

Using the right questions well: Towards a learner centered English language in Ghanaian senior high schools

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Abstract

The success or otherwise of teaching is contingent, to a very large extent, on the type of interaction between teachers and students. This interaction is facilitated by the use of the right questions and the right techniques of asking those questions. Communication in the English language classroom is usually initiated and sustained by the teacher's expertise in the use of different types of questions. This study investigated the types of questions teachers of English use in their lessons. It also moved further to look at some of the techniques teachers adopt with regard to wait time, redirection of questions and distribution of questions. It came to light that, while some teachers make good use of higher order questions, many of them still rely needlessly on lower order questions. Most teachers redirect students' questions and students' responses for other students to comment on. It was also realised that, even though most teachers allow adequate wait time before calling on students to respond to questions, some teachers do not. Teachers distribute their questions unequally as a large proportion of questions are directed to the brilliant students. The study will inform teachers of the importance of using the right questions in the teaching and learning of English in order to make the teaching of English learner centered. Finally, the research will serve as a springboard for other researchers. Any other researcher who will like to embark on a similar study in future can use this material as a source of reference.

Key words: Questions; wait time; English language education; questioning techniques

Introduction

Teacher student interaction through communication is a very important ingredient that is needed to achieve success in the classroom. The success of interaction depends on the teacher's ability not only to ask relevant questions but also to develop techniques that will help him or her get the best out of his questions. Redirecting questions and allowing learners to ask their own questions are irreplaceable practices that are needed in every lesson. According to Beamon (1997), questioning is an indispensable method that enhances the development of the thinking skills needed for learning, and as Barell (2008), puts it, if one wants his students' curiosity regarding the world to be significantly enhanced, he needs to create an environment that is conducive for the learners. At the Senior High School (SHS) level, the teacher of English language is expected to help his or her students develop language skills that commensurate with their maturity level. This can be achieved through the teacher's proper use of questioning skills. Teachers have

always relied on questions to keep their class interactive. Leven & Long (1981) asserted that, on average, teachers ask between 300-400 questions daily. The importance of questioning can never be over emphasised as most teachers rely solely on question and answer method to deliver their lessons. This was discovered by Jebiwot, Chebet, & Kipkemboi (2016), when in their study on the use of eclectic method of teaching English, found that a vast majority of teachers use question and answer method to teach their lessons. Zare-Behtash & Azarnia (2015) postulate that Teacher Talk Time should be drastically reduced while premium should be placed on Student Talk Time. This shift in the concept of teaching from being teacher centered to learner centered can only be achieved through the right use of the right questions

Statement of the Problem

A chunk of teachers' time is spent asking low-level cognitive questions Wilen (1991). These questions, instead of promoting critical thinking, emphasise the memorization of facts. Consequently, the student's thinking capacity and adequate comprehension of subject matter is in no small measure limited. Most stakeholders hold the view that teachers lack appropriate questioning skills and the ability to create a favourable learning environment that could promote thinking in the classroom. Bay (2015), asserted that teachers who have been educated on the skill of questioning improve significantly and adopt methods of asking questions that bring out the best in their students. According to Acheampong (2001), educational planners, especially in African countries, including Ghana, have not laid emphasis on how teacher training institutions go about the training of teacher trainees so as to equip them with the requisite skills that are needed to enhance critical thinking. It is vital to identify the categories of questions English Language teachers use during their lessons and how they go about the act of using questions with particular reference to the distribution of questions. It is therefore this lacuna in the research for knowledge in English language education that this study seeks to address.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions

1. What are the categories of questions English Language teachers in Cape Coast Senior High Schools use during their lessons?
2. What questioning techniques do English language teachers in Cape Coast Senior High Schools use during their lessons?

Review of Related Literature

This section presents a review of related literature that supports the current study.

Categories of Questions that Teachers Use

Bloom (1956), in his cognitive domain theory developed a taxonomy that classified the educational objectives into six (6) main domains : knowledge, which involves recall of specific facts and methods; comprehension, which refers to the ability to grab meaning of materials taught; application, which deals with the ability to use learned materials in new and concrete situation; analysis, which refers to the ability to break down materials to its component parts; synthesis, which refers to the ability to put parts together to form a new whole; and evaluation, which is the ability to judge the value of materials for a given purpose. This has over the years given a template for the classification of questions. Questions which fall within the first three objectives are referred to as lower order questions while the rest make up the higher order question. Wilen (1991), opined that questions can either be low or high order and can be convergent or divergent in their design. Cotton (1989), found out that, averagely, close to 60 percent of the questions teachers ask when delivering lessons are lower cognitive questions while

20 percent of the questions are higher cognitive question. To Cotton, it is better to use lower cognitive questions when the focus of the lesson is young students who are in the primary school. In such instances it is more beneficial to rely on lower cognitive questions to impart knowledge about facts which students need to commit to memory higher order questions. Bay (2015), found out that teacher candidates in Turkey predominantly ask knowledge level questions while US teacher candidates' questions are mainly at the comprehension level. A significant outcome of her research was that most of the teacher candidates relied on lower order questions.

Techniques of Asking Questions

Cotton (1989), states that redirecting questions is very important technique for situations when a teacher feels initial responses lack essential elements that will make the responses satisfactory and complete. Due to the practice of redirection, non-volunteers are given the opportunity to make contributions in the discussion. Tobin (1987), said that students' participation in a lesson increases when they are given the opportunity to comment on the responses of their colleagues. Rowe (1986), discovered that the wait time period that teachers offer during lessons are usually in excess of more than 1.5 seconds. She discovered, however, that when wait time lasted for a minimum of 3 seconds, the advantages are more than one can imagine. Rowe identified wait time one and wait time two. Wait time one refers to the pausing after asking the question before calling on the student to answer and wait time two refers to the pausing after the student has given the response. On the issue of the distribution of questions, Cuneo (2008), observed that teachers who were new to the profession tended to call on the same students often. They favoured students who raised their hands. Cuneo also observed that when questions are not evenly distributed, students who are extremely bright and verbal monopolized the teaching and learning process as if it were a one-on-one discussion with the teacher.

Methodology

This research used the descriptive survey method primarily to describe teachers' use of questioning in English language lessons in three selected Senior High Schools in Cape Coast. The population of the study comprised the English Language teachers and their students from three selected Senior High Schools in Cape Coast, namely Adisadel College, University Practice Senior High School and St Augustine's College, Cape Coast. Adisadel College has a student population of 1,740 and 13 teachers of English language. University Practice Senior High School has a total population of 1,200 students 9 teachers in the Department of English. St. Augustine's College has a total population of 1,679 students. There are 9 teachers of English language. In sum, the population was 4,650, which was made up of 4,619 students and 31 teachers of English Language. (Information from Assistant Headmasters in charge of Academics). For the purpose of this study, the unit of analysis was all teachers of English Language and their students in three Senior High Schools within the Cape Coast metropolis and the sample size was 28 teachers and 357 students. This sample size was arrived at using Krejcie & Morgan (1970) formula for determining sample size. The purposive sampling was used to select 10 teachers of English language from Adisadel College while all the teachers of English language in University Practice Senior High School and St. Augustine's College were used. The simple random sampling, specifically, the lottery approach, was used to select 119 students from each of the three schools. Questionnaires and observation guide were used for this study. The questionnaires, made up of open-ended and close-ended questions were in two sets. One set was administered solely to teachers while the other was specifically administered to the students. The questionnaire for the students had three sections; section A, section B, and section C. I obtained an introductory letter from the Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, University of Cape Coast. This letter helped me to seek permission from the headmasters of the Senior High Schools in which data was collected for the study. I further observed the selected teachers during the teaching and

learning process. The observation was done using the structured observation guide. The observation took place in the natural learning environment (classroom) and I did a non-participant observation. Also, questionnaires were designed and administered to the students. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 16.0) was used. The analysis on the data was presented using frequency and percentage tables.

Results and Discussions

The results and discussion were based on the research questions. In the discussion, reference would be made to some of the findings in the literature review.

Research Question 1: What are the categories of questions English language teachers use during their lessons?

This research question specifically sought to determine whether or not teachers rely on convergent questions which are lower order question or divergent questions which generate critical thinking in students. The findings have been organized in Tables 1, 2, and 3. While Table 1 captured teachers' views about the categories of questions they ask during lessons, Table 2 focused on students' views about the categories of questions teachers use during English language lessons. Table 3 dealt with the categories of questions observed during the study.

Table 1: Teachers' perception about the categories of questions they ask

| Variables | Strongly Agree | % | Agree | % | Disagree | % | Strongly Disagree | % |
|------------------------|----------------|------|-------|------|----------|------|-------------------|------|
| Factual questions | 02 | 07.1 | 15 | 53.6 | 08 | 28.6 | 03 | 10.7 |
| Divergent questions | 09 | 32.1 | 11 | 39.3 | 08 | 28.6 | 00 | 00.0 |
| Higher order questions | 15 | 53.6 | 9 | 32.1 | 03 | 10.7 | 01 | 03.6 |
| Probing questions | 14 | 50.0 | 10 | 35.7 | 02 | 07.1 | 02 | 07.1 |

Source: Author's own calculation

Table 1 shows teachers' perception about the categories of questions they use during English language lessons. From the analysis, it was evident that the teachers use all the categories of questions. On the use of factual questions, 2 teachers, representing 07.1% strongly agreed that most of the questions they ask are factual questions. Furthermore, 15 teachers, representing 53.6% attested to the fact that most of the questions they use during English lessons demand only one correct answer. Again, 8 teachers, representing 28.6% disagree and 3 teachers, representing 10.7% strongly disagree on the use of factual questions. Cotton (1989), opined that approximately 60% of the questions teachers ask during lessons are lower cognitive questions. The response of the teachers proves this assertion. On the divergent questions, 9 teachers, representing 32.1% strongly agreed on the use of it while 11, representing 39.3% agreed to mostly using divergent questions during their lessons. However, 8 teachers, representing 28.6%, disagreed on the use of divergent questions during their lessons. Higher order questions are questions which require students to think critically before responding to them. On the use of higher order questions, 15 teachers, representing 53.6% and 9 teachers, representing 32.1% strongly agreed and agreed respectively to using higher order questions which will require students to think critically. This is in line with Costa (2008), who suggested that teachers should place premium on higher order questions in order to increase students' participation in classroom interaction. On the use of probing questions, 24 of the teachers representing 85.7% agreed to using probes to help students correct their incomplete or wrong answers during

English language lessons. Again, 4 teachers, representing 14.3% however, disagreed on using probing questions during their lessons.

Table 2: Students' Response to the Categories of Questions Teachers ask

| Variables | Strongly Agree | % | Agree | % | Disagree | % | Strongly Disagree | % |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------|--------------|----------|-----------------|----------|--------------------------|----------|
| Factual questions. | 56 | 15.7 | 112 | 31.4 | 149 | 41.7 | 40 | 11.2 |
| Divergent questions. | 173 | 48.5 | 136 | 38.1 | 35 | 9.8 | 13 | 3.6 |
| Higher order questions. | 160 | 44.8 | 134 | 37.5 | 49 | 13.7 | 14 | 3.9 |
| Probing questions. | 165 | 46.2 | 132 | 37.0 | 39 | 10.9 | 21 | 5.9 |

Source: Author's own calculation

Table 2 shows the views of students about their teachers' use of questions during English language lessons. It was brought to light that 56 of the students, representing 15.7% strongly agreed to their teachers' use of factual questions while 112, representing 31.4% agreed to that their teachers mostly use factual questions. 149 and 40 students representing 41.7% and 11.2% respectively disagreed that their teachers' questions mostly demand one correct answer. 173 students, representing 48.5% strongly agreed that most of the questions their teachers ask require different correct answers from students. 136 students representing 38.1% of the students' population agreed that their teachers use divergent questions. On higher order questions, 160 students strongly agreed that most of the questions their teachers usually ask require students to think critically in order to answer the questions. 134 students also agreed on this. With regard to probing questions, 165 students, representing 46.2% of students used for the study strongly agreed that teachers always help them through probes to correct their wrong or incomplete answers. However, 39 students disagreed on this while 21 strongly disagreed. This situation calls for concern because students need to be guided by giving them clues as is suggested by Kerry (1992) when he gave 8 general questioning skills that should be used in teaching and training. Kerry suggested that teachers should use all responses (even wrong answers) in a positive way.

Table 3: Categories of Questions Observed

| Categories of Questions | No. of questions. | % |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| Factual questions | 147 | 42.2 |
| Divergent questions | 073 | 20.0 |
| Higher order questions | 062 | 17.8 |
| Probing questions | 066 | 19.0 |
| Total | 348 | 100 |

Source: Author's own calculation

Table 3 shows the categories of questions observed during the study. In all, the study observed 15 lessons made up of 35 minutes each. Of these 15 lessons observed, a total of 348 questions were used. This proves the assertion of Leven & Long (1981) that teachers use between 300 and 400 questions each day. Out of these, 147, representing 42.0% were factual questions 73 questions, representing 20.0% were divergent questions while 62 of the questions, representing 17.8% were higher order questions. For probing questions, a total of 66 questions, representing 19.0% were realized. This observation further proves the assertion of Cotton that teachers predominantly ask lower order questions. Wilen (1991), also posits that the vast majority of question asked by teachers require students to focus on memorization rather than questions which foster students understanding.

Research Question 2: What questioning techniques do English language teachers in Cape Coast Senior High Schools use during their lessons?

The purpose of this question was to determine the questioning techniques English language teachers use during their lessons. The techniques that were investigated were the redirection of questions, allowance of wait time and distribution of questions in the classroom during lessons.

Table 4: Students' Views about Teachers' Redirection of Questions

| Variables | Strongly Agree | % | Agree | % | Disagree | % | Strongly Disagree | % |
|--|----------------|------|-------|------|----------|------|-------------------|------|
| Redirection of students responses | 65 | 46.2 | 197 | 55.2 | 70 | 19.6 | 25 | 07.0 |
| Redirection of students questions to the class | 119 | 33.3 | 193 | 54.1 | 27 | 07.6 | 18 | 05.0 |

Source: Author's own calculation

Table 5: Teachers' Views on Redirection of Questions

| Variables | Strongly Agree | % | Agree | % | Disagree | % | Strongly Disagree | % |
|--|----------------|------|-------|------|----------|------|-------------------|------|
| Redirection of student responses | 11 | 39.3 | 17 | 60.7 | 00 | 00.0 | 00 | 00.0 |
| Redirection of students questions to the class | 12 | 42.9 | 16 | 57.1 | 00 | 00.0 | 00 | 00.0 |

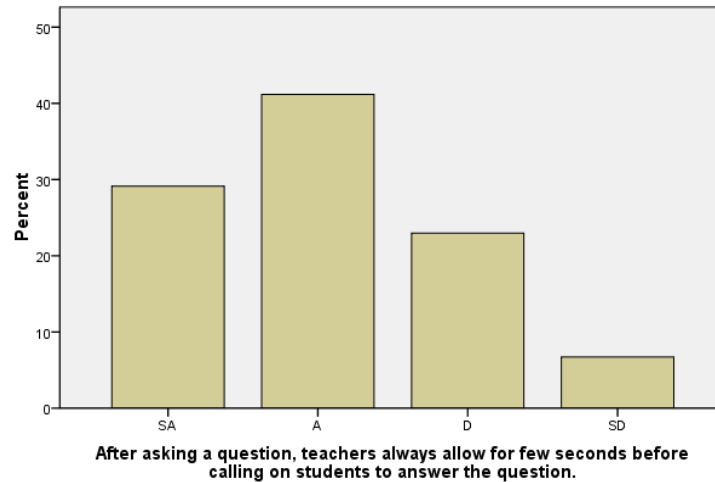
Source: Author's own calculation

From Table 4, it is evident that 65 students strongly agreed that their teachers usually redirect students' responses for other students to comment on while 197 agreed on the statement. However, 70 students disagreed while 25 students strongly disagreed on the statement. Also, 119 students strongly agreed that their teachers give them the opportunity to answer questions asked by other students while 193 students agreed that their teachers give them the opportunity to answer questions asked by their colleagues. This development is refreshing because it makes the class interactive and students are motivated throughout the lesson. This is in line with Tobin (1987), who posits that students' participation in a lesson increases when they are given the opportunity to comment on responses of their colleagues.

From Table 5, it was brought to the fore that all the teachers agreed that they redirect students' responses for other students to comment on. They further agreed that they give opportunity to students to answer questions asked by their colleagues. This attests to the fact that teachers use the pupil centered approach in teaching. This is good because Cotton claims that redirection improves the quality of students' responses. There was overwhelming evidence that in terms of classroom interaction, teachers redirect students' responses and students' questions for other students to comment on.

Allowance of Wait Time

After asking a question, teachers always allow for few seconds before calling on students to answer the question.



Source: Author's own calculation

Figure 1: Student Views on Teachers' Use of Wait Time

From Figure 1, it will be realized that 29.1% of the students strongly agreed that teachers allow a few seconds before calling on students to answer the questions, 41.2% agreed on this while 23.0% disagreed and 6.7% disagreed. To ascertain the actual number of seconds the teachers allow, I observed their lessons and recorded the seconds they allowed before calling on the students to answer questions. Table 6 shows the results of this observation.

Table 6: Wait Time Allowed by Teachers (Observed)

| Number Of Seconds Allowed | No. | % |
|---------------------------|------------|--------------|
| 1 Second | 15 | 04.3 |
| 2 Seconds | 53 | 15.2 |
| 3 Seconds | 71 | 20.4 |
| 4 Seconds | 72 | 20.6 |
| 5 Seconds | 82 | 23.5 |
| 6 Seconds | 22 | 06.3 |
| Above 6 Seconds | 34 | 09.7 |
| Total | 348 | 100.0 |

Source: Author's own calculation

From Table 6, out of the 348 questions asked, teachers allowed for a period of 1 to 3 seconds of wait time for 139 of the questions asked. For the rest of the questions asked, the teachers allowed for more than 3 seconds before calling on the students to respond. It is evident from Table 9 that instructional time was wasted on 139 questions. Rowe (1986) postulated that, when wait time increases, the length of students' responses increases between 300% to 700% and the incidence of speculative thinking increases. It can be said that, probably, the teachers who do not allow for adequate wait time are not aware of its immense benefits.

Distribution of questions during lessons

The facts in Table 7 and 8 detail how teachers distribute their questions during English language lessons

Table 7: Teachers' view on distribution of questions

| Variables | Strongly Agreed | % | Agreed | % | Disagreed | % | Strongly Disagreed | % |
|---|-----------------|------|--------|------|-----------|------|--------------------|------|
| Most questions to brilliant students. | 1 | 3.6 | 00 | 00.0 | 8 | 28.6 | 19 | 67.9 |
| Calling students' name before asking questions. | 3 | 10.7 | 7 | 25.0 | 5 | 17.9 | 13 | 46.4 |

Source: Author's own calculation

Table 8: Students' View on distribution of Questions

| Variables | Strongly Agreed | % | Agreed | % | Disagreed | % | Strongly Disagreed | % |
|---|-----------------|------|--------|------|-----------|------|--------------------|------|
| Most questions to brilliant students. | 57 | 16.0 | 50 | 14.0 | 147 | 41.2 | 103 | 28.9 |
| Calling students' name before asking questions. | 80 | 22.4 | 126 | 35.3 | 102 | 28.6 | 49 | 13.7 |

Source: Author's own calculation

During the observation, I realized that none of the teachers used mechanical systems such as alphabetical order, sex, row or columns to distribute questions. However, results from the questionnaire indicate that some teachers direct most of their questions to the brilliant students in the class. While table 10 indicates that only one teacher out of the 28 agreed to directing most of his questions to the brilliant students, table 11 shows that 107 students agreed to the fact that their teachers direct most of their questions to the brilliant students. Even though the percentage of those who agreed to this phenomenon is low, it still calls for concern as teachers are required to give equal attention to low achievers as well as the high achievers in the class. Cuneo (2008), observed that when questions are not evenly distributed, students who are extremely bright and verbal monopolize the teaching and learning process as if it were a one to one discussion with the teacher. During the study, it was also realized that teachers mostly called the names of their students before asking their questions. Table 10 shows that 35.7% of the teachers agreed to the fact that they call the names of their students before they pose their questions. The fact that more than one-third of the teachers said this proves Acheampong(2001),

assertion that educational planners, especially in African countries, including Ghana, have not laid emphases on how teacher training institutions go about the training of teacher trainees so as to equip them with the requisite skills to enhance critical thinking. In contrast, Table 11 shows that 57.7% of the students agreed that teachers call their names before asking questions. This is a worrying situation because when teachers call names before asking their questions, the other students in the class would feel the question does not concern them and will therefore not pay attention. This negatively affects classroom interaction.

Conclusions

In terms of key findings, it was found that teachers use all the categories of questions in their lessons. However, teachers put more premium on factual questions. Most teachers redirect students' questions and students' responses for other students to comment on. It was also realized that even though most teachers allow adequate wait time before calling on students to respond to questions, some teachers do not allow for wait time before calling on students to answer questions. Teachers distribute their questions unequally as a large proportion of questions are directed to the brilliant students.

Recommendations of the study

Considering the findings of the study, the following recommendations have been made.

1. Teachers who teach at teacher training colleges should teach teacher trainees the art of using the right types of questions well. In fact, Questioning should be incorporated in the curriculum for teacher trainees as a course of study.
2. Teachers should adopt learner centered methods of teaching and ask questions which can cater for slow learners as well as fast learners and not over rely on the use of lower order questions.
3. Ghana Education Service (GES) should organize in-service training and workshops to teachers on the importance of wait time and redirection of questions.

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