

6 A Comparison of Teachers' Questions in Grade 2 and Grade 5 Classrooms

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1 INTRODUCTION

English language teaching in Oman is currently moving from a General Education curriculum to a new Basic Education curriculum. The two curricula differ in many ways, most obviously in the use of different coursebooks, but another big difference is that in Basic Education English starts at the age of 6, while in General Education English starts at age 10. In this study I will focus on comparing classroom interaction in English lessons from both curricula. In particular, the focus will be on the teachers' use of questions.

2 BACKGROUND

My experience as a teacher of English has been in General Education. However, this is now being phased out. The new curriculum aims to provide a more modern approach to foreign language learning and I was curious as to whether the patterns of classroom interaction in classes following the new curriculum would be similar or different to those in the older curriculum. The literature on classroom discourse suggested that teachers' questions are an important feature of such interaction and that is why I decided to focus on them here. The comparison will be between Grade 5 General Education and Grade 2 Basic Education.

3 TEACHERS' QUESTIONS

Much has been written about the purposes and types of teachers' questions, about effective questioning strategies, and about the effect of questions on learners (e.g. Wragg & Brown 2001; Kerry 1982). Here I focus on types and purposes.

3.1 Types of Questions

3.1.1 *Display and Referential Questions*

In display questions, the teacher asks the questions and knows the answer, for example, 'What is the capital of Oman?' The purpose of the question is to check what learners know. With referential questions, the teacher asks the question and does not know the answer, for example, 'What sport do you like?' As Brown and Wragg (1993) indicate, referential questions are the kinds of questions we generally ask in real-life. Brock (1986), cited in

Farr (2002), found that learners' answers to referential questions were longer than those to display questions.

3.1.2 Wh- Questions and Yes/No Questions

Wh-questions (e.g. What's the opposite of happy? Where did you go yesterday?) and Yes/No questions (e.g. Do you like bananas?) are a common feature of classroom discourse. Farr (2002) points out that wh- questions and Yes/No questions are used by teachers to motivate learners to participate in the classroom as these types of question are often easy for learners to answer.

3.1.3 Open and Closed Questions

Open questions allow for a range of possible answers. In contrast, closed questions have one particular answer which is often short (Ellis, 1994). For example, 'How do you spend your spare time?' is an open question while 'What is the second day of the weekend?' is closed.

3.2 Reasons for Teachers' Questions

According to Peacock (1990) and Brown, and Wragg (1993), questions in the classroom are different from questions in the real world. Teachers generally ask questions not to obtain new information but to test learners' knowledge. Teachers also ask questions to develop learners' thinking, to improve their understanding and to help them learn from each other's answers (Kerry, 1998; Morgan and Saxton, 1991). Ellis (1994) and Tsui (1995) also state that teachers ask questions to control learners' behaviour. Language teachers also ask questions to get learners to practise the language.

4 METHOD

4.1 Research Questions

This study aimed to answer these questions:

1. What types of questions do teachers of English ask in Grade 5 General Education and Grade 2 Basic Education classrooms in Oman?
2. What reasons do teachers have for asking these questions?

4.2 Participants

Four female teachers, two from Grade 5 and two from Grade 2, participated in this study. In General Education Grade 5, the learners were 10-11 years old, all girls, and there were about 40 in each class. These learners were in their second year of learning English. In Basic Education Grade 2, which was also the learners' second year of English, the learners were 7-8 years old, boys and girls, and there were around 30 in each class. The teachers had 9-12 years' experience.

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through audio recordings and interviews. Four forty-minute lessons, one for each teacher, were audio recorded and transcribed. Audio recording allowed me to produce a detailed record of the teachers' discourse and to analyse the kinds of questions the teachers asked. I also conducted one structured interview lasting about thirty minutes with each teacher in order to discuss their reasons for asking questions in the classroom. Bell (1999:137) suggests that "if you are a first time interviewer, you may find it easier to use a structured format". This was why I chose a structured format in this study.

5 FINDINGS

5.1 Types of Questions

Table 1 summarises the types of questions asked in the four lessons studied. Overall, the number of questions asked in Grade 2 (83) and in Grade 5 (87) was very similar.

Table 1: Types of questions asked by teachers in four lessons

Question Type	Basic Education Grade 2		Total	General Education Grade 5		Total
	Lesson A	Lesson B		Lesson A	Lesson B	
Display	34	24	58	18	28	46
Referential	15	8	23	31	10	41
Open	8	17	25	8	9	17
Closed	39	19	58	36	34	70
Wh	39	33	72	32	24	56
Yes/No	7	0	7	11	5	16
Number of different questions	48	35	83	48	39	87

5.1.1 Display and Referential Questions

Overall, there were 104 display questions compared to 64 referential questions. In Grade 5 the difference in frequency between the two types was small but in Grade 2 there were more than twice as many display questions as referential questions. This is interesting given that the new Basic Education curriculum used in Grade 2 aims to promote more authentic communication in the classroom. I also found that in all four lessons display questions tended to occur at the start of the lesson while referential questions occurred in the middle and at the end. Here, for example, is an extract from the start of Lesson A in Grade 2:

T: Good morning Grade 2.

Ss: Good morning, teacher
 T: How are you?
 Ss: Fine, thank you. How are you?
 T: Fine, thank you. Sit down. Stand up. Touch your head. Touch your shoulders. Touch your body. Who can tell me? What is it? (pointing to elbow).
 Ss: An elbow. (chorus)
 T: What is it?
 Ss: An elbow.
 T: What is it? (pointing to arm)
 S1: An arm.
 T: Yes, an arm.
 T: What is it?
 Ss: An arm. (chorus)

The teacher's questions throughout here are display and this was typical of the way the lessons in this study started.

This example of referential questions comes from the end of the same lesson:

T: Ok. Muhana. Do you have brothers?
 S: Yes
 T: Who is the tallest one?
 S: Raja.
 T: Raja is taller than Muhana.
 T: Do you have brothers?
 S: Yes.
 T: Who is the shortest one?
 S: Mohammed.
 T: Muntadhar, can you tell me who is the tallest one in your family?

Although the teacher did have a language point in mind here (comparatives), the questions asked are ones which elicit information the teacher does not know.

5.1.2 Open and Closed Questions

Table 1 shows that overall there were over three times as many closed questions in the lessons studied as there were open questions. In Grade 2 closed questions made up 70% of the total number of different questions asked, while in Grade 5 the corresponding figure was just over 80%. These figures indicate that all four teachers predominantly asked questions which required a limited range of brief answers. This was the case even for many of the referential questions; that is, although the teacher was requesting real information and learners could choose how to respond, the length and range of their possible responses was often limited by the question.

5.1.3 'Wh' Questions and Yes/No Questions

Wh- and Yes/No questions were commonly used in both Grades, although the former were more common in both cases. In fact, wh- questions were the most common of all the types of questions analysed here. Generally,

too, such questions were closed and display, as the examples in the first extract presented earlier show (e.g. What is it?) .

5.2 Purposes of Questions

In the interviews I asked teachers about why they asked certain kinds of questions. One common point which they highlighted was that they ask questions to check learners' comprehension. This function of questions is commonly mentioned in the literature on classroom discourse (e.g. Kerry 1982). There were many examples of questions being used for this purpose in the transcripts. For example:

T: What is this?

Ss: Ears

T: Ok . Saleema. Do you have small ears or big ears?

S: Small ears

T: Ok. Very good.

Here the teacher asked the learner about the size of her ears to check whether she understood the meaning of 'ears'.

Another common reason mentioned by the teachers for asking questions is to find out what learners already know. Questions asked for this reason normally occurred at the start of a new topic or lesson. The Basic Education teachers also agreed that they ask questions to attract learners' attention. The General Education teachers did not mention this purpose.

In discussing her use of questions, one teacher explained that "other than display and referential questions I ask remedial questions, technical questions, quiz questions, simple one word questions, and objective type questions in the class ". These question types could probably be described under the more traditional categories used in Table 1 but they do suggest that the way teachers think about their questions may not always fit into those categories. Another teacher explained that her choice of questions depended on the ability of the learners, and that she asked more challenging open questions to the better learners and less demanding questions to those who were less able. She felt that choosing the right questions for different learners was an important way of motivating them.

6 DISCUSSION

The lessons analysed highlight many similarities in the types and frequency of questions asked by teachers in Basic Education Grade 2 and General Education Grade 5. Overall, the numbers of questions asked in each case were comparable, although there was a higher proportion of display questions and wh- questions in Grade 2. The first of these findings is particularly interesting given that the literature on classroom discourse argues, as discussed earlier, that increasing the use of referential questions in the language classroom can help learners participate more and contribute to the development of their oral skills. Given that the Basic Education curriculum used in Grade 2 is being introduced to replace that used in

General Education Grade 5, one would expect the new curriculum to promote more communicative use of classroom language, including a wider use of referential questions. This small study cannot claim that the new curriculum is not achieving this aim, but the findings here suggest that more research into this issue would be interesting.

Another finding here was that in all lessons display questions were used towards the beginning and referential questions later on. Again, this is interesting as one might expect that when a new topic or lesson is being introduced, teachers might want to connect it to learners' own experiences by asking questions which elicit personal information. Such questions would generally be referential. In trying to interpret this finding, we must remember that in both curricula teachers are provided and expected to follow the teacher's book in which detailed notes for conducting lessons is provided. The use of display questions at the start of the lesson may be caused by the suggestions the teachers' books contain. Also, given that referential questions may be harder for learners to answer, teachers may choose to start the lesson with display questions so that learners can participate confidently straight away.

In terms of teachers' purposes in asking questions, the reasons they gave in the interviews reflected a narrow range of the possible uses of questions given in the literature and which I discussed earlier. The two most common reasons teachers mentioned were checking comprehension and checking prior knowledge. These findings suggest that teachers could benefit from a greater awareness of the full range of purposes which questions can be used for, such as promoting thinking and developing skills for evaluation and analysis. Of course, the answers teachers gave during the interviews were influenced by the questions I asked, and the limited range of answers I received may have been caused by the structured format I adopted.

7 CONCLUSION

This study suggests several further areas of study. In particular, an interesting issue which emerged here is about the ways in which the new curriculum for English in Oman is changing the kinds of classroom discourse which occurs in classrooms. The old and new curricula are different in terms of their goals and materials. Teachers who taught the old curriculum for many years and who are now being moved on to teach the new curriculum will also need to change the way in which they interact with learners. In training teachers to teach the new curriculum, a focus on the kinds of questions they ask would seem to be an important issue to focus on.

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