career in Basic Education and was teaching Grade 5, 6 and 7 classes. Regarding the learners in this study, they were in Grades 5-7 and aged 11-14. They had been studying English from Grade 1 in Basic Education Cycle 1. The number of learners in each class was around 33 and the textbook used was English for Me.

3.3 Data Collection

I chose a case study approach. Johnson (1992) suggests that case studies are intensive and give researchers more in depth understandings of the strategies and processes that a small number of subjects use. This approach enabled me to collect a large volume of data about the classroom language of the two teachers and to obtain insights into their individual decisions and motivations.

Data were collected in a variety of ways. The first was observation. I used it because it helped me to identify what questions the teachers actually used and whether they contained grammatical errors. The lessons I observed were audio recorded. I analyzed three lessons from each teacher (two of which I observed personally, with the third being recorded for me by the teacher). However, observation has some disadvantages. As Holmes (2005) points out, observation

takes time and also requires a skilled observer. Therefore I prepared for the observations carefully and made sure that I had a good observation instrument. This helped me to make my observations more reliable.

The second method I used was the semi-structured interview to find out what teachers think about their questions and as a follow up to the observation. I asked the subjects two main questions in the first observation about whether they planned their questions before lessons and whether they thought they use correct question forms in their classrooms. At the end of the observations I interviewed the two subjects asking them further questions. The interviews provided me with qualitative data about the teachers' thinking about their questions. An example of an interview is given in the Appendix.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Subject A

Table 1 below shows the quantitative data (the types of questions and the purposes) derived from the three lessons analyzed for Subject A. This teacher asked 125 questions. In terms of question forms, over 90% were wh- questions. In terms of the purposes of the questions, almost 86% were display questions.

Table 1: Types of questions used by Subject A

	Types of questions	No. of questions	100%
Form	Wh	113	90.4%
	Yes/no	4	3.2%
	Other types	8	6.4%
Purpose	Display	107	85.6%
	Referential	18	14.4%
Total		125	

I also analyzed the grammatical correctness of these 125 questions. Over 58% of them I considered to be grammatically incorrect¹. Here are some examples:

- What does it mean communication?
- Who use them?
- What is in English?
- Abdulaziz what he said?

As noted earlier, I interviewed each teacher using six questions. The answers helped me to understand their awareness and attitudes about teacher questions. The first question checked whether the teacher understood the difference between display question and referential questions. Subject A answered "Yes, and I usually use display questions in which students answer with very short answers. There is only one answer for these questions". This suggested that he had not completely grasped the point about the two types of questions and their different purposes. He was unable to explain his understanding of referential questions.

¹Editor's note: It is my view that the criteria applied in deciding what is grammatically correct in this study were very stringent. Thus the actual percentage of grammatically incorrect questions was lower than reported here, though the point remains that not all questions were correctly formed.

The second question asked if the teacher could comment on the types of questions he used. He replied with only one word “Yes” without giving any further explanation. In answering the third question Subject A claimed that he frequently used wh-questions and how-questions (as he said) to help learners understand the target language. In his response to the fourth question Subject A explained that, because of his confidence resulting from 12 years of teaching experience, he felt no need to write down the questions in advance of lessons, although he added that he did do this in the early stages of his career. Regarding grammatical accuracy, Subject A recognised his questions were not always correct, perhaps because he asked so many questions in the lesson. The last question established that Subject A felt that he corrected his mistakes immediately when he noticed them.

4.2 Subject B

Table 2 shows the quantitative data (the types of questions and the purposes) derived from the three lessons analyzed for Subject B. This teacher asked 88 questions. In terms of question forms, almost 70% were wh- questions. In terms of the purposes of the questions, 60% were display questions.

Table 2: Types of questions used by Subject B

	Types of questions	No. of questions	100%
Form	Wh	61	69.3%
	Yes/no	8	10%
	Other types	19	21.5%
Purpose	Display	53	60%
	Referential	35	39.7%
Total		88	

The other question types used by Subject B were mainly indirect questions spoken with rising intonation followed by an interrogative pause seeking a completion, for example in Unit 2 Lesson 7 (yes good ... and the last one is ...?)

I also analyzed the grammatical correctness of these 88 questions. Over 44% of them I considered to be grammatically incorrect. Here are some examples:

- What does intonation means?
- What the objective number one?
- What does the instruction number two says?
- Now class have you finish?

As with Subject A I interviewed Subject B using six questions. To the first question, about the difference between display question and referential questions, Subject B answered “Yes of course referential questions refer to questions that need free and open answers while display are those which need close and fixed answers”. This as with Subject A suggested that he had not completely grasped the point about the two types of questions and their different purposes. In his answer to the second

question, about awareness of different question types used in the classroom, Subject B reported that he varied his questions but he did not specify the different types. However, in his answer to the next question Subject B indicated that he frequently used display questions. Responding to the fourth question, Subject B said he planned his questions before the lesson by writing them down on paper.

Regarding grammatical accuracy, Subject B thought his questions were mostly correct because he prepared them before the lesson. The last question established that Subject B felt he corrected any mistakes as soon as he noticed them. These last two questions were interesting because they demonstrated the gap between the teacher's own perceptions and the reality of his classroom questions. This might be a problem for teachers in general.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Subject A

In terms of his questions, Subject A reflected patterns highlighted many times in classroom research – i.e. he asked mainly display questions, and in this case they were largely of the wh- type. My analysis also suggested that close to 60% of this teacher's questions were not grammatically correct² and this should be an area of concern. The interviews provided some insight into this teacher's thinking regarding his questions. He did not demonstrate a clear understanding of different types of questions and seemed to rely on his experience as a guide in deciding what types of questions to ask; his questions also were not prepared in advance. Relying on experience is an important part of teaching, but in this case it seemed that this was limiting the teacher's questioning techniques; in other words, he may have been following this pattern of wh- and display questions for many years, and without some awareness of alternatives was likely to continue following it in the years ahead. The impact of his questions on his lessons were that the learners had few opportunities to speak and that the responses they were required to give tended to be short.

5.2 Subject B

Subject B also relied mainly on wh- questions but there was more evidence of referential questions in his lessons than in those for Subject A. There was in fact a greater variety of questions in his work, something he acknowledged in his interview. His wider use of referential questions may suggest that he wanted to encourage learners to express their feelings, and to encourage thinking and discussion in the lesson. He also said that he prepared his questions before the lesson. Nonetheless, there still seemed to be a high proportion of grammatically incorrect questions in his lessons.

² Editor's note: But, as noted earlier, the criteria used in judging what was correct here were very stringent, perhaps unreasonably so.

5.3 Limitations

One limitation in this study is the small number of participants. I would have liked to investigate other teachers but was unable to secure any other participants. The number of lessons I analyzed for each teacher was also small and not necessarily representative of their work. A third issue I was aware of here was the difficulty in deciding what the purpose of a question is; only the teacher will know for some questions what their purpose is, and in some cases I was unsure whether a question was display or referential. I must also acknowledge that this study raises ethical questions; the teachers were not aware of the focus of my analysis (i.e. of my concern on grammatically incorrect questions). It would, however, be difficult to do research of this kind if teachers are aware of its purpose as most teachers would not agree to participate. Finally, I am aware that not all readers may agree with the way I classified questions as grammatical or ungrammatical. My choices in this respect had a powerful effect on the results of this study.

6 CONCLUSION

This study highlights a number of issues which can provide a focus for further research and in-service teacher education. There are clearly instances where teachers' questions are not correctly formed; teachers can benefit from being made aware of these and from support which helps them to improve the accuracy of their questions. Given that this is a sensitive issue, perhaps the best way to raise awareness among teachers of this matter is to engage teachers in the study of their own questions. Support from senior teachers and supervisors could also be valuable. This study also suggests that teachers can benefit from an awareness of a wider range of question types, of their uses and their impact of what learners say. In this study, teachers' awareness of these issues was not particularly sophisticated. Given the central role that questions play in the classroom there are good arguments for ensuring that teachers can asked a variety of questions appropriately and in a way that supports L2 learning.

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE INTERVIEW

I = Interviewer

A = Subject A

I Do you understand the difference between referential question and display questions?

A Yes and I usually use display questions in which students answer with very short answer. There is only one answer for these questions.

I Are you aware of the different types of questions you use in the classroom? Could you explain the differences?

A Yes

I What types of questions do you think that you most frequently ask in the classroom?

A I usually ask wh questions and how question, because I think they help students in understanding the target language.

I Do you plan your questions before the lesson? If the answer is yes how? What do you do?

A No as an experienced teacher I used to ask questions 12 years ago but at early stage of my teaching I used to write down question in paper and used them in the lesson.

I Do you think your questions are grammatically accurate?

A Not always because I ask many questions during the lesson.

I Do you self correct your teacher questions? If so how often?

A Yes I usually correct my questions immediately in the lesson because sometimes I used is instead of was.