Question Discourse as a Linguistic Strategy in Classroom Communication: Implication for ICT

By

PROF. A.V. UHUNMWANGHO
Ambrose Alli University (AAU), Ekpoma

And

M.H. OHONEME
Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi

Abstract

Over the years, scholars of diverse calling have devoted time to observe and analyzed the interaction between teacher and students in a teaching-learning situation and have adopted terms and concepts to describe it especially in this era of ICT. This paper however, highlights one aspect of that interaction which is, question discourse as a linguistic strategy in class room communication. It examines the meaning and types of questioning, its importance and emphasizes the relevance of questioning in the educational system as it is a two way communication situation. A teacher may pose questions to assess the students’ level of comprehension or misconception of a topic and in like manner, students may seek clarification through questioning. The paper recommends amongst others, the need for lecturers, to strike a balance during the teaching-learning process rather than struggle to rush and cover the syllabus without comprehension on the part of the learners.

Introduction

Classroom interaction is essentially an aspect of the communication process. It involves three main elements viz: the lecturer, student and subject matter. As a verbal communication process, feedback is required to enable the encoder, in this case, the lecturer assess the receiver (learners’) level of comprehension. This is made possible through questioning.

Scholars of the diverse callings have devoted time to study several aspects of classroom interaction and proffered suggestions on how best to improve on the teaching and learning process especially of English Language which still remains the medium of interaction of most schools in Nigeria; with growing public concern over ways of how to improve on the quality of graduates from the nation’s educational institutions because a good many of them cannot express themselves properly, for instance, there are cases of bad usage of English Language ranging from faulty or clumsy sentence...
construction, wrong use of vocabulary, spelling errors and outright use of poor grammatical construction. Many students graduate from school and are ill-equipped to face the reality of life or to meet the challenges of present day society which is fast becoming ICT focused. All these have brought to fore, the need to lay a solid foundation for learners by stimulating their curiosity and awaken their consciousness to learn, understand and pursue knowledge on their own.

This paper sets out to examine question discourse as an avenue to assess a learner’s level of comprehension of a particular topic during the teaching/learning process. The choice of this topic is necessitated by the reality that a veritable source of subject matter comprehension is question discourse. Nowadays, it is a common feature to hear frustrated teachers exclaim in desperation at students’: “can’t you use your imagination”? Or “what is so difficult for you to understand.” In truth, the learner has to be equipped to face certain challenges and task their imagination for them to discover knowledge themselves.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper examines the concept of question discourse, other issues and problems related to it and subsequently make recommendations on ways to improve the level of comprehension of a subject matter by students.

Feedback Strategy in Communication

Each time communication takes place, either at home, office, along the street or classroom, the emphasis should be on achieving mutual understanding between the parties involved in the communication process. This can be achieved through effective feedback and a well conducted questioning format, this is the core of this paper.

Feedback is the response of the receiver and sender to each other. (Hybels and Weaver, 1998). The question any lecturer should have in his sub consciousness always is: did my students comprehend my lectures? Rather than rush through the prescribed syllabus. How much did they comprehend and what areas did they fail to understand? Thus, question discourse will help to create effective feedback on one hand and in turn create a sophisticated class of students who think not only of their immediate environment but pursue global issues and be challenged to be creative and imaginative as well as to give vent to self expression and become independent. This is because anything that can be imagined can be created positively for the benefit of the society.

Concept of Question Discourse

Nigeria, like many other developing Nations is plagued by unemployment and gross under utilization of its natural resources. One way of improving this is by developing the imagination and creative potentials of our students through question and answer session as a feedback method to facilitate comprehension of a topic and to take such learners to the next level.

According to Coulthard (1979) scholars like Medley and Mitzel (1963) Kliebard (1966) Biddle (1967) Meux (1967) Weick (1968) and several others like Barmus (1969), Sacks (1964), Sinclair (1973) and Kendon (1972) have devoted time to study the type of interaction in the classroom and they have adopted several linguistic
terms such as: turn taking, production, move, interpretative and sequencing rules to describe it.

Osisanwo (2005) agrees with Brown and Yule (1983) that discourse refers to “Language in use”, it covers both written and spoken aspects of language. As an aspect of discourse analysis it deals with large linguistic units such as verbal interaction/conversation exchange or interaction between speakers or writers. In this case, the focus of this paper is an aspect of the interaction between teacher and pupils in a classroom situation with specific attention on questioning and ways through which feedback can be obtained.

Questioning has been looked at from different perspective. The focus here is from the linguistic perspective. Thus, question discourse aims at clarifying issues, finding out the unknown from others, and to serve as a feedback strategy in the communication process. In a classroom situation, questioning may be in a verbal or written form. However, it helps teachers to determine among others, how many learners are being carried along, it draws attention to the salient points of a discourse, it checks boredom, and restlessness on the part of the learners as well as making the classroom lively.

**Need for Feedback in Questioning**

Teaching and learning should not just be a one way communication process where the pupils passively listen and knowledge flows from the teacher to learners rather resource materials should be provided and the teacher has to go a step further to evaluate the students’ level of understanding. Besides, students learn more, when they are actively involved in the classroom communication situation.

According to Onwuka (1981) questioning is a technique and it can stimulate pupils into creating thinking. According to him, the ability to raise thought-provoking question is the key to successful teaching and learning. The intellectual development of a pupil is encouraged when the curiosity is aroused to ask good and quality questions.

Some lecturers view questions from students as a form of distraction, some others believe that students deliberately pose questions to test the lecturer’s level of intelligence or knowledge of a topic some outright do not entertain questions during or after lectures this fact is corroborated by Schectcher (2004) cited in Fakoya (2005) that some teachers are hostile to questions and may view such students as enemies noting that such teachers could as well be replaced by a book or movie. In some other instance, some teachers will outright hush up students who try to ask questions. They may tag such questions as irrelevant and do not deserve response unfortunately such actions may dampen the enthusiasm of learners; while some other lecturers may unleash words of abuse on such students for asking questions. This may make many students subsequently to be afraid to ask questions.

Questions can help the teacher know learners with peculiar problems. For instance, those who do not pay attention, or who may have eye problems or who are hard of hearing are identified and such students may have their seats, changed to enhance their understanding in class or perhaps with counseling such learners can be assisted with ICT learning aids.
Effective question and answer session can help the teacher evaluate the teaching style and where areas of short coming are identified; the teacher can change plans or adopt adequate method of illustration or analogies to explain abstract concepts that a difficult to understand even the use of some information and communication technology devices can help to make leaning easier.

The essence of any classroom interaction is to encourage learning by adopting a style that is student focused. Questioning can help stir up students’ interest in the classroom. Through it, they can develop critical thinking ability and encourage them to pursue knowledge on their own, especially as more learners are exposed in internet facilities.

According to Cotton (2001) cited in Fakoya (2005) apart from helping to review previous lectures, oral questions directed at students can help to make a lesson more effective, nothing that lecturers can achieve more, if they make their student to talk more meaningfully in the classroom.

Questioning makes classroom interaction more fulfilling. This is because it enables the participants to know when ideas and feelings have been shared or knowledge impacted in the intended manner. In a small classroom, various forms of interaction and non verbal signals such as yawn, facial appearance, restlessness etc. can enable the teacher know when the students are not following the progress of a lecture session. In such an instance, a carefully phrased question directed at the learner can help refocus the learners’ attention. However, in a large class it may not be so simple because some general questions like “Are you following (me)?” “Are you with me?” “Am I communicating or making sense?” This may be answered with a chorus “yes” A negative response will further lead the teacher to ask: “what do you not understand”? At this stage, a change in lesson plan is necessary and further illustration can be introduced to make the topic clearer to the learner. Perhaps through the use of projected slides, diagram etc.

Question discourse like any communication process is a two way affair, with the teacher and students as participants and contributors. Questioning can stimulate originally and build up the confidence of students in communication with others. One reason, why many candidates fail oral interviews is because they lack self confidence; neither are they composed nor exposed to the act of asking and answering questions. Many prospective employers nowadays, are interested not only in an applicant’s knowledge of a topic or discipline but also in their communication skills or ability.

Thus, effective knowledge of the skill of questioning will encourage the spirit of adventure in learners to use their hands and brains in a well co-ordinate manner to discover more knowledge by self learning and strive towards self reliance.

Techniques of Questioning

For question discourse to be effective in classroom interaction, certain techniques should be adopted.

i. The lecturer should encourage students to ask or respond to questions.

ii. Create a relaxed atmosphere conducive for learning in the classroom. This is because the names of certain teachers tend to create fear not respect in
students this may make learning difficult, since such learners never be composed in class.

iii. Question should be asked in a language that will communicate to the learner

iv. Questioning improves self-expression and boosts the listening and speaking skills. The curiosity of the learner is stirred to discover new things such that a learner can declare boldly, “I don’t know but I know where to go for answers”. This is where ICT comes in, such that learners can pursue knowledge by themselves.

v. It is necessary to choose the right words in posing a question so as not to compose a question wrongly. Otherwise a wrong answer will follow:

According to Tomori (1991) if an appropriate answer is received to a question, learners will organize such a response and make it fit into what they already know. Thus, if we receive an answer, it is associated with stored knowledge. For instance if you get a telephone call, you may ask:

a. Hello, who is this or who am I speaking with?

b. (if the reply is) “It is Jane”

b. (and if we recognize the voice we may say) “how are you Jane”?

On the other hand, the response be: “Jane who? Or Jane from where?” (i.e. if we do not know the identity of the caller.

b. I am one of your students, Sir”

It is necessary to adopt words that can help clarify issues in a question and answer session.

Coulthard (1979) cites suggestive findings from a research to the extent that, often times, students’ participation in the classroom is too low, they ask too few questions and sometimes when they are to contribute, as in the following extract, their contribution is not built upon.

T: (Teacher): These letters have special names. Do you know what it is? What is one name that we give to these letters? Who knows the answer?

P: (Pupil): (Several hands are up and the teacher points to a fellow). Vowel sir (the pupil replies)

T: They’re vowels, that’s correct but who can make a sentence without having a vowel sound in it?

Banes (1969) cited in Coulthard (1979) opine that students should be encouraged to participate in question-answer sessions and draw on their own knowledge and experience. Thus, a teacher’s questioning should be more concerned with stimulating thinking to produce a sequence of teacher.. student or vise versa form of interaction, e.g.

Teacher: who can tell me what a noun is?..... Yes?

Pupil: A name of anybody, place or thing.

Teacher: em….. well something is missing yes, who knows?

Pupil 2: A word that names another thing

Teacher: Very good who has a different opinion … Yes? Good.

Teacher: Who can add to what has been said?
Teacher controls the participation and turn-taking events in the class by calling on names or pointing out to individuals to respond or ask questions. This linguistic etiquette is proper to maintain order in the class e.g.

T: Anyone think they know that this means?
S: (Hands are raised) or a chorus “yes”

The teacher nominate the next speaker. However, many a time, the teacher has to urge students to ask or answer questions but often times students decline mainly out of fear of being ridiculed by classmates or come lack the ability to properly express themselves. Others suffer from stage fright or they may be too shy to address a group. However, these short comings can be overcome by sheer determination and encouragement from peers and the teacher, as well as early exposure of students to information and communication technology devices.

It is important to consider the feeling of others who may be unable to answer questions rather than embarrass such students they can be encouraged to form a reading group or tutorial classes. At other times, students can be given time to work and discover answers for themselves, just as some students may pose questions that may appear challenging before the teacher. A smart way out could be to re-direct the question before the class. Through the group participatory affair and from the responses received, the teacher can get a clue to work out a suitable response to clarify and harmonize the responses from the class and provide a suitable answer.

Questions should challenge the intellect of learners and make them strive towards finding a solution to a problem. Onwuka (1981) goes further to suggest that questions should be clear and easily understand and should be composed in a simplified language. Besides, teachers should ask answerable questions either in class or during examinations, and finally questions should be addressed to the whole class and not just a few bright students and the class should be given adequate time to prepare and respond otherwise their response may just be: “I don’t know” or “no idea” and then withdraw into themselves. In such a situation, such students may not gain from the teaching.

Types of Questions

Questioning is a teaching technique which can supply feedback to the teacher. This will help the teacher to know aspects of the lecture that require further explanation. Some teachers may choose to make students write quizzes when they fail to respond to verbal question in class.

As a matter of fact, several scholars have adopted various terms to describe both verbal and written question types. Fakoya (2005) agrees with Blosser (1975) that there are four question types.

a. Managerial questions are designed to keep the classroom operations going. E.g. “are you with me?”
b. Rhetoric questions are used to emphasize a point or re-echo a statement of fact or idea. E.g. “This is what is called democracy. Do you follow”?
c. Closed questions are used to check level of retention or to make learners focus their thoughts on a particular issue E.g. “define democracy”
d. Open questions are used to encourage students’ interaction or discussion in class. E.g. “what is your view of democracy in Nigeria”?
Others classify questions in terms of function. Thus we can have:

1. Teacher – initiated information seeking questions. This is designed to know how the students have comprehended a lesson.
2. Student – initiated information seeking questions. These are questions; pupils pose to seek clarification explanation from a teacher over a subject matter.
3. Opinion versus factual questions is designed to elicit students’ responses or know about their passing views on certain issues. While factual questions are used to state facts or definitions e.g.
   i. What is the difference between a clause and a phrase? Is a factual question type
   ii. What do you think the writer ought to have done to improve the quality of the essay? Or “where do you think the problem lies” this type of question invites the personal view of students.

The various terms adopted above, are for convenience or ease of description what counts, are the outcome of the question discourse. For instance, in written questions, we have essay questions, objective questions and context questions etc.

Conclusion

Teaching and learning cannot be complete without question discourse. It serves as a feedback assessment strategy. Teachers can ask questions to ascertain the learner’s level of comprehension of a topic and in like manner, students may ask questions for clarification purposes. Questioning also afford the students the opportunity for self expression. This technique makes the classroom interaction a two way participatory communication process. Besides, the adoptions of information technologies like the computer, Internet facilities, and audio visual materials can aid further comprehension and questioning.

Recommendation

In the communication process, the teacher, with the bundle of knowledge is the encoder; the message comes in form of lecturers using the classroom interaction as the channel and students as the decoder. Feedback comes in form of various responses to question discourse. Based on the foregoing, the following suggestions are put forward.

i. There is need to encourage students to form reading groups and organize tutorial classes or discussion groups with the bright students directing affairs of the group
ii. In-house discussion sessions or workshops among lecturers of a department or academic unit to share ideas on new areas or aspects of their discipline should be encouraged so that lectures are kept abreast of developments in their area.
iii. Answerable questions should be composed in a language that will communicate to both learner and lecturers
iv. Questioning should not only be concerned with evaluating student’s performance but questioning should be posed to challenge students to pursue knowledge on their own.
v. There is the need to urgently introduce and adopt various tools of information and communication technology to facilitate the teaching and learning process in various stages of our educational system in Nigeria.

References


