

QUESTIONING STRATEGIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONTEXT IN CLASSROOM TALK

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the teacher's questioning strategies in order to elicit responses that contribute to the construction of context in classroom discussion. It also examines the social power relations of the classroom teacher and students. The findings of the children's talk in this study suggest that preschool children do observe rules for public conduct and for a share in the construction of context with their peers and teachers. They also develop extensive repertoires of speech acts and use speech strategically to manipulate others, to guide their activity, and most importantly to construct meaning in context.

Introduction

In classroom context, students need to utilise the language that they possess in expressing their thoughts while interacting. They need to learn the art of conveying and receiving messages that contain information which is of interest to them. As such, interaction in the classroom involves teachers and students listening and responding, understanding and comprehending as well as negotiating meaning in a shared context. In such situations, the role of the teachers is deemed crucial for she/he is responsible for creating various types of context and in providing opportunities for students to interact.

In recent years, interactions in the classroom have focused on the manner in which questions are structured and directed to students in order to elicit responses that demonstrate knowledge of the subject and to obtain maximum classroom participation. If teachers are able to construct relevant questions, they may receive appropriate or adequate responses from students. Due to the constant need to discover new things and to make sense of things that they encounter, students resort to asking questions. In the same vein, teachers perpetually ask students various types of

questions in order to assess students' understanding of the subject and to know if learning has taken place.

At the other end of the continuum, the classroom teacher, who already knows the subject matter, elicits questions which require students to respond appropriately and demonstrate knowledge of the taught subject. The elicitation of questions serves to assess and monitor students' progress and to determine if the learning objectives have been achieved. On the other hand, students frequently ask questions only when information is needed, to satisfy their curiosity or to seek clarification particularly when in a state of confusion.

Purpose

The contention of this paper is to focus on the strategies and types of questions employed by teachers in order to elicit students' responses that contribute to the construction of context in the classroom discussion. It also seeks to examine the social power of teacher-student relations and how these are manifested in classroom discourse.

Construction of Classroom Discourse and Context

In general, speakers are responsible for the construction of talk. However, in the context of a classroom, teachers monitor the turn exchanges and take control of the topic of discussion. Pomerantz (1984:153) reports that teachers, being more knowledgeable, elicit student's response by "clarifying, reviewing the assumed knowledge, and modifying (his or her) position." In this case, through the use of target language, the teacher creates authentic activities and "demonstrates absolute power and control in the management of the distribution of classroom talk" (Jariah Mohd Jan and Khatijah Shamsudin, 2003: 68). The concept of power, in this instance, refers to Brown and Gilman (1960) where power is associated with a person who has authority over another to the degree that she/he is able to control the behaviour of the other (asymmetrical relationships). Within the context of the classroom, teachers have the power and authority over the students as they are perceived to be "the 'expert' and thus powerful...as resource persons (knowledge) and as authoritative representatives (authority)" (Jariah Mohd Jan, 1999:399).

Students, on the other hand, are forced to listen attentively to the teacher and are expected to voluntarily respond and share their ideas in the classroom discussion. Mehan (1978) indicates that turn exchanges often involve mutual consent and serious negotiations between students and teachers. This notion of 'jockeying for turns' (Jariah Mohd Jan, 1999: 398) between teachers and students may be viewed as a collaborative effort to build ideas in the discussion and enhance students'

conversational competence. Since this is apparent in teacher-student discourse, it explains the importance of students being comfortable and competent in interacting with their classroom teacher and in responding actively to questions asked during classroom discussions.

Teachers' questioning strategies have also been the main concern in most investigations of classroom discourse. For instance, the question strategies of teachers, according to Mishler (1975) exhibit the social distance and power relations in the school setting. Teacher dominance in the primary school level is particularly reflected in their use of questions and Edward and Mercer (1987: 45) point that "there may be a general increase in teacher questioning in the classroom context". Further, Galton *et al.* (1999: 33) state that children at the primary school level listen more while teachers do all the talking in the class. Consequently, the types of questions teachers ask of students "require them either to recall facts or to solve problem for which their teachers expect a correct answer" (*ibid.*).

Accordingly, students are motivated to explore new ideas when they are constantly challenged and forced to exert their thinking forward by the types of questions posed by their teachers. In her study, Woods (1991:113) points to the fact that "teachers frequently pose specific questions that demand a narrow range of possible 'right' answers". As a result, it is no wonder that responses obtained from students are rather predictable. In line with this predicament, Heath (1978) states that 'wh' questions such as 'what' require a factual response while 'why' necessitates reasoning or an interpretation. Teachers also use 'chaining' (*ibid.*) as a strategy to elicit responses from students. This strategy entails a teacher's efforts to develop the subject of classroom discussion by utilising a student's response to a question as a basis for the following question directed to the next student in the class.

Further, Jariah Mohd Jan *et al.* (1993) found in their study that teachers always ask questions that test memory and comprehension. This would involve questions which require factual and direct responses. They also point out that "questions which require students to analyse, evaluate, infer, and to give ideas and opinions are seldom asked" (*ibid.*:59).

In the construction of context in a classroom discussion, the teacher's dominant role takes centre stage. She/he takes control of the structure and content of discourse in the classroom and this is manifested based on the learning objectives to be achieved, the types of questions to be asked and the varied responses elicited from the students. Dillon (1990: 8) stresses that the different teaching and learning objectives and contexts demand "a differentially apt use of questions".

In most cases, a close examination of teacher-student interaction begins with the teacher giving and explaining basic concepts or information, relevant to the

topic to be taught. Following that, several instances that depict relationships with the topic in question are elucidated. In order to check students' understanding of the topic, teachers then initiate questions. Positive responses from students show comprehension coupled with the fact that they have grasped the subject. Further, Garvey (1977) concurs with this notion and states that pre-schoolers in her study also frequently make queries that require teachers to provide explanation, clarification or comments in order to fulfil their desire to learn. These queries and responses between teachers and students contribute to the construction of context in the classroom discourse.

Methodology

For purpose of this study, a classroom of 31 pre-school children (15 girls and 16 boys) from a kindergarten was observed for 30 minutes over a period of five (5) days. The classroom teacher was a senior experienced female teacher who had taught in the school for more than 20 years. The topic of the lesson selected for the purpose of analysis was *Transportation* and the objectives of the lesson included the following:

- a) To introduce transportation and elicit awareness of the different modes of transport;
- b) To examine the mode of transport in the early days and the kinds of animals or 'beast of burden' which were used;
- c) To discuss the two-wheel transport (bicycle, motorbike) and commonly used modes of transport;
- d) To elicit awareness of the various parts of a vehicle and discuss how it works, what makes it move and so on.

The 30-minute classroom discussion was video recorded and transcribed using a standard transcription convention introduced by Sacks *et al.* (1974). Each of the classroom sessions constituted one data set.

Each of the data set was analysed and evaluated based on Mehan's (1979) criteria of conversational subsystems with some modifications due to the nature and setting of the data. The criteria are as follows:

- a) cohesive ties – how well-formed and meaningful are the ideas; it creates text based on utterances;
- b) coherence – how sensibly connected turns at talk are; it gives conversation its thematic texture;

- c) context – how students hold each other accountable to their shifting consensus; how topics shift according to contribution of talk.

It appears that the development of the classroom interaction in this study relates to each element of Mehan’s (1979) conversational subsystems as presented in the following sections.

Analysis and Findings

An analysis of the conversational competencies of 5–6-year-olds clearly illustrates the limitations in their control of cohesion, coherence and context relations and these are discussed in the following sub-sections. It is important to note that Extracts 1 – 4 in this section show examples that are relevant to the discussion about *Transportation* between teacher and students in the classroom.

a) Cohesion

In Extract 1, lines [5], [7], [11], and [15], the teacher frequently repeats the responses given by the students and vice-versa. The use of repetition by the teacher is not only to check the responses given but to reassure the student concerned that she has understood the intended message. In so doing, the teacher helps the student to be confident and this in turn would encourage him to participate and contribute even more in the classroom interaction.

Extract 1 – Initial Stage: Sensitisation

- [1] T: So, you have all been in some kind of transport, right? Ariana, right?
- [2] G: <nodded>
- [3] T: You have all been somewhere, yes or no?
- [4] C: **Yes...**
- [5] T: **Yes.** Now we have cars, but long ago ... How do you think people traveled from one place to another?
- [6] B: **On a ship.**
- [7] T: **On a ship.** Oh, even before that. What did they have?
- [8] C: <silence>
- [9] T: Did they have cars, aeroplanes, helicopters, trains?
- [10] C: **No.**

- [11] T: **No**, they did not. How did people go from one place to another? Hmm? Do you know?
- [12] C: <shook heads>
- [13] T: O.k. They used boats that is if they live near rivers. They used boats to go from one place to another. And if there are no rivers nearby, they used animals. What kinds of animals?
- [14] C: **Horses.**
- [15] T: **Horses**, Camels. O.k. then what else? We are talking about the time when there was nothing – only animals.
- [16] C: <silence>
- [17] T: They used horse carriages, bullock carts, right?
- [18] C: Yes.
- [19] T: They used open carts to carry things and row boats. So you have to use your hands to paddle. Would you have liked to live long ago? Without any cars? No?
- [20] C: Yes
- [21] T: Well, you either have to walk or used the animals? Would you like to live in this time? Or do you want to live now, in the modern days? You will have to make a choice. Do you want to live during the early days or now?
- [22] C: Now...
- [23] T: The transport is very easy because everything is there. Everything is so nice, nice roads...
- [24] C: Yes

*T = teacher G = girl B = boy C = class

Since this is the initial stage of the lesson, the types of questions generated are of basic cognitive level that requires direct answers. The ‘*What*’, ‘*How*’, ‘*Do/Did*’ and the ‘*Yes-No*’ questions are among some of the types used. The teacher uses such a strategy mainly to sensitise students with the lexical meaning of ‘transportation’, which is the topic of the class discussion.

This type of questioning strategy merely requires students to identify and recall information from the given text and does not provide an avenue for students to explore, expand or critically express their ideas based on their own personal experiences. Such exercise does not promote any higher level thought processes.

b) Coherence

In Extract 2, the teacher uses a lot of minimal responses or back channel support such as *right* [27], [30], *that's right* [44], *yes* [46], [49], and *o.k.* [32], [42] in order to acknowledge students' responses. By offering such feedback, the teacher is actually informing the students that she is actively listening and is endorsing the talk. As such, students tend to feel good about contributing ideas and they feel encouraged and appreciated by their peers and especially their classroom teacher.

Extract 2 - Actual Setting: Context

- [25] T: What is the most common kinds of transport that you see around you?
- [26] C: Cars
- [27] T: **Right.** How many of you have more than one car at home?
- [28] C: I, I, I
- [29] B: I have one.
- [30] T: **Right.** Most of you have more than one car.
- [31] G: I have six.
- [32] T: **O.k.** Hana <laughs> you have six cars. Who knows how does a car work?
- [33] C: **Engine.**
- [34] T: **It has an engine, o.k.** How does an engine get its energy? How does it move?
- [35] B: Oil.
- [36] T: What kind of oil? Cooking oil? <all laugh>
- [37] B: Oil from petrol station.
- [38] T: What do you call that?
- [39] C: **Petronas**
- [40] T: **Petronas?** Ashraf?
- [41] B: **Gas.**
- [42] T: **O.k.** Some car use **gas** nowadays. What is the oil then called?
- [43] B: **Petrol.**
- [44] T: **Petrol, that's right.** Have you looked into your father's car engine? It has to have what?
- [45] C: **Battery.**

- [46] T: **Yes**, it needs **battery**, petrol, and water. What makes the car move?
- [47] C: **Tyres**.
- [48] B: **Wheels**.
- [49] T: **Yes, tyres**. It has **wheels**. How many wheels does it have?
- [50] C: Four (4).
- [51] T: How do you control the car?
- [52] C: **Steering** <shows their hands as if they are holding the steering>
- [53] T: The **steering wheel**. **Right**. And if you want to stop? What would you do?
- [54] C: Brake.
- [55] B: Use a **brake**.
- [56] T: The **brake**. So you CAN drive a car now!
- [57] C: Yes.
- [58] B: Yes, yes, yes.
- [59] T: Sure? **O.k.** We'll ask your parents.

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It is observed that the students appear to comply with the questions directed at them. Their participation shows willingness to cooperate in the joint construction of text. This act of solidarity contributes to the sequencing of talk and as such develops the discussion of the topic from identification of the different types of transport to the various parts of the car and the whole works. The types of questions used at this stage would still consist mostly of the basic cognitive level such as the 'What', 'Who', 'Have' and a few instances of a slightly higher level of questioning like 'How' and 'Why'.

Brophy and Good (1997: 372-75) indicate that higher-level questions such as "how" and "why" challenge students' thought processes. It also encourages students to think systematically and comprehend the intricacies of the subject in question. In fact, the learning process for students can be more meaningful and valuable if teachers constantly monitor students' understanding and comprehension using higher order questions.

c) Context

In Extract 3, the teacher begins to use higher-level questions of meta-cognitive skills in order to encourage students to construct meaning at a hypothetical level.

Question types such as ‘*If ... which would...*’; ‘*Why*’; ‘*What*’; ‘*Is that...*’; ‘*If..., what..?*’; ‘*Isn’t it...?*’; ‘*Won’t...?*’ are used to elicit responses from the students. Even though students tend to provide a one-word answer, there is the possibility of encouraging them to critically think beyond the basic cognitive level in order to make meaning of the context of discourse.

At this stage, students have to rely on their observation as well as past experience so as to arrive at a logical and acceptable answer to questions asked. For example, students have to provide reasons why they would rather choose a car as in line [62] and not a motorbike as in line [77] or why they would prefer a motorbike instead of a car [81].

Extract 3 - Final Stage: Observation

- [60] T: If you have a choice between a car and a motorbike, which would you take?
- [61] C: Car.
- [62] T: Why?
- [63] B1: Car has a lot of space.
- [64] B2: Car got air-cond.
- [65] B3: It has a radio.
- [66] B4: A bonet (Malay pronunciation)
- [67] T: Pardon?
- [68] B4: Bonet.
- [69] T: A bonet?
- [70] C: Boot.
- [71] T: Oh, a bonnet.
- [72] B5: Mirror.
- [73] T: Mirrors, o.k.
- [74] B6: Antenna.
- [75] T: Antenna, for what? What is an antenna for?
- [76] G: The radio.
- [77] T: For the radio, o.k. Now, why do you want a motorbike?
- [78] B: It can go very fast.
- [79] T: Is that the ONLY reason? Ali?
- [80] B: Wind.

- [81] T: Wind? O.k. you like the speed and the wind that comes with it. Look at the car and the motorbike carefully. You have all been in a car and a motorbike.
- [82] C: Yes.
- [83] T: When it rains and if you are riding on a motorbike, what can happen to you?
- [84] G: Wear a raincoat.
- [85] T: You wear a raincoat, but even then, you can get wet. If you are inside a car?
- [86] B: You cannot get wet.
- [87] G: Cannot open the window.
- [88] T: If you are in a car, you will not get wet. If it is hot in a car? What will happen to you if you are on a motorbike?
- [89] B: Get burn.
- [90] T: Won't you feel hot?
- [91] C: Yes.
- [92] T: But what if you are inside a car? What do you have inside a car?
- [93] C: Air-cond!
- [94] T: So, isn't it more comfortable than a motorbike?
- [95] C: Yes.
- [96] T: A car is more comfortable than a motorbike.

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The teacher, in this instance, elicits questions in a progressive manner and as she builds the text, students are able to follow the discourse and they competitively try to manipulate turns – even if the responses given are still at a one-word or phrasal level.

Extract 4 illustrates some of the comments made by the students when they relate to their teacher the experiences that they had observed or gone through pertaining to the subject of discussion, i.e., transportation. To some extent, they try to provide detailed descriptions of incidents that they had observed.

Extract 4 - Extended Discussion

- [97] T: Why is riding a motorbike dangerous?
- [98] B: When they go fast, police will catch them and put them in jail.
- [99] T: **Right**, they tend to go very fast. What will happen? (*T waits for answer*)
- [100] G: Meet with an accident and they will get hurt.
- [101] T: What must we do if they get hurt?
- [102] B: Send them to the hospital.
- [103] T: **Yes**, send them to the hospital to get immediate treatment.
Yes, Daniel.
(*T waits for answer*)
- [104] B: I saw an accident. Car hit a motorbike.
- [105] T: **O.k.** Hana.
- [106] G: I saw a motorbike and the bus had an accident.
- [107] T: If you are on a motorbike, you can skid ...
- [108] B: When it is raining.
- [109] T: **Right**, when it is raining, the road is slippery and the motorbike can skid, and fall. They can get hurt easily especially on a rainy day.

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The teacher plays a crucial role here because by awarding more wait time and posing more questions such as ‘*Why*’; ‘*What*’; ‘*What... if...*’; ‘*If...*’ they are in fact encouraging students to collaborate with others and generate more ideas and opinions on the topic of discussion. In Extract 4, lines [99] and [103], the teacher waits a second or less for students to respond to the question before calling on another student or supplying information related to the question. It is interesting to note that Brophy and Good (1997) in their study of classroom interaction, suggest teachers incorporate longer wait-time in their pursuit of eliciting responses from students. They further reiterate that “subsequent research has verified ... increasing wait time leads to longer and higher-quality student responses and participation by a greater number of students” (ibid.: 377).

The use of minimal responses (*right, yes, o.k.*), which are given to the students, indicate that the teacher gives positive feedback to the students and this is perceived as a motivating factor to contribute more to the discussion. Minimal responses also signify that the teacher attentively listens to the responses given by the student and generally follows the discussion.

Conclusion

In this study, an examination of children's talk shows that preschool children begin to observe interactive rules in the classroom and to share in the construction of context with their peers and teachers. The multiple constraints of educational contexts enormously restrict what a student can say, when, where, how, and with whom. But as can be seen in this study, accountability is fairly relaxed compared to the strict responsibilities enforced upon the student.

The functions of talk, as shown in the data, vary according to differences in accountability. In some instances, the preschoolers are seen to shift ideas in order to explore the more complex social uses of talk. They also have the tendencies to develop extensive repertoires of speech acts, and use speech strategically to guide their thought processes in constructing meaning within the context of discussion.

Language in the classroom serves to display not only knowledge but intelligence as well and to negotiate meaning with peers and teachers. Within the classroom constraints, students must be made aware of the intricacies of classroom talk as they unfold the multifaceted purposes of class discussions and begin to realise the varied meanings of terms which rely heavily on the contexts and the participating members in the class. Thus, meaning seems to develop from a more individualised perspective, through various objective types, up to the convoluted (complex) social meaning systems.

The classroom teacher takes the role of an authority whose role is to transmit knowledge, facts and concepts to be learned by students. The teacher, in this study, is seen to constantly coax, support and encourage students to proceed in contributing and building ideas to the topic of discussion. The teacher uses various types of questions as a strategy to extract responses in order to gauge existing knowledge and evaluate students' understanding of the lesson. One major finding is that the teacher still uses more low level questions (*What, When, Where*) compared to the higher cognitive level questions such as inferential or hypothetical type (*Why, How, If*). Further, teachers must understand that questions which are strategically used may encourage students to respond effectively and contribute to the construction of context in the classroom talk.

Accordingly, it is the task of the teacher to encourage students to provide more input by allowing them to not only interact more with each other but to also listen to each others' contribution, for active listening lends itself to active classroom participation. By regularly contributing to classroom discussion based on questions, students show attentiveness, interest and motivation thus helping to build the communicative goal by sharing ideas to the topic of discussion.

Effective teachers must become aware of the social significance which is built into the construction of context in order to choose appropriate questions that lead to patterns of discourse which are best suited to the needs of the students in their classrooms. Awareness of the different social variations such as contexts, ethnicity, class, social role, subculture and power relations that exist amongst students and teachers in the classroom should also be cultivated among teachers.

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