TEACHER QUESTIONS IN LINGUISTICALLY CONSTRAINED SITUATIONS: LESSONS FROM TWO PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN RURAL TANZANIA

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Abstract

This article investigates the functions of teacher questions in Standard I lessons in two primary schools in Songea Rural District, Tanzania. The data was collected through observation, using a camcorder. In the communities where the schools are located Kiswahili is a second language, and the community uses mainly Kingoni which is an ethnic community language. Using the Initiation-Response-Feedback framework of analysis, it has been possible to provide an account of what teacher questions as a teaching strategy achieve, and why sometimes teachers necessarily have to use them. The article is critical of national language policies that provide statements with generalised assumptions, which often fail to address local linguistic realities. The Tanzania's national policy on the medium of instruction in public primary schools designates Kiswahili an exclusive role of the medium of instruction, ignoring the fact that Kiswahili is a second language to many people and particularly in remote rural areas of Tanzania. The main finding is that most of the teacher questions in linguistically constrained situation are meant to cover-up silence which is otherwise undesirable in talk. In such situations the immediate pedagogical and practical constraints force teachers to opt for strategies that will conceal silence in the classrooms.

1.0 Introduction

This article reports about teacher questions from three lessons which were observed in two primary schools in Songea Rural District in Central-Southern Tanzania. In these settings teacher-pupil interaction is done in Kiswahili which unfortunately is not the pupils' home language. The study involved Grade I pupils at the age of seven years.

In the research settings, children join school with hardly any knowledge of Kiswahili, and the situation in the classroom is such that the teacher talks most of the time. It is worthy noting that in Tanzania there are about 150 ethnic community languages (ECLs) used by the communities, although as a consequence of the national policy on the medium of instruction these ethnic community languages have been disregarded in favour of Kiswahili, which is the national *lingua franca* and one of the two official languages. In such a situation, it is most likely that communication difficulties in the classrooms will necessitate.

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Teacher questions are of interest in this study because, in some cases, teachers are made to ask questions which sometimes do not add much to the learning process but the situation in the classrooms makes this necessary. The article reveals the contradictions between government policy pronouncements and the actual situation in the classroom, in places where ECLs have been overlooked by the policies.

The foundational years in school are also of special interest because a number of things happen at this age, including learning literacy skills, interacting with teachers who are new to them, and now in a language which they do not understand well.

While there are many studies on classroom processes in Tanzania, little has been investigated about teacher questions in the classroom, and particularly in places where the use of ECLs is at stake. The only study that has addressed teacher feedback using the IRF model is that by Cullen (2002).

2.0 Teacher questioning strategy and the medium of instruction

Teacher questions are a common aspect of teacher talk in the classroom, their types and reasons for their choice; thus, their functions are not always tied up to the realisation of the teacher's specific lesson objectives. Discursively, this has implications in terms of social practices used in knowledge creation and sharing, and the whole assumption about the source of knowledge and who owns it. This is particularly what this study set out to unravel.

There are different ways of grouping teacher questions. For example, Barnes (1969, 1970) cited in Ellis (1994) identified four types of questions: factual questions e.g. *What?* and *When?*; reasoning questions, e.g. *How?* and *Why?*; open questions not requiring any format-specific answer, and social questions used for controlling and appealing to students.

Another way of grouping teacher questions is what is called epistemic (Ellis, 1994:588). Under this type there are four sub-categories of questions: (a) referential, such as: *Why didn't you do your homework?*; (b) display such as: *What is the opposite of 'up' in English?*; (c) expressive such as: *It's interesting the different pronunciations we have now, isn't it?*; and (d) rhetorical such as: *Why did I do that? Because ...*

For the purposes of this study, both Long and Sato's (1983) and some of Barnes' (1976) classifications have been used because they are comprehensive enough to address most of the questions used in the data for this study.

According to Ellis (1994:700) display questions are those that test whether the addressee has knowledge of a particular fact or can use a particular linguistic item correctly. The current study used the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model which had initially been described by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) to account for turn-taking in classroom interaction. Since then it has been used to account for turn-taking processes and functions in the classroom. In a lot of cases, questions follow this pattern.

There are arguments both for and against the use of the IRF pattern, as the norm applied by teachers in transacting their lessons in the classroom and its suitability in providing learning opportunities to pupils (Seedhouse, 1996). Nonetheless, scholars like Sinclair and Brazil (1982:490) and Seedhouse (1996:20) point to the fact that the IRF pattern is inevitable and is now accepted as the classic and acceptable model.

In the extract taken from School A (which will be provided later) the focus of the lesson was the general concept of 'the environment'. Teacher A2 wants pupils to explain the function of a toilet. For some reason pupils provide a response which the teacher did not expect, which makes the feedback turn yet another question.

My reason for doing question analysis is based on the realism that teacher questions are sometimes taken for granted, and yet they constitute an important kind of classroom discourse. One explanation would be the assumption that the questions are unproblematic. The occurrence of teacher questions is backed by some social realities and is also a form of social representation. These include the fact that, in a way, teachers have to abide by the medium of instruction (MoI) policies – as to what language should be used, dictates of school inspectors, and so forth.

Several scholars have shown that teacher questions in the classroom have been used to serve a number of different purposes. Wragg and Brown (2001:7) for example mention some of these functions as arousing interest and curiosity concerning a topic, focusing attention on a particular issue or concept, developing an active approach to learning, stimulating pupils to ask questions of themselves and others, and diagnosing specific difficulties inhibiting pupil learning.

The study is informed by the socio-cultural learning theory propounded by Vygotsky. The theory tells us that ideally learning is a social process in which knowledge is constructed through collaboration between pupils and teachers

and among pupils themselves. In addition, the home background feeds into the learning process and so teachers must respect and incorporate learners' background knowledge (Donato, 2004:285). As such, teacher questions should serve this function as well.

3.0 Why a study on teacher questions?

A study on teacher questions provides an understanding of the types and function of questions that teachers ask and how they facilitate or constrain pupil participation in knowledge creation and sharing. To get such insights, the research attempted to answer two important questions: (i) What kind of questions do teachers ask in the classroom?; and (ii) How do the questions provide or constrain opportunities for learning? To answer these questions, it would be helpful to look at the linguistic context and the MoI in Tanzania, and the situation in some of the schools studied. This is contained in the sections that follow.

3.1 Linguistic context and the MoI in Tanzania

Tanzania's linguistic context posits a three-layer scenario of languages in the following order of functional importance: English, Kiswahili and ECLs. These have variously been described using a modified model of diglosia (Ferguson, 1959) called triglosia (Abdulaziz-Mkilifi, 1972) and double-overlapping diglosia (Fassold, 1984).

In Tanzania, like in many other post colonial states, English is 'by default' accorded a high (H) status. Furthermore, Kiswahili which has received a lot of policy and institutional support is also relatively high in status (H2) compared to ECLs, but lower than that of English. At the very bottom of the ladder rest the ECLs which are accorded no official function in the policy (L). As such, English is used in secondary and tertiary education, the high court and the court of appeal, diplomacy and in the running of the government. Furthermore, Kiswahili is used in primary education, the primary court and in other functions of the government together with English. As for the ECLs, their utility is confined to the home and to the unofficial functions of the society, and more so in rural settings.

In line with this concern, the policy makes an overgeneralised statement about Kiswahili – that it is commonly understood in the country. This is what the policy says about the language (URT, 1995:39): "... Children at this level of education will continue to be taught in a language which is commonly used in Tanzania. Therefore, the medium of instruction in primary schools shall be Kiswahili, and English shall be a compulsory subject."

This statement contradicts research findings which have established that children in remote rural areas in Tanzania do not have enough mastery of Kiswahili in their early childhood to be able to follow instructions interactively (Mapunda, 2013; Wedin, 2004; Stegen, 2003).

3.2 Context of Kilagano Ward and the schools studied

The class in School A had 45 pupils while that in School B had 68 pupils. The schools are about 15 kilometres apart, but resemble in many respects. For example, the communities in both locales use the same ECL, and the teachers who teach the two classes (pseudo named here as Teachers A2 and B2) are both old males, with teaching experience of more than 30 years. In both villages, families engage in subsistence economy. As there is no electricity in the two villages, there is hardly any access to television, and only a few listen to the radio.[12] It also happens that most elderly people in the village spend their leisure time in pubs taking some locally brewed liquor, while busy speaking in their ECL. This situation makes the exposure of the villagers to Kiswahili very minimal; and for the young children, this exposure is even less.

4.0 Research design and methods

The study has used dual-site design, which is a kind of a multi-case study, with a view to increasing the number of cases (Stake, 2006:vi). The number of teachers observed is two, and their choice is based on the fact that these were the class teachers, and in fact the only teachers in the schools who teach in Standard I. The report in this study is about classroom data, not data collected outside the classroom. The data was collected through observation, using a camcorder. The analysis uses the IRF discourse analysis method. One reason for using discourse analysis is the fact that discourse analysis takes into account "the relative importance of text versus context" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002:19).

The schools here have been referred to by their pseudo names – Schools A and B – for the purpose of anonymity. Three subjects were involved (Maths, Kiswahili and Science), and 12 lessons were observed, but because of limited space the extracts used were taken only from Science lessons. One reason for choosing this subject is that the Science lessons observed demanded more talking than did Maths and Kiswahili.

The analysis was done by taking an extract from a fully-transcribed lesson and a few turns discussed with the view to finding out what questions were asked, and whether or not they provided learning opportunities to learners.

[12] In the country, most of the media houses use Kiswahili as the language of their operations.

On a different note, my own position as a researcher is that pupils should be taught in a language that they can understand. If pupils are allowed to participate, the teaching and learning process becomes more productive.

5.0 Findings and discussion

In this part, the findings from both School A and B are presented. The extracts were typical of many other lessons in beginner classes in these schools. In other words, such patterns were very common in the lessons observed.

IRF Sequence 1: What else should you do if your body is unclean? (Science)

Notes: B2 = The class teacher; P, P2, Px = unnamed pupil; **bold** = construction in the ECL; <u>underline</u> = unclear or unacceptable construction in Kiswahili; * = comment to follow.

Turn No.	Speaker	Transcription	Move	Function
2.	B2	(to P2) Wee, funika daftari. (to class) Ili mwili uwe safi unatakiwa ufanye nini? *You, close your exercise book. What are you supposed to do for the body to be clean,?*	I	Direct/Invite
3.	Px	[Uoge (not nominated) *You should take a bath.*	R	Provide information
4.	B2	[(to Px) Wee. (to P) P? [(to Px) *Stop.* (to P) P?	F	Disapprove/invite
5.	P	*(silence)*	R	*(no response)
6.	B2	Ee? *What?*	F	Re-invite
7.	P	Uoge na sabuni *You should take a bath with soap*	R	Provide information
8.	B2	Ee? *What?*	F	Request confirmation
9.	P	Uoge na sabuni *You should take a bath with soap*	R	Confirm information
10.	Px	Uoge tu. *You just take a bath*	R	Provide information
11.	B2	Uoge? *You take a bath?*	F	Accept/invite more
12.	P	Na sabuni *With soap*	R	More information

IRF Sequence 1 is from a Science lesson which was about personal hygiene; this lesson was a recap of a previous lesson. The teacher wants the pupils to explain what one should do to make their bodies clean. As for the type of questions, essentially these are display questions which require pupils to list

down processes and facilities. In addition, the teacher wants to make sure that the responses provided in terms of their form are in the language that the policy allows. Again, the questions do not provide learners with freedom to provide divergent responses.

Several short responses were provided in Kiswahili, but P produced hers a bit late when the Teacher B2 had already asked the next question which appears as turn 10. The response which P produces is in the ECL. In this sequence, several things are happening. When the teacher initiates the exchange, the response provided by P in the ECL is either silently rejected or doubted by the teacher.

IRF Sequence 2: 'Types of food' episode (Science)

Turn No.	Speaker	Transcription	Move	Function
51.	B2	Chakula gani mnachokula nyie? *What food do you eat?*	I	Teacher invites responses
52.	PP	Ugali *Stiff porridge*	R	Single-word responses
53.	B2	Chakula unachokula wewe? *The food which you eat?*	F	Teacher invites more responses
54.	PP	wali, maharage, …. (majani) *Rice, beans, ….. (greens)*	R	Single word responses
55.	B2	….. chakula unachokula wewe? *…,.. the food which you eat?*	F	Teacher invites more responses
56.	Px	….. wali, ugali (*so much noise*) *…. rice, stiff porridge*	R	Pupils repeat some of the responses already provided
57.	B2	Ee, ugali wa nini? *Yes, stiff porridge cooked from what?*	F	Teacher invites expanded responses
58	P	Wa mahindi*(of corn)*	R	One pupil expands on the previous response
59.	B2	Ugali wa mahindi *Corn stiff porridge*	F	Teacher joins the single word responses in a questioning intonation
60.	PP	wa muhogo *of cassava*	F	two word response

IRF Sequence 2 is taken from the main part of the same lesson as IRF Sequence 1. Here also a number of things can be observed. To begin with, Teacher B2 asks display questions, most of which are follow-up questions. A number of things can be observed here: the teacher keeps repeating the questions, which are mostly of the display type, and so forth.

Chin (2007:818) suggests that the teacher asks closed questions that require pre-determined short answers, and that is usually pitched at the recall or lower-order cognitive level. The teacher asks display questions which by default invite one- or two-word responses. In addition, the responses are those learned by rote, not by thinking. What can be said about this sequence is that the questions which the teacher is asking provide very minimal opportunity for learning. Furthermore, the minimal learning which may be realised, is not in line with the focus of the lesson which is to learn scientific knowledge about food and its nutritional value. What seems to be learnt in this sequence is vocabulary building rather than Science. The teacher is aware of the fact that pupils need more of language development in terms of form before they can be taught the nutritional value of food.

IRF Sequence 3: What is put in here (in the toilet)? (Science)

Turn	Speaker	Transcription	Move	Function
107	A2	Aaa kitu kitu gani nitajieni. Kitu gani kinachowekwa humu? *Oh, what is this thing? Mention it to me. What thing is put in here?*	I	solicit
108	PP	Mavi *Faeces*	R	(choral – obvious question)
109	A2	Nini? *What?*	F	Reinitiate/confirm
110	PP	Mavi *Faeces*	R	Repeat
111	A2	Eheee, maavi, sawa sawa. Kumbe mavi ni uchafu. sawa? *Yes, faeces. So faeces is refuse, isn't it? So faeces is refuse. Correct?*	F	Evaluate/Reinitiate
112	PP	Ndiyo *Yes*	R	(*choral response*).
113	A2	Mavi ni nini? *What is faeces?*	F	Accept/Prompt (obvious question)
114	PP	Uchafu. *Refuse*	R	Provide information (111)
115	A2	Sasa uchafu		

		huu unatakiwa tuuweke wapi? *So this refuse where are we supposed to put this refuse?*	F	Accept/re-initiate
116	PP	Chooni *In the toilet*	R	Single word response

In IRF Sequence 3 Teacher A2 from School A also asks display questions. This teacher is also aware that the pupils are unable to provide long descriptive responses, so he opts for questions which are likely to produce 'some kind of talk' regardless of its usefulness in providing room for learning. What the question aims at is that pupils should be *saying something* to conceal silence which is not always taken positively in a conversation. As such the teacher uses the strategy of *pumping* the pupils. Hogan and Pressley (1997) use this notion to refer to the teacher pumping the student for more information during the question and answer process and putting the onus on the student to provide more information.

IRF Sequence 4: ko ki extract (Kiswahili)

Turn	Speaker	Transcription	Move	Function
132	A2	Ke ukiunganisha na ki utasomaje? *If you join ke with ki how will you read it?*	I	Initiate
133	Px	Kiki	R	Repeat (*incorrectly*)
134	A2	Nimekuambia ke hii ukiunganisha na ki utasomaje? *I have told you this ke if you join it with ki how will you read it?*	F	Disapprove/Reinitiate
135	Px	ki	R	Repeat (*incorrectly*)
136	A2	Ee? *What?*	F	Disapprove/Reinitiate
137	Px	Ki	R	Repeat (*incorrectly*)
138	A2	We mtoto umekaaje? Nimekuambia ke hii hapa unganisha na ki utasomaje? *You child what are you like?*	F	Evaluate/prompt
139	Px	Kiko	R	Repeat (*incorrectly*)
140	A2	Ee? *What?*	F	Disapprove/Reinitiate
141	Px	Kiko	R	Provide information
142	A2	Kiko namna gani? Hapa ke hii hapa unga na hii hapa utasomaje? *How kiko? Here this ke join with this one*	F	Evaluate/prompt

		here, how will you read it?		
143	Px	Koki	R	Provide information
144	A2	Ke hii ukiunganisha na ki utasomaje? *If you join this ke with ki how will you read it?*	F	Disapprove/Reinitiate
145	Px	Keki (*correctly*)	R	Provide information
146	A2	Ndiyo keki. Tamka. *Yes keki.*		
147	PP	Keki		
148	A2	Tena *Again.*		

From the extracts provided above, one can say that Teachers A2 and B2 generally shifted their foci from their curriculum objectives to language learning and specifically to vocabulary and pronunciation drills. Another inherent phenomenon is the fact that their choice to ask display questions is necessitated by their pupils' inability to produce long and descriptive responses. This can also be considered a face-saving strategy. Thirdly, it can be said that the teachers paid more attention to the quantity rather than quality of talk. This also relates to the pupils inability to use the MoI. The findings therefore have enlightened us on the types and functions of questions asked by the teacher, but also on the opportunities that such questioning strategies offer in the classroom. These two aspects are expanded in the following sections.

5.1 Types and functions of questions

Overall, from the IRF question analysis, the following inferences can be made from the findings. Teachers ask display questions which are less involving as a safe-talk strategy and which are used as a face-saving strategy particularly in the presence of a visitor. The intention is to make pupils seem occupied and receptive. One of the ways in which this was apparent was through asking obvious questions (obvious from the immediate context or common knowledge, thus less involving). The teacher provides every word and lets pupils repeat the words (e.g. IRF Sequence 3, turns 111-116), where many *yes-no* questions are asked (e.g. 31 – 32). This he does by rephrasing his question as an attachment to a response provided by P2, who is one of the pupils who have a better mastery of Kiswahili in the class. This is usually done as a face-saving strategy.

Teachers A2 and B2 who were both trained and with long teaching experience (longer than 30 years) asked mostly display and a few closed questions. Display questions are those that test whether a pupil has knowledge of a particular fact (in other words, can remember). Their functions are to elicit

information which the teacher already knows. Examples of these are IRF Sequence 1 turns 4-11; IRF Sequence 2, turns 53-57 and so forth.

There are also many closed questions, requiring only one answer and these are found in the extracts used. A few examples of these include IRF Sequence 3, turns 107, 109, 112, and 113. The kind of training these teachers might have undergone is curious.

5.2 Opportunities for learning

In addition to the types of questions, another issue worth noting is the manipulation of the F move by the teacher. If the third move is carefully and intelligently utilised by the teacher it is likely to yield very good results, both in the conduct of the pedagogy and discursively. For example, if the teacher used the F move to prompt the pupils to provide their responses even in their first language (which both Teachers A2 and B2 understood perfectly well) they would be able to provide long and detailed responses, which would make the lessons more interesting and engaging. But discursively, freedom of expression of the pupils' minds is instrumental in the making of critical learners. This is also likely to adjust power relations in the classroom by making the learners' voice heard and valued.

The wait time was short. The time that Teacher B2 provided for Px to supply a response (IRF Sequence 1: Turns 4-6) was 2 seconds. Pupils Px was still thinking when Teacher B2 interrupted demanding a response. The follow-up move was used in unfortunate ways to re-initiate repetitive and very short responses (e.g. IRF Sequence 1, Turns 6-11 and IRF Sequence 6, turns 134-144).

The fact that the teacher had to ask too many questions to get the 'right' answer is indicative of a problem. For example in the IRF Sequence 6 the vowel combination seemed difficult for Pupil Px. One possible way out would be for the teacher to provide extra explanation, which he did not do. Instead he provided feedback responses which were attacks on the person of the pupil (e.g. IRF Sequence 6, turns 138, 142), which in turn is likely to cause loss of face.

6.0 Conclusion

From the data and the discussion, a number of things emerge. In the first place, the teachers use too many questions, as if this was the only method available to

them. This would only be useful if the questions were meant to provide opportunities to pupils to speak and achieve the teaching and learning objectives. This situation is what has been observed by other scholars, such as Heller and Martin-Jones (2001:3) who describe a gap-filling function of talk in the classrooms as 'safe talk', which is talk that allows participation without any risk of loss of face for the teacher and the learners, particularly in the presence of the researcher, as an outsider. Others who subscribe to this realism include Rubagumya (2003), Brock-Utne (2005) and Wedin (2004).

The questions which the teachers asked, most of which were display, showed that the teachers were more concerned with mastery of form than of content. This is apparent in, for example, Sequences 1 and 2 where the children keep repeating soap and types of food. This is a possible diversion of the objectives of the lessons.

While teacher questions can be a useful strategy, teachers need to reflect on the reasons for asking the questions in order to maximise their possible benefits. The overall aim should be to enable them achieve the objectives of the lesson at hand. It is important to ask ourselves whether *learning* is assessed by what the pupils 'know' or how they 'say it'.

From the data presented above, it is clear that Teachers A2 and B2 did not utilise questioning as a teaching strategy to the advantage of the pupils. As such we can say that most of the questions observed in these lessons were pedagogically not promising and discursively disempowering. Following these observations, the best thing to do would be to engender teacher-questions in teacher training either through in-service or mainstream training.

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