

The Effectiveness of Tutor Questions in University Tutorials: A Case Study*

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ABSTRACT Students from previously disadvantaged educational backgrounds enroll at institutions of higher learning underprepared for academic work. One of the reasons for this is that in schools there is very little exposure to English because learners are taught by teachers whose English proficiency is low and this is passed on to the students. Consequently, they enter tertiary education with very low competency levels in the language of instruction. The objectives of the study were to establish how the use of closed-display, closed- referential, and open-referential questions by different tutors encouraged student participation, enhanced comprehension of academic content, provided feedback to discussion questions and sustained interaction in tutorial. To undertake this investigation, qualitative and quantitative research design was used and an analytical framework to examine the quantity and quality of students' output. The findings revealed that open-referential questions produced elaborate student output with many more discourse acts, while the closed-display questions generated limited responses in the form of reply-informs. Closed-display questions were used differently and to better effect because they functioned as follow-up questions that provided links between student turns and sustained the interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Students from historically disadvantaged educational backgrounds enter tertiary education underprepared for academic work. On admission to university, these students do not perform well because the poor education received from high school makes it difficult for them to think in English (Sebolai 2014: 51) and also to express themselves. This lack of preparedness is attributed to the poor teaching of English in the Black schools (Banda 2009) and lack of contact with native speakers of the language. This normally poses a huge challenge for these students when they enroll at university because very limited opportunities are provided for them in lectures to interact with the tutor and other students to improve their proficiency (Hlatshwayo 2011). In order to enhance understanding of content material and also improve the use of English, tutorials were introduced as part of the teaching mode. In these tutorials, different types of questions were used by the tutors to facilitate and sustain effective student participation.

Background to the Research

Research has shown that teachers use questions for different functions in their lessons. Some of the functions according to Brown (2001 in Siposova 2007: 34) include giving 'students the impetus and opportunity to produce language comfortably without having to risk initiating language themselves, providing immediate feedback about students' comprehension and opportunities to find out what they think by hearing what they say'. Questions may also be used to exert disciplinary control and get the students' attention (Farahian and Rezaee 2012). In Long and Sato (1983), questions did not only facilitate and sustain participation between native and non-native speakers, but they also served to signal speaking turns for non-native speakers and made the conversational topics salient. Questions can help make linguistic input comprehensible and expand the students' understanding of the subject matter. However, not all questions posed by teachers fulfill these objectives. Studies have shown that open-referential questions (questions to which the speaker does not know the answer) trigger more student participation than closed-display questions, and questions such as yes or no ques-

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tions, which normally require relatively straightforward, precise and limited responses (Brock 1986; Suter 2001; Hung 2004; Meng et al. 2012; Farahian and Rezaee 2012). In Farahian and Rezaee (2012), the use of more display questions than open referential was attributed to low teacher proficiency in English. This observation confirmed Qashoa's (2013: 53) argument that 'the act of asking good questions is cognitively demanding and it inevitably requires sufficient pedagogical knowledge'. What this implies is that training in asking effective questions is important, especially for inexperienced teachers.

The types of questions posed by teachers contribute differently to communication in a classroom. For example, open-referential questions tend to generate extended student responses, which contain interpretation and reflection. In addition, these questions 'provide learners with more opportunities of interaction at an advanced level of thinking and encourage learners to participate actively in their learning for producing more language output' (Tuan et al. 2010: 33). Because they are open and divergent, they require a higher level of thinking from the learners than closed-display questions to which the questioner already knows the answers and the students are also more likely to know the answers (Hlatshwayo 2011). Although this latter type seems not to have any communicative value, it is used to check the learners' comprehension of grammatical points or vocabulary items (Farahian and Rezaee 2012; Qashoa 2013). The limitation of display questions is that they tend to encourage regurgitation of information and stifle critical, independent thinking because the answers are known to both, the teacher and the students. In discourse analysis of English as a foreign language (EFL) classes, the definitions of open-referential and closed-display questions seem to provide a clear distinction between the two types, but in tutorials because of the complexity of the discourse, there are few exact responses expected by tutors and therefore closed-display questions tend to function as closed-referential questions (Hlatshwayo 2011).

The different functions of teacher questions in Long and Sato (1983) resulted in a framework with the following categories: *open referential*, *closed display*, *comprehension checks*, *clarification requests* and *confirmation checks*. When it was used in an exploratory study of forms and

functions of ESL teacher speech and the speech of native speakers in informal native versus non-native conversation outside classrooms, it was discovered that the teachers asked significantly more closed-display questions during ESL instruction than open-referential questions and also in conversations between natives and non-native speakers there were also more closed-display questions than open-referential questions.

When this framework was later applied by Brock (1986) to investigate whether higher frequencies of open-referential questions would have an effect on adult ESL classroom discourse, the teachers who were trained in the use of this type of questions asked more of these than closed-display questions, while those who were not trained asked more closed-display questions and very few open-referential questions. There were also confirmation checks in the control group, which occurred after responses to closed-display questions, but the total number of clarification requests made by the teachers in both groups was the same. In terms of connectors, the treatment group used far more connectors (for example, *and*, *because*, *yet*, *so*) in their turns than the control group. This was expected as they had longer turns in response to open-referential questions. In addition, the mean length of learner turns in response to open-referential questions was longer than the mean length in response to closed-display questions. Similar findings were also reported in Qashoa (2013).

In other studies, open-referential questions resulted in greater student involvement (Suter 2001 and Tichapondwa 2008; Farahian and Rezaee 2012), and offered more opportunities for language practice in the Limited English Proficiency classroom and elicited more extensive student turns (Long et al 1984 in Hung 2004: 10), while closed-display questions produced short responses and encouraged interaction patterns that resembled the initiation-response and follow-up (I-R-F) cycle (Tichapondwa 2008). Although this participation pattern tends to stifle learner initiative, especially in classroom discourse (Cullen 1998), some researchers believe that it can extend the students' participation in classroom discussion, but only if teacher follow-ups invite students to expand and qualify their initial responses (Walsh 2002; Tuan et al. 2010; Qashoa 2013) through further questions, which expand on their thinking, enable them to

clarify their opinions and make connections to their own experiences.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to explore how the use of closed-display, closed referential and open-referential questions contributed to students 'participation effectiveness', that is the total number of discourse acts and turns and initiative at discourse acts and turn-taking levels in tutorials, and how these questions enhanced comprehension of academic content and sustained interaction in tutorials.

METHODOLOGY

The study can be characterized as a mixed method research design because it combined elements from both quantitative and qualitative approaches and used a discourse analytical framework drawn from Hlatshwayo (2011) to measure the frequency of the students' participation as well as the quality of their interaction. The discourse acts in the analytical framework were counter-inform (CI), comment (C), inform (I), elicit (E), reply-inform (RI) and acknowledge (A). The discourse acts provided a more appropriate measurement in terms of participation effectiveness at discourse act level. But because the quantitative measurement did not distinguish between the different types of discourse acts in a more qualitative way, a second analytical construct, a cline of initiative, was postulated. The discourse acts in the cline were assessed empirically by considering the extent to which the intuitions of a number of lecturers about the degree of initiative manifested in the students' discourse acts would correlate with the ranking in the cline (Hlatshwayo 2011). The lecturers had to indicate the degree of initiative they thought each speech act represented by ticking the appropriate column in an assessment sheet with a scale of 1 to 4 as follows: 1: no initiative, 2: very little initiative, 3: a fair degree of initiative and 4: a high degree of initiative. The rating scores for the different acts were added together to establish the overall degree of initiative for each of the six discourse acts. To get the total rating per discourse act, the number of ratings was multiplied by the value assigned to each act. The ratings for the six discourse acts produced a two grouping structure, namely counter-informs,

comments, elicits and inform being high initiative-bearing acts, while reply-informs and acknowledges are low initiative-bearing acts (Hlatshwayo 2011).

Elicits, which is defined as an act that requests a verbal response (which could be any of the six discourse acts) was subdivided into different types of questions identified in the data because tutor elicits can fulfill different functions such as encouraging student participation, enhancing the understanding of academic content being discussed in tutorials and also stimulating and developing their thinking. These questions are closed display, closed referential and open referential. For example, in Excerpt 1 turn [51] the tutor elicits function as open-referential and closed-referential questions as follows.

Excerpt 1-T301

A-> E->
[Sequence][51]Tutor: Year!/ What about Abigail?(**Open-referential**)/

E-> Did she improve or deteriorate?(**Closed-referential**)/

RI-> I->

[Sequence][52]Mark: I think she deteriorated / because nowhere does she

I->

confess what they did in the woods./ In return, she promises to harm the little girl in one way or the other.

The first elicit is open, but the second one requires a very specific response. Dividing tutor elicits into different types of questions made it possible to explore tutor discourse behavior in terms of a three-way categorization of elicits, namely closed-display, closed-referential and open-referential questions. Closed-display questions require very precise, limited information known to the tutor, as in Excerpt 2, turns [28] below:

Excerpt 2-T311

[Self-selection][28]Tutor: When we talk about caretaker speech/

who is the caretaker? (**Closed-display**)

RI->

[Self-selection][29]Rachel: It is the mother, the father, the grandparents, everybody around the child.

Such questions are described as closed-display because there is often only one correct response requiring very specific knowledge, the content of which is known to the questioner. Closed-referential questions, on the other hand,

expect one of a limited set of closed-responses, but here the questioner does not know which one of these responses will be made and this is what differentiates closed-referential questions from closed-display questions, as illustrated in Excerpt 3, turn [43].

Excerpt 3-T112

I->

[Sequence][41]Tutor: We are talking about the poem.

A-> I->

[Sequence][42]Tsweni: OK!/ the poem itself.

I->

[Sequence][43]Tutor: Do you find this one better or not? **(Closed-referential)**

Confirmation checks, comprehension checks and clarification requests can be expressed through closed-display and closed-referential questions because 'a closed-display question is asked for comprehension checks, confirmation checks or clarification requests' (Tuan et al., 2010: 33). In the data these questions were identified accordingly, but not analyzed.

Participants

The participants were first and third-year students and two tutors—Tutor A, a female tutor in charge of Tutorials 112 and 301, and Tutor B, a male tutor in charge of Tutorials 114 and 311. The decision to use first and third-year students was justified by the results of a pilot study with first, second and third-year students in the Department of English, which suggested that there was very little difference between first-year and second-year students' participation in tutorials.

Data were collected from the four tutorial groups using a video camera. After transcription, data was coded using turn categories and segmented into the six discourse acts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In T112, students were discussing a poem about accommodation for a foreign student in London. In this tutorial, however, the focus was

Table 2: Student discourse acts in T 112 and T114

Tutorials	Counter-inform	Comment	Elicit	Inform	Reply-inform	Acknowledge	Total
T112	1(1.9%)	3(5.8%)	1(1.9%)	31(53.6%)	14(26.9%)	2(3.8%)	52
T114	1 (2.2%)	4(8.7%)	0(0%)	36 (78.3%)	5(10.9%)	0(0%)	46

on the price the landlady was charging and the suitability of the place for the tenant. In T114 tutorial, the discussion was on cultural alienation in *The Lion and the Jewel*. The research question the study attempted to answer was how tutor questions might influence student participation in tutorials.

Table 1: Tutor questions in T 112 and T114

Tutorial	Closed display	Closed referential	Open referential	Total
T112	25 (45.5%)	6 (10.9%)	24 (43.6%)	55
T114	5 (18.5%)	3 (11.1%)	19 (70.4%)	27

The figures presented in Table 1 show that in T112, Tutor A asked more closed display questions (45.5%) than Tutor B in T114 (18.5%). But Tutor B had more open referential questions (70.4%) than Tutor A, with only 43.6 percent. Both tutors had fewer closed referential questions than the other questions. In some instances, the tutors combined these questions in their discourse to form links between student turns (as illustrated in Excerpt 5 T114). In terms of student output, these questions produced very similar totals of discourse acts. However, although the statistical result (Chi-square=7.44 (df=5); p=0.1899) indicated no significant difference between the two groups, if one focuses just on the two most frequent acts (reply-informs and informs) the considerably higher percentages of reply-informs in T112 appears to link with the tutor's use of substantially more closed-display questions. Similarly, the higher percentage of open-referential questions in T114 suggests a link with these students' much higher number of informs (Table 2). Thus, the overall quantitative analyses of the tutor elicit and the students' responses in these two tutorials provide a strong general indication of a connection between tutor discourse behavior and student participation. Given that informs are high-initiative acts and reply-informs are low-initiative acts, the quantitative analysis also shows clearly that

tutor behavior plays a very important role in influencing levels of student initiative (Hlatshwayo 2011).

In T311, the tutorial discussion was on the effects of age on second language acquisition and the importance of input and output in second language acquisition and in T301 the discussion questions on *The Crucible* centered on the principles expected from the Christians.

The third-year students' performance presented in Table 3 show that Tutor A asked three times more questions than Tutor B. She had a higher percentage for open-referential and closed-display questions, while Tutor B had a substantially higher percentage for open-referential questions and fewer closed-display questions than Tutor A. These overall findings on tutor questions help explain patterns in the students' discourse acts, as reflected in Table 4.

Table 3: Tutor questions in T301 and T 311

<i>Tutorial</i>	<i>Closed display</i>	<i>Closed referential</i>	<i>Open referential</i>	<i>Total</i>
T301	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	4(50.0%)	8
T311	9(34.6%)	6 (23.1%)	11(42.3%)	26

Tutor A's use of more closed-display questions in T112 than in T311 largely explains the many more student reply-informs than any other discourse acts. Similarly, the frequent use of open-referential questions in her third-year tutorial (T311) produced a high number of student informs. Tutor B, on the other hand, had very high percentages of open-referential questions in both T114 and T301 and these can be associated with the very high numbers of student informs in both tutorials, while the fewer closed-display questions generated fewer reply-informs (Hlatshwayo 2011).

In T112, the relatively high number of students' reply-informs is not surprising because the number of closed-display questions the tutor used was also high, as already indicated. The responses to these questions tended to be shorter in terms of student discourse acts and

syntactically less complex because there was often only a single correct response, known to and expected by the questioner, as illustrated in Excerpt 5-T114, turn [10].

Excerpt 5-T114

E->

[Sequence][9]Tutor: Are there things in the play that make Lakunle half African, half European?

(Closed-referential)/ Is he a real European? (Closed display)/

I mean would you say this culture is right for him in everything?

(Closed-display)

RI-> I->

[Sequence][10]Lucky: I think Lakunle is not a real European./ He is not a complete European/ because

I->

he doesn't fulfill this culture.

Open-referential questions, on the other hand, are expected to generate student answers that are 'somehow qualitatively better than answers to closed-display questions' (Dalton-Puffer 2007: 96) and evidence of this is seen in Excerpt 6-T112, turn [36].

Excerpt 6-T112

E->

[Sequence]33]Tutor: ...line 22, can you read that?**(Closed-display)**

RI->

[Sequence]34]Dorothy: Not altogether.

E-> E->

[Sequence][35]Tutor: So, what do we say?**(Open-referential)/** What is the development of this feeling in the last 8 lines of the poem, from line 26/27, 'facially unburned, but madam you should rather see for yourself'?**(Open-referential)**

E->

Why does he give this description?**(Open-referential)/**

I->

[Sequence][36]Dorothy: I think by then Africans or Black people did not mix with the Whites or other residents./

Table 4: Student discourse acts in T301 and T311

<i>Tutorials</i>	<i>Counter-inform</i>	<i>Comment</i>	<i>Elicit</i>	<i>Inform</i>	<i>Reply-inform</i>	<i>Acknowledge</i>	<i>Total</i>
T301	6(6%)	5(5%)	4(4%)	79(79%)	2(2%)	4(4%)	100
T311	2(1.19%)	3(1.8%)	3(1.8%)	148(88.1%)	8(4.8%)	4(2.4%)	168

I-> I->
By saying this,/ the caller is trying to convince the madam to think that he

I-> I-> I->
is light complexioned,/ because// if you are light in complexion// they canaccept you.

In turn [36], there are many more discourse acts than in turn [34], a response to the closed-display question. Turn [36] has a double subordinate, that is, *because* and an *if-clause*, which shows that responding to open-referential questions tends to increase the length and complexity of student turns (Hlatshwayo 2011).

In T114, the tutor used many more open-referential questions as opposed to closed-display questions. In this tutorial the open-referential questions, as illustrated in Excerpt 8-T114, enabled the students to produce elaborate discourses compared to the response generated by the closed-referential questions in turn [7], in this excerpt.

Excerpt 8-T114

E->

[Sequence][5]Tutor: [...] What do you think is the writer's main aim in creating that character, Lakunle?

(Open-referential)

I-> I->

[Sequence][6]Benny: I think the writer is unfair to Lakunle/ because he is the sole person in this whole village who seems to be favouring the European values./ No one is supporting

I-> I-> I->

him./ He is against Sidi, Sadiku and Baroka/ and most of the villagers are against

I->

his views./ So, I think the writer is very... I think the writer is very unfair to Lakunle./

I->

He seems like an idiot among these people.

E->

E->

[Sequence][7]Tutor: Do you people agree? **(Closed-referential)**/ Is that the main aim?

(Closed-referential)

I->

[Self-selection][8]Paulina: I think another aim is that the writer wants to show us how important

I->

our culture is/ and that we must respect our culture than European culture.

Benny's response to the tutor's open-referential question in turn [6] is quite elaborate and the closed-referential questions function as fol-

low-up questions to the open-referential question in turn [5] and that is why the student in turn [8] introduces her response with *I think another aim...*

In both tutorials, the responses to the open-referential questions generated elaborate discourse, thus confirming the research findings that have consistently shown that the use of these questions contribute considerably to students' effective participation in interactions (Brock 1986; Cullen 1998; Tichapondwa 2008). The closed-display questions, which occurred without other questions, produced very short responses, as in classroom discourse literature (Hung 2004; Suter 2001; Tichapondwa 2008; Maley 2009; Farahian and Rezaee 2012; Qashoa 2013). But in tutor turns where they occurred in conjunction with other questions, they functioned as follow-up questions and thus formed links between the student turns to continue the interactions until the tutorial questions were adequately discussed before moving on to new ones (Hlatshwayo 2011). This clearly indicates that closed-display questions were not used simply to elicit display of a knowledge item (Dalton-Puffer 2007: 95). Instead, the tutors used them mainly to encourage student participation through the discussion of academic content and that sustained the interaction and made it possible for the other students in the tutorial to also take part in the discussions. None of the other studies analyzed (Sato 1983; Brock 1986; Suter 2001; Hung 2004; Long and Brown 2001 in Siposova 2007; Tichapondwa 2008; Tuan 2010 and Qashoa 2013) considered connections between the questions and the resulting discourse in this way. However, there seems to be an agreement in their findings that closed-display questions outnumber by far open-referential ones, as also shown in the findings of this study that asking open-referential questions is important because they trigger longer, syntactically complex responses and increases student participation more than closed-display questions.

CONCLUSION

The quantitative analyses of the first-year and third-year students' participation revealed that in tutorials open-referential questions generated elaborate discourse with many informs, which implies that these questions produced high-initiative acts, while the closed-display

questions tended to generate low-initiative acts. Interestingly, however, in combination closed-display questions and closed-referential questions often led to elaborate discourse and so tutor questions in tutorials appear to be an important factor in promoting the students' participation effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this study showed that the use of open-referential questions provided extended responses with high-initiative discourse acts, it is recommended that tutors should also consider combining closed-display questions and closed-referential questions as follow-up questions to provide links between student turns and this will contribute to sustaining interactions in tutorials and also improve the students' spoken discourse competence in a language, which in South Africa is often not their mother tongue.

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