

# **4 Teachers' Questions in the Elementary English Classroom**

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Teachers' questions are one of most researched aspects of classroom discourse. The aim of this study is to investigate the use of questions in the work of teachers of English in elementary classrooms in Oman.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

Research on classroom discourse has shown that teachers ask many questions in every lesson and that these questions have an impact on the language learning process. It is because teacher questions play such a key role in the language classroom that I chose this topic. I wanted to learn more about the manner in which teachers use questions. I believed that gaining insight into this topic would allow me to use questions more effectively and hence to support my learners better.

## **3 TEACHERS' QUESTIONS**

### **3.1 Purposes of Teachers' Questions**

As Brown & Wragg (1993) highlight, teachers usually ask questions to check learners' knowledge rather than because they are seeking new information. This contrasts with the use of questions in real-life. Teachers also ask questions to activate learners' schematic knowledge about the topic being discussed and to provoke them to use their thinking skills (Peacock 1990).

### **3.2 Types of Questions**

There are many ways of classifying questions. An important distinction is that between display and referential questions (e.g. Tsui 1995). Display questions as defined by Thornbury (1996) are those for which the teacher knows the answer in advance, and they are used to check learners' knowledge. Referential questions, on the other hand, as defined by Lightbown & Spada (1999), are genuine questions for which the asker does not know the answer. Research on classroom discourse has constantly found that the majority of teachers' questions are display questions (see, for example, Seedhouse 1996).

Another common way of classifying questions is into open and closed questions. According to Peacock (1990) open questions are those where a variety of responses are acceptable, and the questioner does not

expect a particular answer. Closed questions, on the other hand, are those which require a single word or a brief response for which there is a single correct answer.

Questions can also be classified in terms of their form. There are *yes/no* questions, *wh-* questions, and *either/or* questions, and each can have an effect on the type of response learners are able to produce. Gap-filling questions are those where the teacher provides the first part of the answer and the learners complete it.

### **3.3 Strategies for Effective Questioning**

A number of strategies for effective questioning by teachers are outlined in the literature. Amongst these are distributing questions among all learners rather than focusing on the stronger ones (Nunan 1991), using prompts and probes to “follow-up questions when the first answers are inadequate or inappropriate” (Brown & Wragg 1993: 20), and using wait-time appropriately - pausing after a question to give learners time to think.

## **4 METHOD**

### **4.1 Research Questions**

In this study, the following questions were investigated:

1. What are the purposes of teachers’ questions in the elementary English classroom?
2. What types of questions do teachers ask?
3. What strategies for effective questioning do they use?

### **4.2 Data Collection**

Data were collected from four male teachers of English working in General Education schools and who each had around 12 years’ experience of teaching English. Data were collected through classroom observation and interviews.

#### **4.2.1 Classroom Observation**

I observed two teachers of English for two lessons each using both an observation sheet on which I noted down examples of teachers’ questions, and audio tape recording. I listened to the recordings and transcribed the parts which shed light on the teachers’ use of questions.

#### **4.2.2 Interviews**

I interviewed four teachers, the two observed and two others. These semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded. Interviews were used because, as Bell (1999) argues, they allow insight into the reasons respondents have for

their actions. In this case I hoped to learn more about the teachers' views on their use of questions.

## 5 FINDINGS

The data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively in terms of the purposes of the teachers' questions, the types of questions asked, and the strategies for effective questioning used.

### 5.1 The Purposes of Teachers' Questions

The observations suggested that the teachers used questions primarily to activate learners' schemata about the topic, to check understanding and to recall information. Neither of the teachers asked questions which required the learners to use analysis or evaluation skills.

During the interviews, the teachers agreed that their questions are mainly asked in the classroom to check simple comprehension, to activate learners' background knowledge, and to involve particular learners in the lesson. One of the teachers also explained that "I use some questions that are related to the learners just for fun and warming up, and so on".

### 5.2 Types of Questions

Table 1 summarises the analysis of the types of questions used in the four lessons observed.

*Table 1: Types of teacher questions in the work of two teachers of English*

Types of questions	Quantity	
	Teacher 1	Teacher 2
Number of questions	17	35
Referential	8	0
Display	9	35
Open	5	6
Closed	12	29
Wh questions	10	21
Yes/ No	4	3
Gap filling	3	11

Clear differences are apparent here, most notably in the use of referential questions by the two teachers and in the proportion of referential and display questions used overall (almost 85% were display). In both cases too, there were more closed questions than open questions.

In the interviews, teachers acknowledged that they usually ask more closed than open questions. When they were asked to justify this choice, a variety of reasons were provided. The teachers felt that their learners' low levels of English meant that closed questions were more suitable. One teacher also explained that open questions lead learners to make more grammatical

mistakes. The teachers also referred to the course book and syllabus they were required to follow (Our World Through English), indicating that they felt the content and activities in these naturally lead teachers to ask more closed questions.

The interviews also asked teachers about their use of display and referential questions. The teachers were aware that referential questions were generally not as frequently used as display questions (the data above from Teacher 2 in particular support this) and they again explained this with reference to their learners' low levels of English. The teachers were, however, aware of the value of referential questions in relating classroom work to learners' own lives and in motivating the learners.

### **5.3 Strategies for Effective Questioning**

#### **5.3.1 *Distributing and Directing***

The observations indicated that while Teacher 1 generally involved about 30% of the learners in question-answer sessions, for Teacher 2 the figure was closer to 15%. In terms of directing questions, both teachers used a combination of nominated questions (questions directed at individuals) and questions directed at the whole class and which required a choral response. There was not much evidence of teachers directing questions at specific individuals to involve them, although in one lesson by Teacher 2 there was one instance where a question seemed to be directed at a shy learner in order to encourage him to participate.

When asked about the strategy that they usually use when they direct questions, the four teachers agreed that they usually ask the question, wait until the learners bid to answer, and then they nominate a learner. One of the teachers, however, claimed that he sometimes directs some questions to particular learners in order to check their understanding or to check if they are following him. The teachers also said that they sometimes elicit answers chorally to encourage shy or weaker learners to participate.

#### **5.3.2 *Pausing***

The observations indicated that both teachers allowed their learners time to think before giving an answer. One limitation of the analysis, though, was that I did not precisely quantify the amount of wait-time provided. In the interviews, the teachers were generally positive about the need to pause after asking questions and about the beneficial effect this could have on the learners. One teacher, for example, commented on how a pause gave learners time to recall the language needed to answer.

#### **5.3.3 *Prompting***

There were many occasions in the lessons observed lessons where the learners were unable to answer teachers' questions. When this occurred, the

teachers normally modified these questions to increase the opportunities for the learners to respond effectively. In discussing their views about this issue in the interviews, the teachers suggested that when learners did not respond to questions it was often either because the question has been difficult or because the learners had not heard it well. Therefore, the teachers reported that in such situations they either repeated the question in a louder voice, or changed the form of the question, adding perhaps some cue words which helped the learners think about the answer.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 Purposes of Teachers' Questions**

The teachers in this study used questions primarily to check learners' comprehension and to activate the learners' schematic knowledge. Little evidence of teachers using questions to promote thinking and evaluation skills was found. An important factor in this trend, according to the teachers, was the English syllabus used in General Education Schools. My experience with this syllabus would support such an argument. The activities it provides for learners do not promote the use of a wide range of questioning strategies and teachers are encouraged to focus on checking comprehension. This is not to suggest that the syllabus makes it impossible for teachers to ask questions for a wider range of purposes. However, teachers may need support in understanding how this can be achieved.

### **6.2 Types of Questions**

This study found that referential questions were less frequently used than display questions, even though in the interviews the teachers said they recognised the value of such questions. There may be many reasons for this, such as the manner in which the teachers have been trained and the kind of role this encouraged them to adopt – that of checking learners' knowledge, as opposed to encouraging learners to speak freely and to contribute their own ideas to the lesson. The syllabus once again seems to be an influential factor here.

The teachers also preferred to ask closed questions rather than open questions. The interview responses suggest that the teachers' beliefs about language learning are an important factor here. These teachers believe that accuracy is much more important than fluency in speaking, and they claim that open questions can lead learners to make more grammatical mistakes. There were in fact several places in the lessons observed where the teachers did not accept answers where the meaning was clear but where the grammar was not accurate.

### 6.3 Strategies for Effective Questioning:

Although there was some evidence here of the strategies for effective questioning introduced earlier, it seems that teachers feel that their large class sizes mean they often resort to eliciting answers chorally in order to involve all the learners in their lessons. Gap-filling questions are also commonly used to help learners to answer appropriately. Such strategy can have drawbacks if it is used too much. According to Tsui (1995) using gap-filling questions in the language classroom is a two-edged sword, because while it helps the learners to get to the appropriate answer, it can restrict their language production.

### 6.4 Limitations

In interpreting the findings of this study, we need to remember that only a small number of teachers were involved, that a limited number of lessons were observed, and that all teachers and learners were males from the same school. Clearly, a more extensive analysis of actual lessons and interviews with a wider range of teachers are needed for more general conclusions about teachers' questions in elementary English classrooms in Oman to be made.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Effective questioning is undoubtedly an important tool in teachers' work. This study has highlighted some issues which teachers may want to explore in the context of their own classrooms, thus enabling them to better understand their own use of questions, the reasons for their choices, and the impact of these choices on the learners. Although the role of the syllabus emerged here as a powerful factor in the choices teachers made in asking questions, it is important for us to seek ways of, within the framework of the syllabus we follow, using questions in a greater variety of ways and for a wider range of purposes. Doing so can only be good for our learners' experience of English.

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