

Questioning Practices in A Social Studies Classroom: A Case Study from Pakistan

By

¹*Shams-un-Nisa and* ²*Ali Ahmad Khan*

¹Head teacher Aga Khan Diamond Jubilee School, Hyderabad Hunza

²Professional Development Teacher, Aga Khan University
Professional Development Centre North, Gilgit

Abstract

This study explored the questioning practices in a lower-secondary co-education social studies classroom in a private school in Karachi. A qualitative method of data collection including observations, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used. The study found that the classroom questioning practice was revolving around the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern. Teacher's questions dominated the classroom interaction. Teacher asked more questions than students. Furthermore, most of the teacher's questions were low-order. However, she tends to respond to those questions herself. As far as students' questions were concerned, they asked more low-order questions than high-order. Interestingly, girls' ratio of asking questions was higher than the boys. The study also highlighted some of the possibilities and challenges which influence classroom questioning such as teacher's content knowledge and pedagogical skills, classroom environment, and some school factors (time constraints, examination system). The findings might prove useful to further the understanding of teaching and learning practices in social studies classroom in the context of the professional development of social studies teacher.

Keywords: *Questioning, observations, IRF, high order thinking, low order thinking, wait-time, content knowledge, pedagogical skill.*

1. Introduction

The ability to ask question is central to information seeking, learning how to learn, bridging unknown to known, encouraging enquiring minds and it is essential to systematic investigation of information. Moreover, questioning is a skill which enables one to discover the hidden treasure of knowledge (Farmer, 2006; McKenzie, 1997; Rop, 2003). Asking, raising and framing question is the core of learning. However, researcher has experienced as a student and teacher that generally in all classroom instructions and particularly in the social studies classrooms questioning is not encouraged. Most of the teaching and learning is revolved around the textbook, which itself does not encourage the teacher and learner to be engaged in raising issues and deliberately in the different aspects of the issues from different perspectives. Siddiqui (2007) asserts that the syllabus of program offering in education and their execution in the classrooms would reveal that these programs cannot prepare the students to meet the challenges of the new millennium. Large body of literature is on the nature of classroom questioning which has been focused in terms of teachers' questioning and do they use questions in teaching both in developed and developing countries especially in science and language (for example; Ahmed, 2006; Nassaji & Wells 2000; Rop, 2003). Consequently, researcher made an attempt to explore the

contemporary questioning practices in social studies classroom both of teacher and students in Pakistani context. One main and two subsidiary questions were formulated to guide the research study.

Research Question

How classroom questioning is practiced in a lower secondary social studies classroom in a private school in Karachi?

Subsidiary questions

1. What is the nature of classroom questioning?
2. What are the factors which facilitate classroom questioning?
3. What are the factors which hinder classroom questioning?

Research Participants

Keeping in consideration, the criterion of purposeful sampling, researcher selected one lower secondary classroom (class 8), as the site for my observations. Six representative students of the class and a social studies teacher were selected for interviews and for informal discussions. Among six students, there were above average, average and below average students in terms of ability. As the participant class was co-education, hence, the group comprised both gender: three boys and three girls. The participant teacher was social studies teacher who was teaching geography in elementary classes and Pakistan studies at secondary level.

2. Data Collection Methods

The question “how classroom questioning is practiced” demanded and led me towards the discovery of interactions in the classroom setting; among the teacher and students and students to students. Keeping in consideration the criterion of purposeful sampling researcher selected one lower secondary classroom (class 8), as the site for my observations. In addition, six ‘representative’ students of the class and social studies teacher were selected for interview and for informal discussions. Among six students, there were above average, average and below average students in terms of ability. Hence, the group was comprised three boys and three girls.

The main data collection method was observation because the practices of classroom questioning could better be explored through in-depth observations. Nine classroom observations were guided by the following topics

- How teacher and students interact with each other during questioning time
- Nature of teacher’s questions
- Children’s responses
- Teacher’s feedback on the responses
- Level of students’ questions if they ask

3. Findings and Analysis

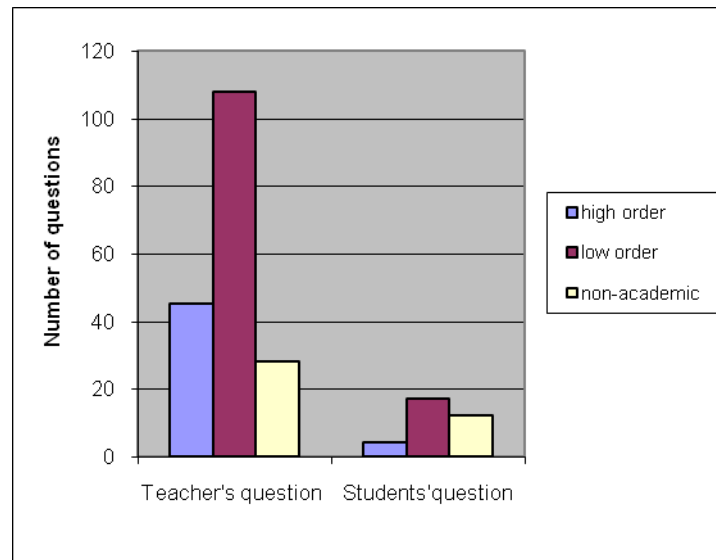
Nature of Questioning

This section is organized in three subsections (initiation, response and feedback) to present the classroom questioning practices, students responses to the teacher questions and the kind of feedback students get from teacher.

Initiation

Throughout the nine classroom observations, it is found that as teacher entered the class she started the lesson either asking low-order, non-academic questions or a statement. Figure 1 presents a comparative overview of questions asked by teacher and students.

Figure 1
Classroom questioning: teacher vs. students' questions



From figure 1 it is evident that teacher asked more questions (181) than the students (33) in the Social Studies' classroom. The questions are categorized in low-order, high-order and non-academic questions. Among them were 108 (60 %) low order academic questions; this did not necessarily encourage high order thinking but required students to “reproduce” already learnt answers from the text book. Some of the examples of low order questions include: which is the biggest mountain range? How many types of folding are there? How many platues are there in Pakistan? Can we measure the volcanic eruption? Can we say that the lava in one way it [sic] is good and in one way it is bad? Whereas, 45 (25%) questions were high order in which students required more than just remembering facts and application of knowledge was involved. For instance; why plates are moving in opposite direction? Why doesn't magma flow like a river? What is the difference between volcanic [sic] eruption and earth quake? When the energy releases? In addition, 28 (15%) questions were non academic questions, such as, does anybody have an atlas? What are you doing? Have you finished your work? miss, when we are going for the outing? May I close the door? Thus, the high proportion of teacher's questions goes to low order questions as compared to the high order questions. Figure 1 also illustrates that the number of questions students asked in the social studies' classroom were 33, out of which 17(52%) were low-order questions. Such as, can we measure the volcanic eruption? Can we say that the lava in one way it is good and in one way it is bad? 4 (12%) were high-order which includes: what is the difference between volcanic eruption and earth quack? when the energy releases? And 12 (36%) were non-academic questions. for example, miss, when we are going for outing? May I close the door? The comparison among the three types of questions showed that students' low-order questions are more as compared to the high-order and non-academic questions. Among the three categories of questions (teacher and students), teacher's questions were constantly higher than the students.

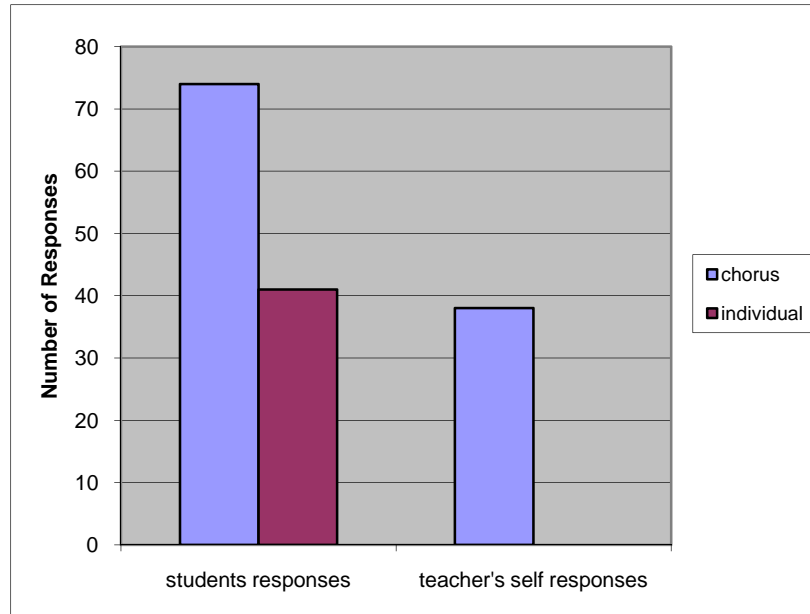
Responses to Questions

The analysis of the data of responses of the teacher's questions showed that most of the questions were responded by students either individually or in chorus. But quite a few questions were responded by the

teacher herself. Figure 2 presents a comparative overview of teacher and students responses to the questions raised by the teacher.

Figure 2

Classroom Questioning: teacher self responses vs. students' responses



It is evident from the observational data that majority of questions were responded by the students, though mode of response was different. They responded to 41 (26%) questions individually while 74 (48%) questions were responded in chorus. However, there were quite a number of questions (38; 25%) responded by teacher herself. She did not wait for students to respond particularly when the questions were high-order.

One possible explanation of ever dominating collective responses could be that teacher mostly used to pose questions to the whole class and students seemed to be habitual of choral responses. Another reason might be nature of the question (low-order) may cause students to give answers collectively. Because it requires less thinking and all children have readymade answers so they could not hold their responses and wait for the teacher to pick one student to respond.

Thus teacher used a variety of strategies while giving feedback for different purposes. Such as praise (good), evaluate (quite right, o.k.) and correct the responses through building on the students' responses.

4. Discussion

The study explored the classroom questioning practices in the social studies classroom and found that the majority of questions were closed-ended. Such questions offered students very limited opportunities to explore new thoughts and ideas in social studies. The teacher had a tendency to pose a series of specific, factual, low-level questions that hardly challenge students' thinking because answers could be readily lifted from the text. This frequent use of low-level questions (108) and neglecting higher-order questions may promote rote learning and may turn students into passive learners (Brown, 2001; Hussain, 2006; Ranjit, 2004). Low-order questions are useful for those students who have no prior knowledge about the concept and who need to experience simple questions before moving on to complex and more abstract

thinking. Amos and Boohan (2002) said that close-ended questions are not at all bad and open-ended questions are good. Close ended questions do have a place in the classroom.

Moreover, the assessment system coupled with transmission style teaching can only produce students who are very good at memorizing and reproducing what they have been taught as and expecting creativity from them is rather too much (Siddiqui, 2007). The findings also pointed out that students, regardless of their abilities, have not been given much exposure to high-order questions in the classroom. The majority of the low-order questions were responded by the students in chorus. Therefore, it creates interdependency and students individually do not get chance to express their ideas. Tan (2007) asserts that preferences for such styles suppress creativity, initiative and assertiveness. If the teacher had asked higher-order thinking questions, students would have asked the same because teachers who use higher-order thinking questions often find that their students give higher-order responses (Edwards & Bowman, 1996; Foster 1981; Tekene, 2006).

Teacher self response was another aspect of questioning observed in the class. There were many questions which would have generated discussion and probed children's thinking but were answered by the teacher herself. Instead of self response if teacher had given the opportunity for students to answer and they were given time to think, they would have produced higher-order responses. These kinds of opportunities may encourage students' questioning as well (Cotton, 2000; Cotton, 1993; Farmer, 2006; Muijs & Reynolds, 2005; Tekene, 2006). When the teacher provides the answer for the question she poses to the class, she consciously or unconsciously denies her students the opportunity to answer the questions and share their ideas with the class. Perhaps, the teacher may not want to loose her authority which guides the process of teacher-student interaction (Edwards & Bowman, 1996).

In response to student' answers, teacher used different strategies as feedback. Teacher sometimes praised, asked a series of questions for the correct responses and sometimes showed no reaction when responses were either correct or incorrect. Generally, this kind of feedback has its implication. Though praise and series of questions can make students feel good (Chin, 2006 & Zohar, 2005) but students may not be able to distinguish whether they were wrong or right and what was needed to improve more which may confuse them and would not be able to identify their performance and achievement.

Motivation is a crucial factor for both teacher and learner to create a learning environment and to participate in the learning processes. It could be internal or external but both of them play an essential role in the facilitation of the learning process (Reeve, 1996).

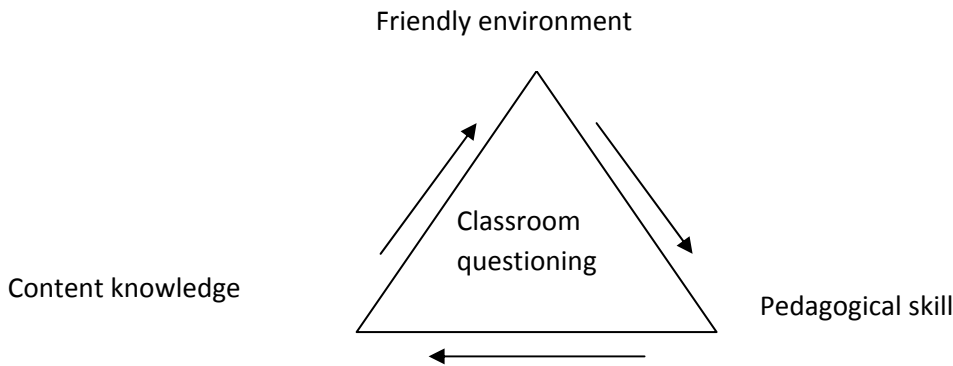
Questioning and answering nurture in a fear free environment where they could express themselves without any hesitation. Suchman (1990) spoke that children's inquiry could develop only when children felt free to share their ideas without fear of censorship, criticism or ridicule. Muzaffar (1999) found that in order to motivate students, teachers need to provide the non-threatening environment, and use a variety of teaching strategies. Naidu (2007) also says that students should be tutored in a manner that they should not be discouraged or distressed and indeed that should enhance their current and future motivation to learn.

While the teacher acknowledged the 'importance of children's participation in classroom questioning' and its 'impact on learning', teacher talk (i.e. questioning) dominated classroom teaching. She seemed to have used teaching as a 'telling activity' rather than engaging students in discussion (Muzaffar, 1999). Perhaps this is the result of the lack of her pedagogical skills. It is argued that teachers' understanding of the content and ability to transform the content into appropriate teaching strategies - pedagogy - help students understand easily (Shulman, 1986). Until teachers are equipped with adequate content knowledge and pedagogical expertise, the quality of education cannot improve (Khamis and Javed, 2006). Also, sound pedagogical skills are imperative to teach higher-order thinking (Zohar & Schwartz, 2005; Zohar, Vaaknin, & Degani, 2001) which is at the heart of classroom questioning.

Lack of time and its relationship with classroom questioning especially 'wait-time' an idea which needs to be unpicked. According to the teacher, social studies needs more time for teachers to appreciate children's participation in classroom activities in general and questioning in particular. Wait-time which is one of the fundamental components of good questioning practices requires 'patience' on the part of the teacher. She needs to give time, after posing a question, to help children think and respond. However, it was observed that the children were not given enough wait time. Why is it so? According to the teacher she was supposed to complete the syllabus in time. Therefore, teaching content is more important than students' participation. Rop (2003) argues that to ensure the classroom environment conducive for the free flow of ideas, students questioning can be used. Another factor which came to surface is that students who do not take part in asking and responding are afraid of being wrong and shy in the class. Students said during interview that "Sometimes they [their peers] are shy, they loose their confidence. They say when we ask this question, this question will not be appropriate. It will be humiliating if our question is wrong, that's why we sometimes don't ask questions" (Sts, Int: 8 /02/ 2008).

The discussion in this section revealed that the three factors depicted in figure 3 are interlinked and interdependent in the promotion of quality questioning practices in the classroom teaching.

Figure 3
Influencing Factors of Classroom Questioning



As mentioned earlier, teacher's content knowledge plays a key role in teaching, but only content knowledge is not enough. The teacher needs to have a strategy through which students' high critical thinking could be improved. Teachers' pedagogical skill assists teachers to effectively transfer the content in students through engaging them in self learning rather than telling them. Until students are free to express their ideas without fear, they cannot improve their critical thinking skills. Therefore, students need a fear-free and friendly environment to practice to improve their thinking skills.

5. Conclusion

Findings from the study show that of the teacher's questions, the predominating ones are those that are concerned with recall of facts already learned low-order questions. Why was it so? Several reasons for asking such questions could be proposed. Firstly, the teacher might be 'pressurized' due to the nature of the exam, which demands that students should learn facts. Whereas, asking question is a skill itself, the high-order question demands more 'expertise' on the part of the teacher in content and pedagogy. Though the teacher was competent in her content knowledge, but the pedagogical skills were not adequate and lacking in terms of questioning practices. If the teacher is not trained in the use of questioning strategies it is difficult for him/her to frame high-order questions to enhance students' thinking. Even if the high-order question is asked it "looses" its importance without handling it properly in order to get response from the children, building on their responses, and encouraging interaction among children. In other words asking

high-order questions is to orchestrate high-order interaction in the classroom. As witnessed in the classroom teaching most of the high-order questions were responded by the teacher herself. The quality of students' responses is also determined by the teacher's questions. The question can frame to stimulate higher cognitive achievements and to make information more meaningful, so that the students are involved in the process of thinking. Furthermore, they may also encourage and learn to pose good questions. It is evident in the classroom that showing the same pattern of teachers and students' questions: more low-order and less high-order questions indicate that the students' questions are dependent on the teacher's questions. However, the environment is another important factor which could hinder or facilitate classroom questioning especially in a democratic classroom, where students are given more autonomy to participate more productively.

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