

5 Teachers' Questions in the Basic Education Classroom

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1 INTRODUCTION

During lessons teachers talk for many different reasons; explaining, controlling, modelling, solving problems, asking questions and giving feedback. The focus of this study is teachers' questions. There is ample evidence (see Brown & Wragg 1993) that these play a central role in classroom interaction and that they also have an impact on the kinds of contributions to lessons which learners can make.

2 BACKGROUND

Reading about classroom discourse (e.g. Tsui 1995) made me aware that in my own classes, and in those of my colleagues, teachers spend much time asking questions. I felt, then, that a greater awareness of the kinds of questions we ask would be useful for my own professional development as well as for that of the colleagues who participated in the study. This was the primary motivation for this study.

3 TEACHERS' QUESTIONS

3.1 Functions of Questions

Brown & Wragg (1993: 4) list several functions of questions, such as "to arouse interest and curiosity concerning a topic, to focus attention on a particular issue or concept, to develop an active approach to learning, to stimulate pupils to ask questions of themselves and others." However, with reference to language teaching, Nunan & Lamb (1996) state that teachers ask questions mainly to check learners' understanding, to elicit information and to control their classrooms. Peacock (1990: 128) says that "more often than not teachers appear to ask questions either to find out what pupils do or do not know and understand, or to remind them about work completed in a previous lesson, or perhaps to challenge, stimulate and develop their thinking". Morgan and Saxton (1991, cited in Brualdi 1998) add that teachers ask questions for several reasons. They ask questions to keep their learners involved during lessons, to express their ideas and thoughts, to enable learners to hear different explanations of the material, and to help teachers to evaluate their learners' learning and revise their lessons when necessary.

3.2 Types of Questions

Questions can be classified into many types, but in this study the focus will be on the following four: display, referential, open and closed. I describe each of these below.

3.2.1 Display Questions

Ellis (1994: 700) defines the display question as “one designed to test whether the addressee has knowledge of a particular fact or can use a particular linguistic item correctly”. Lightbown & Spada (1999) note that teachers ask display questions not because they are interested in the answer, but because they want to get their learners to display their knowledge of the language.

3.2.2 Referential Questions

Nunan & Lamb (1996: 88) define referential questions as “those to which the asker does not know the answer”. Ellis (1994: 721) also explains that these are questions which are “genuinely information-seeking”. Lynch (1996) argues that teachers should ask referential questions because (a) learners tend to give longer answers than they do to display questions and (b) learners will be less willing to answer questions if their purpose is always to test knowledge.

3.2.3 Open & Closed Questions

Nunan & Lamb (1996: 84) describe open questions as “those that encourage extended student responses”. Ellis (1994: 695) suggests that in open questions the teacher does not have a particular answer in mind and different responses are possible. He also mentions that some questions seem to be open, but in fact they are closed (these can be called ‘pseudo-questions’). In contrast, a closed question is “one that is framed with only one acceptable answer in mind” (Ellis 1994: 695).

4 METHOD

4.1 Research Questions

The study aimed to address these questions:

1. What are the functions of the questions asked by Grade 4 teachers of English?
2. What types of questions do these teachers ask?
3. How long are the learners’ responses to different types of questions?

4.2 Participants

Four Grade 4 classes in Basic Education schools were involved in the study. There were around 30 mixed ability learners in each class, boys and girls, and it was their second year of learning English. The teachers were all female, with 6-12 years of experience.

4.3 Data Collection

The teachers' questions in four lessons, one for each class, were studied. Following the advice of Hopkins (1985), the lessons were audio recorded and relevant parts of them transcribed for closer analysis. In addition, I made field notes during the lessons; these were open-ended descriptions and comments about what was happening in the classroom (e.g. about the materials used) which also allowed me to record information which would not be captured on tape.

5 FINDINGS

5.1 Functions of Questions

Table 1 summarises the functions of the teachers' questions in the four lessons observed. This shows that by far the most common function of questions was checking or testing learners' knowledge (accounting for almost 40% of the total). Asking questions to get learners to practise language and to encourage learners to participate were also quite common. Questions asked with the purpose of showing interest in what the learners had to say were very rare.

Table 1: Functions of teachers' questions

Functions of asking questions	A	B	C	D	Total
Practice parts of language	7	15	17	8	47
Elicit personal ideas	2	1	8	-	11
Asking for clarification	1	5	1	-	7
Encourage learners' participation	9	13	17	3	42
Show interest	1	1	-	2	4
Check or test learners' knowledge	21	21	29	9	80
Get learners think	1	2	8	1	12
Total	42	58	80	23	203

5.2 Types of Questions

Table 2 summarises the types of questions asked in each lesson in terms of the distinctions between display and referential and open and closed explained earlier. These figures make it clear that almost 80% of the questions

asked were closed display ones. That is, teachers asked questions to which they knew the answer and to which there was either one or a limited range of acceptable answers. Referential questions were rare. The closed referential questions noted here were ones where the teachers asked the learners if they had finished doing the activity or not. Real information was being requested, but the range of possible answers was limited to 'yes' or 'no'.

Table 2: Types of teachers' questions

Teacher	Closed Display	Open Display	Closed Referential	Open Referential	Total
A	33	8	-	1	42
B	48	8	-	2	58
C	61	15	3	1	80
D	20	-	3	-	23
Total	162	31	6	4	203

5.3 Learners' Responses

Table 3 presents the length of learners' responses, in words, to the different types of questions the teachers asked. Of course, the fact that the total number of words in responses to closed display is much greater than for other question types is not surprising given that almost 80% of the questions were of this type. In terms of the average length of learners' responses, though, open display questions received the longest answers and closed referential questions received the shortest answers. In all cases, though, it must be noted that the average length in words of learners' responses (i.e. the total number of words divided by the total number of each type of questions) was very low.

Table 3: Length of learners' responses

Types of Questions	A	B	C	D	Total Words (by question)	Average Length of Response
Closed/display	50	125	124	43	342	2.11
Open/display	9	30	33	-	72	2.32
Closed/referential	-	-	5	2	7	1.17
Open/referential	-	7	2	-	9	2.25
Total words in responses (by teacher)	59	162	164	45	430	2.12

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Functions of Questions

It is perhaps not surprising to find that in this study teachers, both individually and overall, asked questions mainly to check learners'

knowledge. This reflects the findings from studies of classroom interaction around the world. Questioning is a key tool that teachers use in evaluating learning and this was shown very clearly in the lessons studied here. More qualitative analysis involving, for example, interviews with teachers, is required to shed light on the reasons for the choices teachers make, but my experience of the curriculum we work with suggests that this is a relevant factor here. Other factors may be the learners' level of English (these learners were only in their second year) as well as teachers' previous experience of teaching English; they had all worked for a number of years with an earlier curriculum which had only been replaced by the new one in Basic Education in the last few years. The older curriculum placed great emphasis on questioning to check knowledge and even though they have moved to the new curriculum, teachers may sometimes teach the same way they did in the past.

6.2 Types of Questions

Again, it is not very surprising to find that display questions were the most common (over 95% of the total questions asked). There is a connection between the purpose of questions and the type and so if teachers' main purpose is to check knowledge it may follow that display questions are the easiest way to do so. Checking understanding was particularly common, with teachers regularly asking questions which required 'Yes it is' or 'No it isn't' answers. Nunan & Lamb (1996: 92) explain that the "choice of question should depend on the objective of the lesson, the task within the lesson (...), the size of the class and the particular pedagogical imperative driving the management of the learning process at that particular time". A further way of extending the analysis of teachers' questions then would be to compare the objectives teachers are trying to achieve and the kinds of questions they use.

6.3 Learners' Responses

The average length of learners' responses to the questions asked in the four lessons studied was 2.12 words. This is very short and indicates very clearly the impact which the kinds of questions teachers ask have on the contributions learners can make to the lesson. Brock (1986) found that responses to referential questions were longer than those for display questions. The limited number of referential questions in this study does not allow any conclusions of this kind, though the data analysed suggest that open display questions were the ones which generated the longest responses. Length is not the only issue to consider though. An analysis of the content of these responses would suggest that learners were largely repeating language presented by the teacher or the materials. An interesting question, then, is whether shorter responses where the learners use their own language are more beneficial than longer ones which involved repetition.

6.4 Limitations

This analysis was based on one lesson from four teachers, and we cannot generalise the findings to these teachers' work more generally or to other Grade 4 classrooms. A further point to make is that the analysis of the functions of teachers' questions was based on my own judgements of what teachers were trying to do. Talking to teachers about their purposes would have allowed me to compare my opinions with theirs, and I would suggest that in further work of this kind, in addition to analysing types of questions, that the reasons for the choices teachers make also be studied.

7 CONCLUSION

This study has made me more aware of the types of questions Grade 4 teachers use and of the effect these can have on the kinds of responses learners give. I hope that these findings will make readers interested in studying what happens in their own classrooms as it is clear from the literature on classroom discourse, as well as from this small study, that teachers' questions play a central role in classroom interaction. They also influence what learners are able to say and how much they can talk. Teachers' questions are therefore an important factor in foreign language learning.

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