Enhancing Senior Secondary Schools Students' Speaking Skill in English as a Second Language Through Teachers' Verbal Questioning in Ado-Ekiti Local Government Area of Ekiti State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Questioning is an inseparable part of a classroom teaching/learning process that facilitate students' respone. This study, therefore, investigate students' speaking skills in English as a Second Language classroom through teachers' verbal questioning. Ninety students and ten English language teachers from five senior secondary schools in Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria are randomly selected as participants. Classroom observation and questionnaire schedule are used for data collection and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Fisher's Exact Test and regression analysis are adopted for the test of hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The result shows that teachers' questioning significantly facilitates students' speaking skill in English as Second Language. It also reveals that the most used type of question among others is close/display questions which do not really facilitate much students' classroom responses. The study, therefore, recommends that teachers should be aware of the importance of questioning as a fundamental skill for effective teaching and facilitating students speaking skill. Teachers should be trained on using all types of questions where the focus would be on leading students to higher-level thinking in order to promote active interactions during classroom participation.

Keywords: Questioning, speaking skill, students' response

INTRODUCTION

Spoken language is the most essential form of language as well as the basic skill of communication. Language development, which is essential to all learning, begins with hearing. Language learners mostly learn by hearing and responding to sounds made

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around them through speaking. Akmajian, Farmer, Bickmore, Demers and Harnish (2017) review the early stages in language development such as babbling, the one-word stage and multiword stages. All these stages have been identified to involve verbal production of language. It then indicates the fact that language skills are better learned if speaking is a major component of the learning process.

According to Fisher, Frey and Rothenberg (2008), in the early history of education, talking by students in the course of classroom lessons was not common. It was the norm that teachers would do all the talking while students would be quiet (listen) throughout the instructional time. Students were expected to take all instructions given to them by their teachers, complete their assigned tasks, memorize facts and be able to recite them. Overtime, educators realized that students had to use language if they were to become better educated citizens. Therefore, students were made to respond to questions through which teachers would access their knowledge. Thus, the interaction pattern was predominantly a teacher-centred question-answer-feedback or the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) pattern. This is one of the areas in classroom discourse that has been investigated for decades. According to Mercer and Dawes (2014), Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) cycle which was recommended by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) was commonly applied in teacher-fronted classroom interactions. This explains what is obtained in traditional classroom.

Nevertheless, it is still the scenario today, that students often speak much less in the classroom than the teacher. According to the researcher's observation, though educators are trying to encourage classroom interaction, students' participation is still very poor in some classes. This may be due to a number of reasons such as the fact that teachers are always expected to initiate talk and also to do most of the talk in the whole-class activities. In this case, teachers tend to dominate the interaction and speak most of the time because they believe that close and constant control over the classroom interaction is a prerequisite for achieving their instructional goals (Collins, Harkin, and Nind, 2010). It could also be due to the kind of teachers' questions, the purpose of the questions and the level of motivation students receive from teachers to respond to the questions. Most often, it has to do with students' low proficiency in English, feeling nervous or being afraid to make mistakes when speaking English. In a study conducted by Jibowo (2010), it was observed that learners of English as a second language in Nigeria tend to manifest fear and anxiety in language classes and as a result of this exhibit communication apprehension. In a learning environment, one of the roles of the teacher is to stimulate thoughts and inspire responses from students and thus, encourage more talk from them. This can be achieved through questioning. Adedoyin (2010)

states that teacher's questions have significant advantages for many instructional purposes such as obtaining students' reflection and challenging deeper students' understanding and involvement in the classroom. If the teacher ask questions more frequently than any other activities in teaching and learning process, students are given better opportunity to respond and participate. Thus, the function of teacher's questions to facilitate effective classroom interaction cannot be overstressed.

Teacher's Questioning

The teacher's questioning serves the purposes such as letting students present their ideas, testing their understanding knowledge and skills, engaging them actively in learning by participation, stimulating their thinking and getting them to evaluate and practice previous learnt materials. Croom and Stair (2005) state that teacher questions are best used as diagnostic tools to help evaluate students' academic progress or to assess students' critical thinking. To uphold this view, Vogler (2005) states that classroom questions can monitor comprehension, help make connections to prior learning and stimulate cognitive growth of the students.

That which defines questioning lies in the relevance of questions and the purpose they serve in the interaction. In other words, the types of question teachers ask usually determine the kind of interaction that will be obtained. A number of earlier studies such as Shomoossi (2004); Fakeye (2007) and Lee and Kinzie (2012) on classroom interactions have identified a range of question types, such as closed and open-ended questions, display and referential questions and yes/no questions. Lee and Kinzie (2012) claim that various classroom situations usually determine the kind of questions teachers ask. Open questions can have more than one acceptable answer while closed questions can accept only one answer (Yang, 2010).

Display questions refer to questions for which the teacher knows the answer and thus, can be answered correctly or incorrectly. They are such questions to which students give one word answers or yes or no answers. They demand single or short responses of the low-level thinking kind. Display questions are asked to confirm students' comprehension or make clarification requests which help teachers to evaluate their students in the course of the lesson. According to Tuan and Nhu (2010), they generate interactions that are typical of didactic discourse. They have been found to limit interaction. Referential questions, by contrast, require more thought and produce longer responses for which the teacher, in most cases, does not know the answer in advance. They are usually more effective in initiating interaction with the purpose for

communication rather than testing the students' knowledge (Liu and Le, 2012; Brown and Lee, 2015; Derakhshan, Zeinali and Sharbati, 2015).

Students' Response

Classroom interaction is usually controlled by the teacher who is the dominant figure in the classroom. As reviewed by Mercer and Dawes (2014), exchanges in classroom consist of three moves (initiation moves, response moves and follow-up moves). To give room for effective exchanges in the classroom, students must be engaged in the response move which is the answering move. Thus, with this kind of pattern, students' role is limited to providing answers and receiving instructions. Chin (2006) suggests that the quantity of opportunities for students to interact in classroom is crucial in learning language. In the work of Hattie (2012) on classroom interaction, it is evident that student response takes less significant proportion out of total classroom interaction. However, student response has been described as an effective tool by which teachers can gain insight into students' thinking processes and power of communication (Hamiloglu, 2012).

In many English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, speaking skill is greatly neglected despite its importance to teaching and learning. Teachers rarely give students more than a second to respond to their questions once posed and this does not give room for the students to formulate much of a verbal response. The fact that our classrooms are mostly teacher-centred has limited students' oral output and participation. One of the challenges faced by some secondary students learning English as a second language is expressing themselves correctly and fluently in English. Learners are sometimes reluctant to participate in classroom due to factors like anxiety and low proficiency in English. In a language learning environment, the best way to learn is to use the language so that the learner would be able to add to their knowledge in structure, the real communication. The fact remains that communication is the main target of a language. This study therefore, aims at exploring the types of teachers' verbal questions and how effective they are to facilitate students' response in the classroom. Hence, the following hypotheses were postulated based on the problem identified by the study.

$H_0$1.   There is no significant relationship between teachers' questioning and students' response in classroom.

$H_0$2.   There is no significant relationship between the types of questions teachers ask and the quantity of students' response in classroom.

METHOD

This study is a descriptive survey. The design is ideal for this study because the study was conducted in a setting that requires direct responses from the respondents while investigating existing phenomenon without manipulating the variables. The design also allows the participants to describe and provide their opinions regarding the variables being studied in details.

The target population of this study comprised all the English language teachers and students in Ado-Ekiti Local Government Area of Ekiti State, Nigeria. A total of one hundred (100) randomly selected respondents were raised for the study. The selected respondents consisted of ninety (90) students and ten (10) English language teachers from five (5) senior secondary schools in Ado-Ekiti Local Government Area of Ekiti State, Nigeria.

The instruments for data collection were self-structured closed-ended questionnaire and classroom observation schedule. The study used classroom observation protocol to explore the actual status of questioning patterns and processes happening in the classroom. The questionnaire designed for the study was made up of two sections - A and B. Section A was used to seek information on the demographic data of the respondents. Section B was used to seek information on the research variables and it was of four (4) Likert Scale format. The face and content validities of the instruments were carried out through the experts in Language Education and experts in Test and Measurement Departments of the faculty of Education, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria. To ensure the reliability of the instruments, it was administered on twenty (20) students and teachers that were purposively selected from two (2) secondary schools that were not part of the study sample. Alpha-Cronbach reliability estimate was used to analyze their responses and a reliability coefficient of 0.71 was obtained. Hence, the instrument was adjudged to be reliable. Data collected were analyzed using the descriptive and inferential statistics while the Fisher's Exact Test was used to test the two hypotheses formulated for the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of analysis from combined responses of both teachers and students on how teachers' questioning facilitates students' talk was revealed in Table 1. The grand mean response value (3.31) which was greater than 2.50 indicated that many of the respondents agreed that teachers' questions helped to grab learners' attention and responses in the classroom (3.52), teachers' questions helped to identify those learners

who were attentive and could understand the lesson through their accurate responses (3.19), teachers believed that questions determine whether the learners could follow and understand the lesson (3.20), questioning enable teachers to measure how much successful the teaching was (3.32) and teachers questioning influence classroom interaction (3.33). These findings align with the idea of Croom and Stair (2005) which states that teacher questions are best used as diagnostic tools to help evaluate students' academic progress or to assess students' critical thinking. This was equally validated by Vogler (2005) who opines that classroom questions can guide comprehension, help make connections to prior learning and stimulate cognitive growth of the students.

The result of analysis presented in Table 2 reveals the different types of questions teachers ask in classroom. The grand mean value (3.41) in the table is greater than 2.50 indicating that many of the respondents agreed with the entire items listed in the table as the different types of questions teachers ask in classroom. It therefore means that teachers agreed that open/referential question (3.30), close/display question (3.26), and Yes/No questions (3.67) are the different types of questions teachers ask in classroom. According to Farahian and Rezaee (2012), teachers questions have been categorized into open and closed questions, display and referential questions and yes/no questions. Hussin (2006) supports the notion that students' utterances and extent of classroom participation are very much independent on the teacher's types of questions and questioning techniques.

From the bar chart in figure 1, it was observed that open/referential type of question promote and generate greater amount of students' response as indicated by 24% of the students that it gives room for students to give two and more words response in the classroom while close/display question (14%) and Yes/No question (6%) have least responses. However, 94% indicated that Yes/No question type gives room for one word response, close/display question (86%) and open/referential (76%). The implication of this is that among the three types of questions identified, open/referential questions promote and generate greater amount of students' response in the classroom. Open/referential questions are more effective in generating students' oral production than the other types of questions such as yes/no and close/display questions. Referential questions enable students to engage in critical thinking, produce their own ideas and also help them to internalize language better (Naz, Khan W., Khan Q., Daraz and Mujtaba, 2013).

The result of analysis presented in Table 3 reveals that the P-value (0.000) was less than 0.05 level of significance. This means that there is significant relationship between teachers' questioning and students' response. The results reveal that most

preferred types of questions are yes/no and display questions both of which require short answers. These types of questions do not challenge students enough to think at higher levels of their cognitive capacity rather lead them to quick and cognitively limited responses. The finding is in line with Hussin (2006) who is of the opinion that students' utterances and extent of classroom participation are very much dependent on the teachers' questioning technique. The content of the questions and the manner in which teachers ask them determines whether or not they are effective in promoting students learning and talks (Fakeye and Ayede, 2013).

The result of analysis presented in Table 4 reveals that the P-value (0.000) was less than 0.05 level of significance. This indicates the types of questions teachers ask will significantly determine the quantity of students' response. Boyd (2015) has raised the awareness of how different forms of teacher questions can influence the amount of students' response in the classroom and also demonstrate their linguistic and cognitive capacity. According to Boyd (2015), yes/no and display types of questions do not challenge students enough to think at higher levels of their cognitive capacity, rather, they lead students to quick and cognitively limited responses. However, a number of studies have found a positive impact of teachers' open/referential questions on students' achievement in language use (e.g. Chin, 2006; Lee and Kinzie, 2012; Fakeye and Ayede, 2013).

The analysis of teachers' perceptions on questioning skills indicated that many of the respondents were of the opinion that teachers' questions helped to grab learners' attention and responses in the classroom and equally helped teachers to properly evaluate the outcome of his/her teaching. The teachers' questioning skills also increase students' participation, focus attention on particular issue or concept, structure a task for maximizing learning and get feedback on the effectiveness of a lesson and management of classroom. This corroborates the findings of Adedoyin (2010) who posits that teachers' questions have significant advantages for many instructional purposes such as obtaining students' reflection and challenging deeper students' understanding and participation in the classroom.

Furthermore, in analyzing the different types of questions teachers often employ in classroom descriptively, the analysis indicated that teachers agreed that open/ referential questions, close/display questions and yes/no questions are the different types of questions they ask in classroom. According to Farahian and Rezaee (2012), teachers questions have been classified into open and closed questions, display and referential questions and yes/no questions. Lee and Kinzie (2012) claim that the types of questions teachers employ in classroom interaction are usually determined by the

purpose they serve, the kind of feedback or interaction the teachers want to obtain, teachers' and students' intellectual levels, as well as the classroom situation.

The inferential analysis of the data obtained indicated that significant relationship exists between teachers' question and students' response. The findings are in line with the findings of some studies like Hussin (2006); Dalton-Puffer (2007) and Adedoyin (2010) that teachers' questioning is of great significance to creating effective classroom interaction. These studies affirm that more interactions are promoted between teachers and students when teachers give instructions that include posing questions than when they use instructions without questions. The present study indicates that verbal questioning is a teaching method that allows students to be adequately involved in classroom discussion. Teachers' questioning is used to increase students' engagement, to focus attention on a particular issue or concept, to structure a task for maximizing learning, to know about students' prior and current knowledge, to assess the understanding of the students' about any assigned tasks, to get feedback on the effectiveness of a lesson and in managing a classroom, and/or to check and control students' behaviour (Richard and Lockhart, 2000; Croom and Stair, 2005; Vogler, 2005).

Furthermore, it was revealed in this study that the types of questions teachers ask will significantly determine the quantity of students' response in the classroom. This finding is in line with Croom and Stair (2005) who posit that teachers' questions are best used as determinant tools to evaluate students' academic progress and assess students' critical thinking. In addition, the argument put forward by Hussin (2006) supports the notion that students' utterances and extent of classroom participation are very much dependent on the teachers' questioning technique.

It was further revealed that more than 60% of teachers involved in the study believed that open/referential questions are more effective in generating students' oral production than the other types of questions such as yes/no and close/display questions. Referential questions enable students to engage in critical thinking, produce their own ideas and also help them to internalize language better. However, the teachers who participated in this study note as it was also revealed through the classroom observation by the researcher that no matter the types of questions the teachers used, the students' responses were generally in single words or simple phrases. Some of the students did not even make any attempt to speak at all perhaps because they were not proficient in the second language or they had communication apprehension. Therefore, teachers prefer to ask more of closed/display questions in order to get more but short responses from most if not all of their students in order to get feedback from the students as to whether they understood what they had been taught and also to encourage them to participate.

Table 1: Teachers' perceptions on the effects of classroom questioning skills

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Teachers' questions help to grab learners' attention and responses in the classroom	52 (52%)	48 (48%)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.52	Agreed
Teachers' questions help to identify those learners who are attentive and also understand the lesson through their accurate responses	33 (33%)	53 (53%)	0 (0)	14 (14%)	3.19	Agreed
Teachers believe that questions determine whether the learners could follow and understand the lesson	26 (26%)	68 (68%)	0 (0)	6 (6%)	3.20	Agreed
Questioning enable teachers to measure how much successful the teaching is	46 (6%)	40 (40%)	0 (0)	14 (14%)	3.32	Agreed
Teachers questioning influence classroom interaction	53 (53%)	34 (34%)	6 (6%)	7 (7%)	3.33	Agreed
Grand Mean					3.31	Agreed

Mean greater than or equal to 2.50 'Agreed' otherwise 'Disagreed'

Table 2: Different types of questions teachers ask in classroom

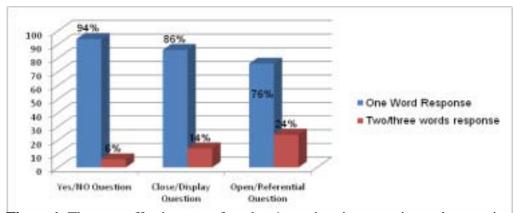| Types of Questions	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Open/Referential Questions	39 (39%)	61 (61%)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.30	Agreed
Close/Display questions	33 (33%)	60 (60%)	0 (0)	7 (7%)	3.26	Agreed
Yes/No questions	67 (67%)	33 (33%)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.67	Agreed
Grand Mean					3.41	Agreed

Mean greater than 2.50 'Agreed' otherwise 'Disagreed'

Figure 1: The most effective type of teachers' questions in promoting and generating a greater amount of students' response

Table 3: Statistical test for relationship between teachers' questioning and students' response in the classroom

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Table	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	110.392a	1	.000		
Continuity Correction	110.226	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	119.295	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				3.84	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	113.608	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	100				

Table 4: Statistical Test for types of questions teachers ask in promoting or generating students' response

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Table	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	170.135	1	.000		
Continuity Correctionb	182.952	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	123.747	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				3.84	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	190.763	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	360				

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study focused on teachers' questioning behaviour and how effective teachers' questions are to promote adequate students responses in ESL classrooms. Through the classroom observation for this study, it was established that closed/display and yes/no questions were more asked by the teachers than open/referential questions. It was also found out that the responses of the students to all kinds of questions used by the teachers were generally made up of one words, two words or simple phrases. Even though most of the teachers involved in this study believed that the most effective type of questioning in ELS classroom to promote and generate greater amount of students' response is open/referential questions, they preferred to ask more display questions in order to ensure that most of the students participated.

Making students speak more in the classroom is not a matter of forcing them to speak. This demands good preparation on the part of the teachers. There is the need for the availability of proper materials; and equally, implementation must be progressive and systematic. Thus, this study recommends the following:

1. Teachers should be aware of the importance of questioning as a fundamental skill for effective teaching as well as a means of facilitating effective students response.

2. Teachers should be trained on using all types of questions where the focus would be on leading students to higher-level thinking in order to promote active interaction and talks during classroom participation.

3. Teachers' questions should not just be an elicitation device; rather, teachers' questions should take on the dynamic discourse devices through which students can be actively engaged to produce language that will result in the second language learning and proficiency.

4. Teacher talking time should be reduced to give room for more students talking time in the classroom.

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