

Enhancing Quality in Language Teaching and Learning by proving the Quality of Teacher Questions

Berhanu Matthewos, PhD, Associate Prof. of English Language and Literature
Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University
E-mail - <mailto:brthsnum@ils.aau.edu.et>
berhanum@ils.aau.edu.et

Abstract

Questioning has a central place in verbal interaction in the classroom. It is a complex process involving the cognitive level of the question, questioning strategies, student responses, and the way teachers react to student responses. However, discussions of instructional concerns by educational planners, curriculum designers, and teachers in higher education in Ethiopia too often focus on classroom management, class size, etc., but seem to show relatively little concern about using questions to improve the quality of education.

Furthermore, a survey of the state of classroom questioning in Ethiopian higher education seems to show that there are two major problems. First, an investigation of pre-service English programs for prospective teachers shows that the training does not include courses or sufficient components on techniques of classroom questioning. Secondly, there is a serious dearth of research or theoretical literature on classroom questioning in the institutions that would help instructors to improve their questioning strategies. The situation seems to be similar in the Ethiopian higher education system in general.

The aim of this paper is to look into the state of teacher questioning in the English language classroom in Ethiopian higher education institutions with particular reference to St. Mary's University College and Addis Ababa University. The paper is, by and large, analytic and descriptive. Theory is drawn from literature on classroom questioning. Data has been gathered through a questionnaire survey conducted with English language instructors at St. Mary's University College and Addis Ababa University. Additional data has been gathered through a survey of pre-service English curricula for prospective

English teachers.

An instructor evaluation questionnaire was used in these and other higher education institutions. Instructor evaluation questionnaire, filled out by students, was used to find out whether teacher questioning in the classroom has been given any place in the evaluation of instructors' classroom practice.

This study can throw some light on the subject of teacher questioning in the instructional process. This can help curriculum designers and teachers to consider classroom questions in the process of designing syllabi and other teaching guides. The study might also make instructors aware of research on questioning and to incorporate the findings into their practice.

Methodology

Since curriculum development has been a hotly debated and discussed academic issue It was, expected that there would be substantial literature, and so attempts will be made to make an appropriate review of the related literature, particularly of those that have taken place locally. Attempts will also be made to elicit the stakeholders opinion through a questionnaire about the state of affairs related to the suggested interfacing of the quadruple R's. Hence, the research will adopt qualitative and quantitative research approaches.

Hypothetical Outcome

Higher education is being imparted at a premium, which demands all possible care to make it cost-effective and fruitful. Understandable, curriculum development in higher education not only enlivens but also strengthens and makes effective and fruitful the learning and teaching process. Hence the researcher hopes that the proposed schematic interfacing of the quadruple R's will create a conducive atmosphere for realizing sustained and meaningful curriculum development.

1. Background and Introduction

Questioning has a central place in verbal interaction in the classroom. Studies have also shown that teacher questioning is one of the factors that affects the quality of classroom interaction and the effectiveness of instruction. However, discussions of instructional concerns by educational planners, curriculum designers and teachers often focus on classroom management, class size, etc but seem to show relatively little concern about using questions to improve the quality of education. Furthermore, a survey of the state of classroom questioning in the Ethiopian higher education shows that there are two major problems. Firstly, an investigation of pre-service English programs for prospective teachers shows that the training does not include courses on techniques of classroom questioning. Secondly, there is very little empirical research or theoretical literature on classroom questioning in the institutions under this study that would help teachers to improve their questioning strategies. The situation seems to be similar in the Ethiopian higher education system in general.

The aim of this paper is to look into the state of teacher questioning in the English language classroom in the Ethiopian higher education institutions with particular reference to St. Mary's University College and Addis Ababa University. In brief, the study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is teacher questioning?
2. What is the state of teacher questioning in the English language classroom in higher education?
3. Can skill in questioning enhance the quality of language teaching and learning?

The paper is analytic and descriptive. Theory is drawn from the literature on questioning. Data have been gathered through a questionnaire survey conducted among English language teachers at St. Mary's University College and Addis Ababa University.

Additional information has been gathered through a survey of pre-service English curriculum for prospective teachers and teacher evaluation questionnaire (instruments) used at Teacher evaluation questionnaire have been used to find out whether teacher questioning has been given any place in the evaluation of teachers' classroom practice.

1.1. Limitations

Questioning is a very broad subject that can not be exhausted within the bounds of a conference paper like this one. Hence, the scope of this paper is limited to a discussion of the state of teacher questioning in the higher education classroom and its role in enhancing quality in language teaching and learning. This study is also limited to the investigation of the teacher questioning in the English language classroom in Addis Ababa University and St. Mary's University College.

1.2. Significance

This study can throw some light on the subject of teacher questioning that can help curriculum designers and teachers to show enough concern about classroom questions in the process of designing syllabi and other teacher guides. The study might also make teachers cognizant of research on questioning and to incorporate the findings into their practice. It can also contribute to research on questioning in the Ethiopian setting. It is also hoped that this study initiates other researchers to conduct research on the various aspects of questioning.

2. Review of Related Literature

The aim of this section is to review works related to the subject of classroom questioning so as to give the paper a theoretical background which can serve as a basis for the discussion and interpretation of the data in the subsequent section.

2.1. The Concept of Questioning

According to Bellon et al (1992: 309): "Questioning is a complex process consisting of the cognitive level of the question, questioning strategies, student responses, and the way teachers react to student responses.

" When teachers use questioning effectively, all these factors function in concept. Wilen (1986: 5) defines a question as "any sentence having either an interrogative form or function.

" This definition sets off questions from commands or nonverbal gestures that may serve classroom management functions. Kisko's (1982: 2) conception of the term question is similar to that of Wilen: Kisko writes: "Questions are statements for which a reply is expected."

Questions are related to the content students are expected to learn. They focus students attention on information to be learned and on teachers' expectations about what students are to do and how they are to do it.

According to Fisher et al (1984) approximately one third of classroom interactive instruction consists of teacher questions.

For Ornstein (1988: 13): "A good question is one that serves to prove the instructional objectives, makes the lesson thought provoking and enhances students comments and discussions."

There are also some published materials available on the subject of classroom questioning. In his book The Art of Questioning in the Classroom Austin (1979) observes that the skill of questioning has a central place in the teaching learning process. He writes, "The success and efficiency of our teaching depends more on the skill and judgment with which we put questions than on any other single circumstance" (Ibid: p. 23).

Beach and Marshall (1991) have also given some important observations on the subject of questioning. They underline the importance of well-conceived patterns of questions in order to enhance student reflection and discussion in the classroom. Davies and Stratton (1984) also stress the importance of a well-structured questioning in the language teaching and learning process. According to Davies and Stratton, classroom questions that are not clearly framed or are asked in a haphazard manner only confuse students. They contend that questions as learning activities should be organized in such a way as to facilitate continuous and communicative learning which builds upon one another.

Bellon et al (1992) have also given some insightful ideas on classroom questioning. They have identified four main purposes of teacher questioning in the classroom. These are instructing, encouraging student participation, managing the classroom, and assessing learning. (p. 311). Studies (Orstein, 1988) have also revealed several factors that influence the quality of classroom interaction and the effectiveness of instruction. These factors include the way the question is phrased, the type of questions asked, the order or sequence of inquiries, and the choice of respondents.

2.2. Review of Studies in the Ethiopian Context

The aim of this section is to establish intertextuality between previous works on the subject and the present paper.

Research on the subject of questioning is quite limited in our context. One study related to the subject of the present paper is Zerihun Mekonnen's M.A. dissertation (1985) entitled "The Nature and Kinds of Questions Teachers and Students Ask in the English Classroom in the Secondary School." As reflected in the title, this paper deals both with teacher questioning and student questioning. The findings showed that 78.43% of the questions teachers ask are fact questions that can be classified under the domain of cognitive questions. The study also revealed that most of the questions teachers ask are ambiguous, vaguely worded and repetitive. The study also showed that 49.67% of the teachers' questions were answered by volunteers.

Another study on the subject of classroom questioning is Seime Kebede's PhD thesis (1999). In this work Seime explored the relationship between up take and classroom questioning behavior in a biology classroom. The focus of Seime's paper however, is on student questioning rather than teacher questioning in a science classroom.

Alemayehu Jote's (2004) M.A. dissertation entitled. "Teachers' Questioning Behavior in EFL Classrooms" is also related to the concern of the present paper. Alemayehu investigated the frequency and types of questions teachers ask in grade 9 English classroom in four secondary schools in Bale Zone. This study revealed that 75% of teacher questions are confirmation or fact questions.

The paper also showed that 94.44% of the questions were answered by volunteers. According to this study, 40.74% of the questions were haphazardly presented showing no clear purpose and full of errors.

This review has shown that, no studies have been made on the state of teacher questioning in the higher education classroom in our context. In the light of this review, the subsequent section will discuss the state of teacher questioning in the English language classroom in higher education institutions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results of Survey of Teacher Evaluation Instruments

A survey of teacher evaluation instruments has also been used as a source of additional data for this study. The intention was to find out whether teacher questioning was given any place in the classroom performance evaluation of teachers. To this end, the instructor evaluation questionnaire of St. Mary's University College and Addis Ababa University were examined.

The questionnaire used at St. Mary's University College has 21 items. This questionnaire has included items on examination questioning and student questioning.

This shows that some consideration has been given to the importance of questioning. It should, however, be revealed here that no consideration has been given to teachers classroom questioning in these instructor performance questionnaire.

The instructor performance evaluation questionnaire used at Addis Ababa University has 30 items. Like the questionnaire used at St. Mary's University College, this questionnaire included items on examination questioning (See item 18) and student questioning (see item 8). This shows that the instructor evaluation questionnaire used at AAU has given some consideration to the value of questioning. The investigation revealed, however, that no consideration has been given to teacher classroom questioning in these evaluation instruments.

3.2. Results of Survey of Pre-Service English Syllabi for Prospective Teachers

A survey of pre-service English syllabi for prospective teachers has also been used as source of additional data for the study. The intention was to find out whether the training of pre-service English teachers includes the art of classroom questioning. To this end, the three year BA program in English education used at Addis Ababa University and St. Mary's University College were reviewed. It should be noted here that pre-service teacher education across the country are using similar or the sample syllabi handed down to them by the Ministry of Education.

An investigation of the course descriptions of the courses offered to prospective teachers showed that in most courses teacher classroom questioning has been overlooked. For instance, in the syllabus used at AAU it is only the course description for spoken English II (FLEE 202), see p. 49, that gives some attention to the development of the skill of classroom questioning in the trainee teachers. Similarly, in the syllabus used at St. Mary's University College it is only the course description or content for the course Classroom Language (Eng. 203), see p. 69, that gives due attention to the development of the skill of classroom questioning, in the trainee teachers. On the whole, the pre-service English program for trainee teachers has not given due importance to the art of teacher questioning in the classroom.

3.3. Results and Discussion of Questionnaire Survey Conducted with English Language Teachers

In this section, the data obtained from a questionnaire survey conducted with English language teachers at St. Mary's University College and Addis Ababa University will be presented and discussed. The survey covered 6 out of a total of 8 regular instructors (75%) at St. Mary's University College and 17 out of a total of 38 regular instructors (45%) at AAU.

The following table presents the instructors' opinion on the role of teacher questions in the instructional process.

Table 1: What is your opinion on the role of teacher questions in the instructional process?

	St. Mary's University College		Addis Ababa University	
	Responses	%	Responses	%
Very central	2	33.3	10	58.8
Central	4	66.7	6	35.2
Quite central	-	-	1	5.8
Other	-	-	-	-

As can be seen from table 1, the majority of the respondents in the institutions, 100% at St. Mary's and 94% at AAU, regarded the role of teacher questions in the instructional process as very central and central.

The following table presents the instructors' rating of the relationship between teacher questioning and student learning.

Table 2: How do you rate the relationship between teacher questioning and student learning?

	St. Mary's University College		Addis Ababa University	
	Responses	%	Responses	%
Absolutely related	1	16.6	6	35.3
Very related	4	66.7	8	47.1
Quite related	1	16.6	2	11.8
Other	-	-	1	5.9

The results show that most of the respondents, 83.3% at St. Mary's and 82.4% at AAU, considered teacher questions and students learning as either absolutely related and very related.

Table 3 presents the instructors' responses to the question whether skill in classroom questioning can enhance quality in language teaching and learning.

Table 3: Can skill in classroom questioning enhance quality in language teaching and learning?

	St. Mary's University College		Addis Ababa University	
	Responses	%	Responses	%
Yes	6	100	17	100
No	-	-	-	-
Other	-	-	-	-

As can be seen from the table all the respondents (100%) in both the institutions held the view that skill in classroom questioning can enhance quality in language teaching and learning.

Table 4 presents the data on whether the instructors had taken any course or training on using classroom questions.

Table 4: Have you taken any course or training on classroom questioning?

	St. Mary's University College		Addis Ababa University	
	Responses	%	Responses	%
Yes	2	33.3	8	47.1
No	4	66.7	9	52.9

The results show that most of the instructors, 66.7% at St. Mary's and 52.9% at AAU, had not taken any course or trainings on using classroom questions.

The following table presents the results of the survey on whether the instructors ask questions in their teaching process in the classroom.

Table 5: Do you ask questions in your teaching process in the classroom?

	St. Mary's University College		Addis Ababa University	
	Responses	%	Responses	%
Yes	6	100	17	100
No	-	-	-	-

As can be seen from table 5, all the respondents (100%) in both the institutions revealed that they use questioning in their teaching process.

The survey also attempted to elicit the views of the instructors on how often they ask questions in the teaching learning process.

Table 6: How often do you ask questions in the teaching process?

	St. Mary's University College		Addis Ababa University	
	Responses	%	Responses	%
Frequently	5	83.3	13	76.5
Occasionally	1	16.7	4	23.5
Rarely	-	-	-	-

Other	-	-	-	-
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The results in table 6 show that the majority of the instructors, 83.3% at St. Mary's and 76.5% at AAU, ask questions frequently in the teaching process. According to the literature on classroom questioning this is a very healthy or commendable trend.

Table 7 presents the results of the survey on whether the instructors follow any sequence in organizing their classroom questions.

Table 7: Do you follow any sequence in organizing your classroom questions?

	St. Mary's University College		Addis Ababa University	
	Responses	%	Responses	%
Yes	6	100	13	76.5
No	-	-	4	23.5
Other	-	-	-	-

The results of the survey show that the majority of the respondents, 100% at St. Mary's and 76.5% at AAU, follow some sequence in organizing their classroom questions.

The survey also attempted to obtain data on whether the instructors covered by this study have developed informed questioning techniques or strategies for their English language classes.

Table 8: Have you developed questioning techniques for your classes?

	St. Mary's University College		Addis Ababa University	
	Responses	%	Responses	%
Yes	4	66.7	11	64.7
No	2	33.3	6	35.3

As can be seen from table 8 the majority of the respondents indicated that they have developed questioning techniques or strategies for their classes.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In this paper an attempt has been made to look into the state of teacher questioning in the English language classroom in the Ethiopian higher education institutions with particular reference to St. Mary's University College and Addis Ababa University. The basic assumption underpinning the discussion in this paper has been that asking and answering questions is at the heart of a problem solving approach to learning.

Theory has been drawn from the literature on classroom questioning. The study has been essentially analytic and descriptive. Data has been gathered through surveys made on teacher evaluation instruments used at the higher education institutions and pre-service English syllabi for prospective teachers. Additional data has also been gathered through a questionnaire survey conducted with English language instructors at the institutions under the study.

The results of the investigation made on teacher evaluation instruments revealed that no consideration has been given to teachers' classroom questioning in the instructor performance questionnaire.

The results of the study made on pre-service English program for trainee teachers also showed that sufficient emphasis has not been put on the development of the art of classroom questioning in the prospective teachers.

The questionnaire survey results have also made a number of reflections on the state of teacher questioning in the higher education institutions. It indicated that most teachers regard the place of classroom questioning as very central in the instructional process. The results also indicated the integral relationship between teacher questioning and students learning. It is also important to note that all the instructors believe that skill in classroom questioning can enhance quality in language teaching and learning. The survey also showed that instructors ask questions frequently and that they follow a sequence in

organizing their questions. The study also indicated that the majority of the instructors have developed techniques for classroom questioning.

On the basis of the findings of the study the following recommendations can be made. Since teacher questioning has a central place in verbal interaction in the classroom, it should be highlighted in teacher evaluation instruments used in higher education institutions. Moreover, because skill in classroom questioning can greatly affect the quality of English language teaching and learning, pre-serving English curriculum should give sufficient attention to the development of skills in classroom questioning for the trainee teachers.

In addition to this, theoretical support should be given to in-service teachers through acquisition of literature on questioning in order to help them update their skills.

On the whole, teachers should ask questions that stimulate thinking or motivate students to be more actively engaged in their own learning. It should be noted that although the focus in this paper has been on enhancing quality in language teaching and learning by improving the quality of teacher questions, the implications can be extended to enhancing quality in other subject areas.

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