18 Teachers' Questions in the English Language Classroom

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1   INTRODUCTION

As Tsui (1995:23) notes, "questions are... a very important aspect of classroom talk". Wood (1998:175) adds that "classroom talk is dominated by teacher questions". Given the role which teachers' questions play in the classroom, understanding teachers' questioning strategies is an important area of research and here my focus is on the questions which are asked by Grade Four teachers of English in Basic Education Schools in Oman. My aim is to compare my findings to those of studies already conducted in Oman on teachers' questions and also to extend these by examining teachers' perspectives on the questions they ask.

2   TEACHERS' QUESTIONS

2.1   Number of Questions

A number of studies have attempted to investigate the number of questions teachers ask in the classroom. Leven & Long (1981), cited in Brualdi (1998), found that between 300-400 questions are asked by teachers each day. Similarly, Stevens (1912), cited in Brown & Wragg (1993) found that "teachers appeared to ask 400 questions per day" (p.10). Johnston (1990), cited in Ellis (1994) observed a total of 522 questions of different types in three hours of teaching. Long & Sato (1983), cited in Ellis (1994:586) also observed "a total of 938 questions in six elementary level ESL lessons". Wood (1998:174) also found in two studies that "the frequency of teachers' questions as a proportion of all their utterances was 47 per cent and 43 per cent respectively". Galton et al. (1980), cited in Boo (1999:111), note that "nearly 20 per cent of all teachers utterances are questions". Overall, then, there is ample evidence in ELT and education generally that teachers' questions are a major component of classroom discourse.

2.2   Types of Questions

Questions can be classified in many ways. One common distinction is that between closed and open questions. Closed questions are questions which have only one acceptable answer, while open questions are questions which have more than one acceptable answer (see, for example, Ur, 1999). Kerry (1982:7) adds that closed questions require a monosyllable response, while open questions are questions which "allow for opinion, speculation, the generation of hypotheses, the putting up of an argument". Nunan & Lamb (1996) say that open questions are those which motivate students to extend their responses.

Another distinction is that between display and referential questions. Display questions are questions to which the teacher already knows the answers, while referential questions are questions to which the teacher does not know the answer in advance (see, for example, Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Some writers add to the previous definition by saying that display questions are questions which are used to check learners' knowledge and understanding, while referential questions genuinely seek new information (e.g. Lynch,1996; Cullen, 1998). Tsui (1995:28) points out that "display questions generate interactions that are typical to didactic discourse, whereas referential questions generate interactions typical of social communication".

2.3   Frequency Of Teachers' Questions

Barnes (1969), cited in Ellis (1994), found that teachers in the secondary school he investigated used closed questions more than open questions. Wood (1998:174) also argues that "teachers' questions are more often of the 'closed' type with known right answers". In Oman, Al-Kharbushi (2006) and Al-Omrani (2006) also found closed questions to be more common in their studies of English teachers' questions.

Shomoosi (2004) conducted a study to investigate the number of display and referential questions. He observed five teachers and found they used a total of 1335 display questions compared to only 293 referential questions. Also, Long & Sato (1983), cited in Ellis (1994) found that ESL teachers asked display questions more than referential questions. Similarly, Brock (1986), cited in Nunan (1989), observed that teachers who were not trained to use referential questions asked 141 questions; 24 were referential and 117 were display. The studies from Oman mentioned above also showed that English teachers used more display than referential questions.

Most of the studies referred to above analyzed teachers' questions without exploring teachers' perspectives on this issue. Thus they tell us how many questions teachers ask and classify these questions without providing insight into the rationales teachers might have for asking certain kinds of questions.

2.4   Length Of Learners' Responses

Brock (1986), cited in Ellis (1994), found that referential questions produce significantly longer responses than display questions. Similarly, Long & Sato (1983), cited in Tsui (2001:122), concluded that "referential questions were more conducive to the production of lengthier and more complex responses by learners". Also,

Shomoosi (2004:102) says that "It was inferred from the obtained data that display questions required short answers containing small pieces of information".

In Oman, the findings of studies into English teachers' questions have been less conclusive in showing that referential questions produce longer responses. In Al-Muaini (2006), both display and referential questions tended to generate short answers, while Al-Farsi (2006) found that open display questions produced longer answers than closed referential questions. Clearly, as White (1992), cited in Ellis (1994:590), claims "not …all display questions produce short answers". Banbrook (1987), also cited in Ellis (1994), similarly points out that referential questions can produce answers of varying length.

2.5   The Value Of Different Types Of Questions

Nunan (1990), cited in Maley (n.d.), states that referential questions interest students more because they require personal involvement. Brock (1986), cited in Nunan (1991), concluded that referential questions which are asked by teachers in the classroom may increase learners' amount of speaking. Lynch (1996:108) notes that "if teachers generally use questions to test students' knowledge rather than to let them tell us what they have to say, that can discourage them from wanting to answer…". In contrast to the general view that referential questions are more desirable in many ways than display questions, Long & Crookes (1987) cited in Ellis (1994) report that display questions elicited more student turns than referential questions.

3   METHODOLOGY

3.1   Research Questions

This study investigated the questions which are asked by Grade Four teachers of English in Basic Education Schools in Oman. More specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:
  1.   How many questions do Grade Four teachers of English in Basic Education School ask?
  2.   What types of questions do these teachers ask?
  3.   Which types of questions do these teachers ask most?
  4.   How long are the learners' responses to different types of questions?
  5.   What are these teachers' views about the different types of questions they ask?

3.2   Context and Participants

The participants in this study were a non-probability sample of four female Grade 4 teachers working in different Basic Education Schools in Muscat. All of them were teachers of English who had a Bachelor's degree. They had between four and fourteen years of teaching experience. Their learners were mixed ability groups (boys and girls) who were in their fourth year of learning English and 10 years old.

In approaching the teachers I was mindful of the ethical issues discussed by Denscombe (2002). Thus I explained my research and its purposes to the

participants, gave them information about how I wanted to conduct the study and what their commitment would be; I also explained how I would use the data and told them that participation is voluntary. I agreed convenient times for them to be observed and interviewed. Moreover, I assured them I would treat all data confidentially and that I would use pseudonyms instead of real names in reporting the study.

3.3   Data Collection

This is a mixed methods study, involving both the quantitative analysis of teachers' questions as well as the qualitative analysis of teachers' views about their questions. The quantitative part of the study allowed the use of teachers' questions to be described and counted; the qualitative part provided insight into teachers' own perceptions of the questions they use in their lessons.

I carried out eight open-ended observations (two lessons of 40 minutes each for each teacher) during which I was a non-participant observer. As Richards (1998:143) argues "The observer should remain an observer. An observer cannot observe effectively if participating in the lesson". During the observations, I used audio recording in order to capture everything teachers said and this allowed me to conduct a much more detailed analysis of their questions. I also made field notes about information which was not captured on tape such as materials, context and what the teacher wrote on the board.

I also did one semi-structured interview lasting 10-15 minutes with each teacher (see Appendix for an example). The purpose of the interviews was to discuss teachers' views on their use of questions. Robson (1993) says that semi-structured interviews are useful because they allow the researcher to modify the questions and their order with different respondents; in this study, each teacher's classroom questions were different and thus each interview was slightly different. I tape recorded the interviews because "Tape recording interviews … provides a far richer source for data analysis" (Campbell, McNamara, & Gilroy, 2004:129).

I designed my semi-structured interview following the principles suggested by Drever (1995). I designed open questions to give respondents freedom to answer in any way and closed questions to offer little scope in answering. Also, I used simple and clear language to help the teachers understand my questions. Moreover, I avoided leading questions and double-barrelled questions and followed a logical sequence in ordering these questions. In addition to that, I prepared prompts to encourage teachers to talk more and probes to encourage them to explain what they have already said. I piloted my observations and interviews with two teachers and I revised the interviews because I did not get sufficient information from them. Therefore, in the actual study I used more prompts and probes to in order generate a larger volume of interview data.

3.4   Data Analysis

I analysed the eight observation transcripts by identifying all the teachers' questions in them and classifying these using the distinctions between open, closed, display and referential questions discussed above. I similarly counted the number

of words in learners' responses. The frequency information about teachers' questions and learners' responses was used to calculate the total numbers of questions for each and for all teachers, the overall frequencies for each type of question, and the average length of learners' responses according to question type too.

In analysing the semi-structured interview transcripts, I read the transcripts carefully and identified all the data relevant to a particular research question. Then, I categorized these data according to key topics (e.g. open questions, closed questions) and used different coloured highlighter pens to mark the data for each topic. Finally, I wrote a summary of the key points for each topic and gave examples.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Observation Findings

4.1.1 Number of Questions

Table 1 presents the number of questions asked by the four teachers in the eight lessons observed. It shows that the total number of question in these eight lessons was 556. The range for the teachers was from 76 for T3 to 197 for T2. The average number of questions asked per lesson was 69.5.

Table 1: Number of questions asked by the teachers

Teachers	T1	T2	T3	T4	Total
No. of questions	127	197	76	156	556

4.1.2 Types of Questions

Table 2 shows the type of questions asked in terms of the distinctions between closed, open, display and referential questions explained earlier. It shows that all teachers used all the four types of questions except T3. She did not use open questions at all. Also T1 and T2 did not use open questions in one of their lessons

Table 2: Frequency of teachers questions in the eight lessons

	T1			T2			T3			T4			Total
Lessons	1	2	1+2	3	4	3+4	5	6	5+6	7	8	7+8	
Closed	48	74	122	84	106	190	45	31	76	102	41	143	531
Open	0	5	5	0	7	7	0	0	0	5	8	13	25
Display	37	68	105	74	109	183	43	27	70	79	46	125	483
Referential	11	11	22	10	4	14	2	4	6	28	3	31	73

4.1.3 Frequency of Teachers' Questions

Table 2 also summarizes the frequency with which the different types of questions were asked by the four teachers in the lessons observed. Closed and display questions were overwhelmingly more frequent than open and referential questions.

4.1.4 Length of Learners' Responses

Table 3 presents the length of learners' responses, in words, to the different types of questions asked by the teachers. The first column gives the question types and the total number of each that occurred in the lessons observed. Then for each teacher the figures given are the total number of words learners spoke in their responses to each question type (e.g. for the closed questions in the lessons of T1 learners' responses totalled 242 words). The final column is the average number of words in learners' responses for each question type (e.g. for closed questions this is 633/531). These figures show that closed questions generated slightly longer answers than open questions and that referential questions were those which produced the longest answers overall. In all cases, though, responses were short.

Table 3: Frequency of teachers questions in the eight lessons

	T1	T2	T3	T4	Total	Average
Closed (N=531)	242	172	92	127	633	1.19
Open (N=25)	5	5	0	19	29	1.16
Display (N=483)	185	164	86	118	553	1.14
Referential (N=73)	62	13	6	28	109	1.49

4.2   Interview Findings

4.2.1 Types of Questions

The interviews asked teachers about the types of questions they ask their learners. They all said that they used a range of questions and provided a variety of answers when I asked them to explain their understanding of closed, open, display and referential questions. They believed open questions produce longer answers and that closed questions give only one acceptable answer. They described referential questions as real questions are about learners' lives and background. I asked the teachers why they used such questions and they contrasted situations where they genuinely want to know an answer with those where their aim was to check understanding. In the former, they asked referential questions, but not in the latter. As one teacher explained, "I ask them questions about things related to the subject and I expect their answers. I ask this type of question, because I want to check their understanding. For example, what's Sami wearing? Is this a boy?".

4.2.2 Frequency of Questions

In the interviews, the teachers were asked about the types of questions they ask more. Three of them acknowledged that they ask closed questions more than other kinds of questions. When they were asked to justify their answers, a variety of similar reasons were provided. For example, one of them said they ask closed questions "because of the level of my learners and because I want specific information". She also noted that it was "because in the syllabus we are given ready made questions to ask and we have to follow notes". One teacher said she used Wh-

questions more than other types because "learners talk more and get used to them". Wh- questions, though, can be both open and closed.

4.2.3 Learners' Responses

In the interviews, the teachers were asked about the length of learners' responses to different types of questions. Two of them felt that their learners give short responses to all types of questions. For example, one of them said that "My learners give short answers to open and closed questions even if they are real or not real, because of the syllabus and their English level is low. They don't know English". The other two felt that answers for open questions are longer than for closed questions.

4.2.4 Value of Different Types of Questions

I also asked the teachers about the value of different types of questions. Three of them felt that open real questions are more valuable than others. When they were asked to justify their choice they gave similar reasons. For example one of them said: "Because these questions let learners use the language more. I think they feel that they are outside the classroom. This helps them to say anything even if there are a lot of grammatical mistakes. Also, I can check if they improve the language or not". One teacher felt that Wh- questions are more valuable than others (it is not clear whether she meant open Wh- questions as such questions can be closed too). She explained her choice by saying that learners have the opportunity to give long answers and to use language more.

5   DISCUSSION

5.1   Number of Questions

The high number of teacher questions observed in this study reflects the findings of studies referred to earlier both in ELT and in education more generally (e.g. Johnson, 1990, in Ellis, 1994; Leven & Long, 1981, in Brualdi, 1998). It is clear that in the lessons studied here "…the most dominant feature of teacher pupil interaction is the question-answer-acknowledgement exchange" (Wood, 1998:174).

5.2   Types of Questions

There was evidence of a range of questions in the teachers' lessons, although open questions were not found at all in the work of one teacher and in one lesson each from two other teachers. Teachers' views of learners' ability may be a factor in determining the kinds of questions they ask – some teachers here did say that their learners cannot produce long answers to any type of question. In my own experience as a teacher, I ask closed questions to lower level learners, because they can produce one-word answers, and open questions to higher level learners, because they can express their ideas more fully. In the interviews, all teachers said that they use all types of questions, but as already noted open questions were not found at all in four of the eight lessons studied. Perhaps, then, teachers' theoretical views about the value of open questions are not always reflected in what they do in the classroom.

5.3   Frequency of Teachers' Questions

It is not surprising to find that, once again, closed and display questions were much more common that open and referential questions (see, for example, Al-Kharbushi, 2006; Al-Omrani, 2006). The teachers were generally aware of this tendency, although one teacher claimed that she used open questions more frequently (this was not evident from her lessons though). Again, there may be tensions here between what this teacher believes and what she does.

5.4   Length of Learners' Responses

The literature suggests that open questions normally receive longer answers from learners (e.g. Randall & Thornton, 2001). Making the same point, Nunan (1990) in Maley (n.d.:1) points out that "Students respond better to teachers who treat them like real people and who show a genuine interest in them". In this study, none of the questions generated long answers and the overall average response length per question was less than two words (Al-Farsi, 2006 reported a similarly low average response length of 2.12 words). Almost all the open questions asked by teachers required learners to look at their books and to obtain ideas from there (e.g. What can you see?). These questions can be open because sometimes a number of answers are possible but they do not encourage learners to be creative; also, such questions are display questions and, as Chaudron (1988:173) notes, "display questions tend to elicit short answers". However, even referential questions did not generate longer answers. Why exactly this occurs merits further study; perhaps learners' proficiency is too low or they do not know what teachers expect them to say (because they are accustomed to giving short answers to closed display questions).

5.5   Value of Questions

The teachers generally agreed here that open referential questions are more valuable than other types of questions. The teachers felt that such questions encouraged learners to speak more, although as noted above there was no evidence of this in the lessons observed, and thus this issue may reflect a tension between what teachers believe and what actually happened. My own views concur with those of the teachers - when I ask my learners personal questions they talk more even if their language is not accurate.

5.6   Limitations

In interpreting these findings there are some limitations to keep in mind. One issue I was concerned about was that the interviews did not generate as much in-depth insight into teachers' views about questioning as I had hoped for. This was partly because of my inexperience in conducting semi-structured interviews but also because the teachers' may have been nervous because of the audio recording. My presence during the lessons observed may also have affected the behaviour of teachers and learners (e.g. learners may have tried harder to reply to teachers' questions) but such effects can never be completely eliminated in observational studies.

6   CONCLUSION

This study adds to existing research in Oman on English teachers' questions by suggesting that closed display questions are much more common than open referential questions. At the same time, the teachers here felt that open referential questions are more valuable. This tension between observed classroom practices and teachers' views suggests that teachers may benefit from in-service training which allows them to review their questioning strategies and to consider ways of achieving more balance across the different question types. This study also extends research on teacher questions in Oman by going beyond an analysis of the questions themselves and showing the value of also asking teachers for their views on questioning. This approach can allow us to understand not only what teachers do but why, and can lead to findings which can be usefully built into professional development initiatives.

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE INTERVIEW

I=Interviewer, T= Teacher
I: I want to ask you about the questions that you ask your learners. Ok?
T: Ok.
I: What types of questions do you ask?
T: Open questions and closed questions
I: What do you mean by open questions and closed questions?
T: Open questions give long answers, but closed questions give only one acceptable answer.
I: Can you give me an example of open questions?
T: What do you do in the Id?
I: And closed questions?
T: Do you like chocolate?
I: So, these questions are real or not real?
T: Real questions.
I: What do you mean by real questions?
T: Questions which are related to them. When I ask these questions I really want to know the answers from them. I mean about their life and their background in order to find a good way to deal with individual learner.
I: This means that you ask only real questions in the class?
T: Not always. Sometimes I ask them not real questions. These questions are about the lesson. For example, closed question: Is this a book? and open question: What can you see in this picture?
I: What do you mean by not real questions?
T: Questions about the lesson which I know their answers not questions from outside the lesson which I don't know their answers.
I: Why do you ask not real questions?
T: To check if my learners understand my lesson or not.
I: Which types of questions do you ask more?
T: Closed questions about the lesson.
I: Why do you ask closed questions more?
T: Because my learners' level of English is low.
I: How long are the learners' responses to different types of questions?
T: My learners give short answers to open and closed questions even if they are real or not real, because of the syllabus and their English level is low. They don't know English.
I: Do you feel that certain types of questions are better than others?
T: Open questions are better for the learners
I: Do you mean real and open or not real and open questions?
T: Real and open.
I: Why?
T: Because these questions let learners use the language more. I think they feel that they are outside the classroom. This helps them to say anything even if there are a lot of grammatical mistakes. Also, I can check if they improve their language or not.