QUESTIONS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CLASSROOM TALK IN COMMUNICATION AND STUDY SKILLS CLASSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the use of questions in a classroom can improve the development of classroom talk. The paper is based on a study that was carried out in the Communication and Study Skills (CSS) classes of the University of Botswana. The study probed at how CSS lecturers interacted with their students in an endeavour to improve the students' oral communicative competence. The mixed methods approach was used and two research instruments were used. The sample consisted of 356 students enrolled for the 2011/12 academic year. Using the Initiation (I-Move) analytical tool and the Sociocultural Theory (SCT), it was found out that generally, open-ended questions improve the quality of classroom talk as opposed to the close-ended questions. The study makes contributions to the research on classroom interaction. The study recommends professional training of lecturers with a view to providing them with skills of infusing questioning techniques in their teaching.

Key words: Open questions, closed questions, Initiation Move, Oral Communicative Competence

1.0 Introduction

Classroom interaction is an important aspect of the teaching-learning set-up and it facilitates understanding in the classroom in a number of ways. According to Allwright (1984), classroom interaction is, "the fundamental fact of classroom pedagogy-the fact that everything that happens in the classroom happens through a process of live person-to-person interaction" (p. 156). By way of explanation, classroom interaction is very important in the classroom because it depicts the manner in which lecturers and students exchange oral information with each other. Also, how both the lecturers and the students talk reveals whether the teaching and learning is a success or not. Relating the above working definitions to the University of Botswana (UB) context, students are assisted by their lecturers to acquire oral communicative competence. In assisting the students to talk, three aspects of the SCT mentioned above, are addressed.

2.0 Importance of classroom interaction

Classroom interaction is important in a number of ways. One of these is that it contributes to dual synergy. Relating to the aforementioned synergy, Hall and Verplaetse (2000) suggest that, "the oral interaction that occurs between teachers and students…-its role is especially consequential to the creation of learning environments and ultimately to the shaping of individual learners' development" (p. 9). In providing the importance of interaction, the above authors think of teachers and students as the main contributors to the interaction. This is because neither a teacher nor students can talk alone. Additionally, they point out that during the interaction process, students are the main focus as the process helps them to develop orally. The second importance of classroom interaction is that it helps in cognition. Cazden and Beck (2003) prepares us for the understanding of classroom interaction and cognition by stating that, "if we are to understand and foster students' communicative abilities to nurture the development of complex cognitive skills, we must have a way to describe the trajectory of

their growth as users of language" (p. 167). This means that interaction and cognition work together through the use of language.

3.0 Background of the study

This particular study investigated questions and the development of classroom talk in CSS classes of the University of Botswana (UB). The objective of the study was to establish whether or not the use of questions in CSS classrooms improve the development of classroom talk. Regarding the initiations, the focal point was on how lecturers asked students questions, in terms of identifying whether these were open or closed ended. Additionally, how lecturers provided students with information was considered. The focus was on whether the information provided was elaborate or short. Generally, all the above considerations were able to shed some light on whether or not the students are helped to develop their oral communicative competence.

The language situation in Botswana is said to consist of several parts (Bagwasi, 2010; Nyati-Ramahobo, 2010). It can be claimed that the several parts are English and Setswana; which are official languages. English language is the official language while Setswana is the national language. Further to the two languages above, there are other local or ethnic languages used by Batswana across the whole country.

The Government of Botswana has introduced a language system to be used in its educational structures. English is used as a medium of instruction in all the main educational structures in the country at primary and secondary schools as well as tertiary institutions (Republic of Botswana, 1994). Even though this is the case, it is only in the first year of primary school (Standard 1), that the medium of instruction is Setswana, except for English lessons. Setswana is regarded as the first language for most students although for some it is a second language. It can be claimed that the use of English in primary and secondary schools, adequately prepares students for studying at university.

The Communication and Study Skills Unit offers General Education Courses (GEC) to the university's undergraduate students. The GEC's are courses within the UB that are designed to offer academic and professional communication skills to the whole student community to help the students acquire various skills irrespective of the faculty in which the student is studying. From a linguistic angle, one of the aims of the Communication and Study Skills Unit is that students should communicate effectively by using amongst others, spoken forms for academic and professional purposes (University of Botswana, 2012).

4.0 Statement of the Problem

From my observation as a CSS lecturer for fifteen years, when students are asked to talk in the classroom, most of them seem passive. The students seem not to consider oral communicative competence as a skill that will help them whilst still studying, or even during their life after university; whether in the work-place or during social occasions. It seems the students associate classroom talk in CSS classes with the lecturer providing them with information (lecturer centeredness) rather than them contributing more talk in class (student centeredness). Therefore, the objective of the study was to establish if the use of questions in CSS classrooms improve the development of classroom talk or oral communication.

5.0 Literature Review

This section examines the literature that relates to classroom interaction in universities. A number of studies such as Tan (2007) have investigated the importance of initiations in the classroom. The above scholar assert that, "questioning has been, for thousands of years, one of the most popular modes of teaching and much class time has been devoted to it" (p. 88). That is, at the university level, most of the classroom talk is depicted by asking the students questions. Suviniitty (2010) suggests the importance of questions by stating what they do and points out that, "questions are also used as organizers" (p. 48). This may well address the fact that some of the questions are open and others are closed ended. Therefore, depending on how they are asked, that can lead to quality classroom interaction and more talk from the students.

In further commenting on quality classroom talk at the university level, Xie (2008) concluded that there is absence of quality classroom talk and noted that, "…the teachers should relax their control and allow the students more freedom to choose their own topics so as to generate more opportunities for them to participate in classroom interaction" (p. 19). Thus, there should be more student talk in university classrooms. An overall suggestion to avoid lecturers' domination of classroom talk is identified by Bentley (2010) who points out, "this is the moment when new knowledge is assimilated and when dialogic learning takes place" (p. 234). According to Bentley, if both the lecturer and the students engage in a dialogue, such interaction helps the students to acquire new ideas. It can be argued that Bentley's point of view is supported by other research on classroom talk that dialogic teaching is the best and a true foundation of learning (Alexander, 2008).

6.0 Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The research design helps one to understand how the research was carried out. According to Creswell (1994), "the design of a study begins with the selection of a topic and a paradigm." (p. 1). Thus, the research design in this paper focused on the mixed methods approach to help readers understand how and why this research was carried out.

Mixed methods is a type of research where more than one method is used in analysing the data (Brannen, 2005; Wilson, 2017). For this study to be viable, both qualitative and quantitative research techniques were used to collect and analyse data, with the two methods complementing each other. The two methods complemented each other because the qualitative aspects deal with words and observations and these are then interpreted. Nonetheless, quantitative methods are accomplished by the use of numbers. The I-Move was used to numerically analyse the use of questions in the CSS classrooms. In using the Mixed Methods, the SCT was used as a lens to answer the research questions (Refer to section 6). According to some authors (e.g., Biesta, 2012; Bryman, 2006) this type of research is also known as mixed methods research and triangulation is used to test the said methods' correctness.

6.2 Sampling

The population for this study comprised of first year students and CSS lecturers of the University of Botswana for the 2011/12academic year. The total student population was 3 483, whilst the total lecturer population was 29. From this population, a sample was chosen. This view of sampling is supported by Mertens (1998) who writes, "once the general nature of the respondents has been identified, it is time for the researcher to become more specific about the information sources" (p.112). According to Creswell (1994), "...purposive or judgmental sample is wherein potential respondents are

chosen on the basis of their convenience and availability" (p. 120). This type of sampling was chosen because the data collection involved capturing real lessons by video recording. Some participants were reluctant to be video recorded or to be observed as they thought that the recordings might be used to negatively rate their teaching styles.

Since CSS is offered to all first year students at the University of Botswana, a sample was chosen from the pool of all the CSS lecturers and students. The sample consisted of those lecturers who agreed to being observed, of whom there were 9 in total (two of the seven lecturers were observed twice in two different faculties). On the other hand, 356 students from all the faculties in UB participated in the study.

Those who participated in the study were given pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. However, the names of the sample faculties were maintained to indicate that none of the faculties to which CSS is offered was left out.

7.0 The Research Instruments and Data Collection

Systematic Observations

Systematic observation was used to collect date. The advantage of systematic observations is the recording and sequential analysis of the number of 'talk turns' between the lecturers and the students (Mercer, 2010). This particular instrument was used to ensure that the researcher did not miss any important aspect of the spoken or oral interaction. This was done, by ticking the various aspects of talk that were used by both the lecturers and the students. The checklist of items was also used to allow for the quantitative aspect of the study. In this study, therefore, the extent of questioning and the development of classroom talk was measured within the total teaching time. Generally, systematic observations were used in order to answer the research question(s) in terms of both the quantitative and qualitative aspects. Therefore, systematic observation helped to find out the nature of questions used in CSS classes.

Classroom Observations

In addition to systematic observation, the study used classroom observation. According to research methods scholars, classroom observation is where one gets first-hand information by watching and recording how people being studied naturally behaves in a research setting (Dikinya, Seeletso, Tloteng, Lesedi, Molebatsi & Ntuma, 2008; Mertens, 1998). Additionally, the above scholars have revealed that the aforementioned research instrument is advantageous in a number of ways, such as, observing the physical, the human and the social environment and program activities in order to obtain detailed and context specific data. Therefore, in this paper, classroom observations were used in order to get data from the participants' classroom setting (their classrooms) with a view to coming up with detailed information that could be used to explain the quality of questions used in CSS classrooms. As a result, the classroom observations helped to answer research question(s), with particular focus on both the quantitative and qualitative aspect. This dimension helped with finding out more about how the questions used developed the classroom interaction.

8.0 Data Analysis

Previous studies shows that data analysis is the process of discovering themes, detecting patterns and concepts embedded within the facts or data to test a specific hypothesis (Dikinya., et al, 2008). Based on the findings by the said scholars, the data, in this study, were analysed to find out how

the use of questions in a classroom improves the development of classroom talk in CSS classes. The data were analysed as follows:

The Systematic Observations

After making a check-list of items that resembled classroom talk in CSS classes, these were counted in order to come up with the quantitative results. The checklist of items, mainly the Initiation Move, was used to allow for the analysis of the discourse quantitatively. The advantage of systematic observations is the recording and sequential analysis of the number of 'talk turns' between the lecturers and the students (Hardman & Hardman, 2017; Mercer, 2010). This particular instrument was used to ensure that the researcher did not miss any important aspect of the spoken interaction. This was done, by ticking the various aspects of talk that were used by both the lecturers and the students. Therefore, the research instrument helped to find out how the use of questions in a classroom improves the development of classroom talk in CSS classes.

Classroom Observations

To analyse the lessons observed, a transaction was selected from one of the three lessons observed per lecturer. According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), "transactions normally begin with a preliminary exchange and end with a final exchange. Within these boundaries a series of medial exchanges occur" (p. 56). It is on the basis of this explanation that one of the transactions was selected and analysed for each of the nine lecturers so that the research question(s) on the use of questions in the classroom could be answered qualitatively.

In analysing the discourse for all the nine lecturers observed, the data were coded by numbers and pseudonyms provided for the lecturers as a way of classifying the information. Some scholars such as Basit (2003) assert that coding is categorising and sorting out the data so that it makes sense, in order to aid in the next step of the research process, which is discussion of the results. Coding helps in that, after data collection, there is always a lot of data that needs to be consolidated by the researcher before analysing it.

9.0 Results

The following research questions were used to examine how the use of questions in a classroom improves the development of classroom talk in CSS classes:

a) What kinds of questions occur between the lecturers and the students?
b) What kinds of questions are used by the lecturers?What kinds of questions are used by the students?

Deeper analysis of closed and open questions

The information below discusses the use of questions and the development of classroom talk. For all the nine lecturers that were observed amongst the seven faculties of the UB. Two of the lecturers taught CSS in the Faculty of Science and the other two taught in the Faculty of Business. For the other Faculties (Health Science, Humanities, Education, Social Science, Engineering and Technology), only one lecturer in each of the Faculties was observed teaching CSS. Each lecturer was observed three times and as a result, 27 lessons were observed within a period of three months.

A percentage breakdown of the analysis of the lecturer questions in CSS classes is given *in Figure 1 below:*

Figure 1: Frequencies of the Sub-Types of Questions in all the Twenty-Seven Classes
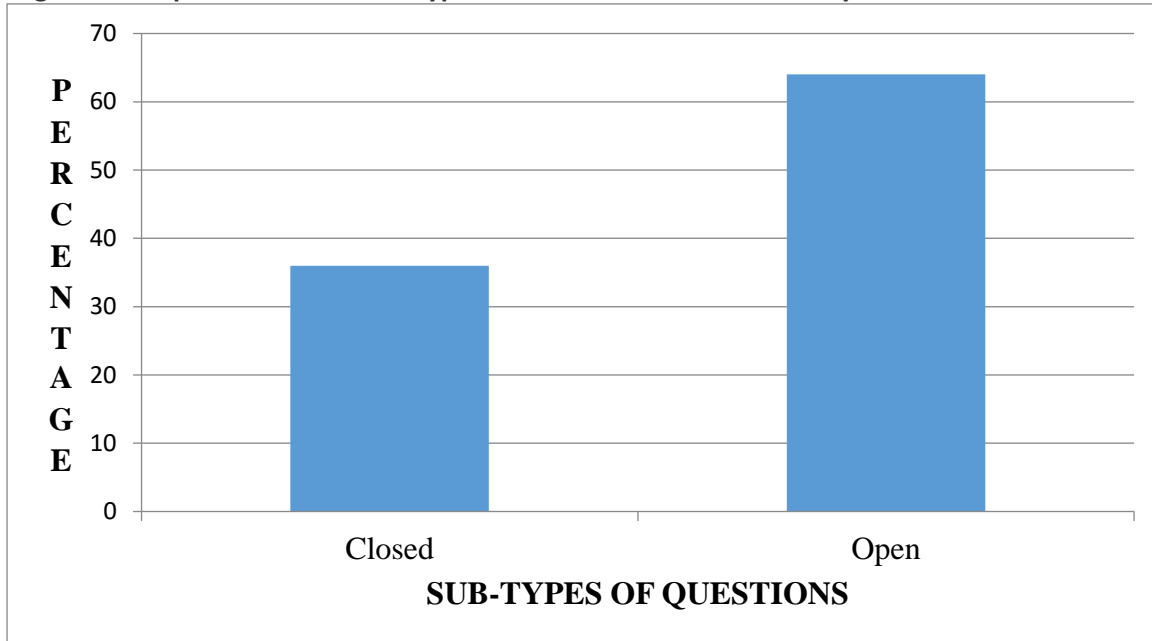
From the above illustration, findings of the types of questions used in the CSS classes suggest that there was a huge discrepancy in the percentages of the questions used by the lecturers. This is indicated by 64% and 36% of open and closed ended questions respectively. This suggests that the lecturers used more open questions than closed ones. Two arguments are advanced regarding the above results, and they address the short-term and long-term instructional goals. The short-term goal indicates that, because the lecturers plan their lessons before class, it is possible that they also think of how best to solicit elaborate information from the students before they get into the lectures. Regarding the long-term goal, it can be argued that the lecturers want to develop the students' oral communicative competence. As a result, open-ended questions end up being used mostly rather than closed-ended questions, in an endeavour to impart to the students, life-long skills. Several studies have revealed that there are discrepancies relating to the two main types of questions. However, the said studies show that teachers mostly used closed-ended questions, and that open-ended questions were not frequently used during classroom interaction (Saikko, 2007; Tabulawa, 2013). As open-ended questions were mostly observed in the CSS lessons, it can be argued that the teaching tends to be skills-focused. It could be that the lecturers are aware of the mandate of the CSS classes, in terms of developing the students' oral communication skills.

Moreover, by asking open-ended questions, the students might be actively involved in the classroom interaction. There is a consensus amongst classroom interaction linguists that questions extend pupils linguistic resources as they build on what has been previously said (e.g., Chin, 2006; Cullen, 2002). Analysing the use of open-ended questions in the classroom is a way of gauging students' oral participation.

Presentation and analysis of the discourse on the use of questions

As already indicated above, two types of questions (closed and open) were used by the CSS lecturers in an endeavour to develop classroom talk. The tables below indicate the use of questions during classroom talk.

From the CSS classes observed, the open-ended questions were illustrated in the following lesson: lecturer Pretty's lesson on academic reading.

Table 1: Excerpt of lecturer Pretty's lesson on "reading for academic purposes"

Exchanges	Participant	Classroom talk	Moves
18	L	Why the publisher?	I
	S	If you take Macmillan and Oxford and compare them with others; they are reputable publishers.	R
	L	Okay. I never thought of it in that way. Whether some publishers are more reputable or not.	F
19	L	Disregard **"tsabo" (those of)** Collegium or whatever?	I
	Ss	Yes	R
	L	Okay. I never thought of it in that way.	F

Two teaching exchanges developed from the above lesson extract as the lecturer probed for more information regarding the physical features that help one to determine the usefulness of a book. The lecturer even alluded to the fact that she never thought that some publishing houses were more reputable than others. The above results suggest that indeed, open-ended questions have more than one answer, as observed by Hardman, Abd Kadir., & Tubihinda (2012). In the above two examples, the lecturers probed the students for more answers. Also, the lecturers built on a student's latter response with a subsequent question, as illustrated in lecturer Pretty's lesson extract above. Finally, there were examples of refocus questions where the lecturers re-structured the question because the initial one was not answered by the students. This was illustrated by examples such, "what are your impressions? How do you see your note taking ability so far?" Additionally, because of the multifaceted nature of open-ended questions, new information was brought up by the students, and this improved the quality of classroom interaction. Moreover, the above results of lecturer open-ended questions suggest that they were varied and effective.

On the other hand, the category of questions that was least used was closed-endedquestions. It is worth mentioning that these occurred in various ways. One of these is that the said questions were asked in the form of cued elicitations, where the lecturer always gave the students some clues to answering the question. Littleton (2010) defines cued elicitations as, "a way of drawing out from the students the information that is being sought by providing strong visual cues and verbal hints as to what answer is required." (p. 149). This type of questioning is shown in the one extract below:

Table 2: Excerpt of lecturer Victor's lesson on, "information literacy skills"

Exchanges	Participant	Classroom talk	Moves
6	L	Everybody, It is-′	I
	Ss	Information Literacy.	R

From the above example it is indicative that the cued elicitation involved a simple repetition of words accompanied by verbal hints, with no new information added to the instruction. Edwards & Mercer (1994) have revealed that cued elicitation, "inculcates the students into shared discourse with the teacher because knowledge is aided and 'scaffolded' by the teacher's questions, clues and prompts to achieve insights in which the pupils by themselves seemed incapable of"(p.194). In a related idea, Littleton (2010) asserts that, "teachers try to create continuities in the experience of learners, for example, by referring to past events and implicating these in a joint construction of knowledge with their students." (p. 150). A considerable amount of literature has been published on teachers' use of cued elicitations. These studies (Chin, 2006; Hardman & Hardman, 2017) indicate that cued elicitations co-occur with closed questions. A similar trend of significance has been observed in the literature. Mercer (2010) carried out an investigation into teacher-pupil interaction and found that statements can also be used as cues. It can be claimed that from all the CSS classes observed, cued elicitation co-occurred with closed questions as statements and/or questions. This is because the students were guided in the appropriate completion of the required information.

Another point worth mentioning is that cued elicitation occurs at the same time as rising intonation as it tends to shift with a fast pace of questioning. The above results have a number of implications; that the cued elicitations co-occurred with both closed-ended questions and sought to display what the lecturer already knew. Secondly, these questions were sometimes asked with a rising intonation and a fast pace resulting in the students providing short answers that do not help in the development of classroom talk. As discussed earlier, this could be because of the simple repetition involved during questioning.

The second important aspect about closed-ended questions is that in most cases they tended to lead to choral responses. It can be argued that such closed-ended questions generated a lower level of student interaction. This was because of the simple repetition of points that normally displayed the lecturers' knowledge of the answer.

Another way of posing closed-ended questions is that they were responded to by one-word answers and this limited the development of classroom talk. Similar to cued elicitations, these were sometimes responded to in choral form, and also with 'Yes/No' responses. Such responses are illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Excerpt of lecturer Masterpiece's lesson on, "academic writing"

Exchanges	Participant	Classroom talk	Moves
1	L	Did you visit the library?	R/I
	Ss	Yes	R

Previous similar studies have indicated that there was indeed the use of choral responses in the form of 'yes/no' (Hardman, 2015; Saikko, 2007). Adding to Saiko's observations, some scholars state that this way of questioning could be highly used in verbal interaction (e.g. Cullen, 2002). The implication is that the questions that require 'yes/no' choral responses are used in teaching, and they are rarely or highly used, depending on the students' educational level, such as pre-primary, primary, secondary or university. It is worth mentioning that a relationship exists between cued elicitations and the 'Yes/No' responses, because they both co-occurred with closed and display questions. Even though the choral responses were on the deep end in the CSS classes (Refer to figure 1 above), this could suggest that the lecturers asked the students to respond as a whole class in order to emphasise a particular point.

Additionally, there were some closed questions that required very short answers (one or two words) rather than the common 'Yes/No' responses.

Table 4: Excerpt of lecturer Masterpiece's lesson on, "academic writing"

Exchanges	Participant	Classroom talk	Moves
2	L	What did you do? What did you learn?	I
	Ss	Cataloguing	R

The above results suggest that if the students are asked questions where they have to display information known, either by both the lecturer and/or the students, short responses also occur. This means that the display questions do not provide the students with an opportunity to critically think of the answers. In conclusion, closed-ended questions require short answers, and they also limit the students' responses. This is because in most cases the lecturers asked questions, which were simple or those to which they already knew the answers. The said questions can be divided into two, namely, requiring one-word responses and displaying known information.

There were some student initiations (i.e. the first part of the talk during classroom interaction) in the form of questions. These were advantageous to the classroom interaction and they were indicated by the student(s) stopping the lecturer and asking a question about what was being discussed. These comprised 34 (5%) of the total initiations (Figure 1 above). This minimal number could suggest that the lecturers dominated the classroom talk. The student initiations came in two ways, students asked questions out of own accord where the lecturer did not provide the information required. An example of this was in lecturer Victor's lesson on academic writing. One of the students asked, "when you say, 'It is surprising', aren't you in some way injecting an opinion?". Even though the students' initiations could be viewed as minimal, the foregoing example is an indication of striving towards the development of classroom talk by posing some questions during lessons.

Key:

1 Meaning of abbreviations: L-Lecturer; S-Student; Ss-Students; I-Initiation; R-Response; F-Feedback; R/I-Re-Initiation

10.0   Discussion

Research Question 1.1: What kinds of questions are used by the lecturers?

The development of classroom talk in various educational settings emerges in a number of ways. One of these is that at the University of Botswana CSS classes, the lecturers recap the previous lesson by either asking the students some questions or they briefly go over the lesson in order to link it with the current one. The results of this paper also suggest that the lecturers initiated classroom talk by asking the students questions as a way of probing them to actively take part in their learning. Because the SCT was used to benchmark the results for this paper, it is interesting to note that there was mediation, co-construction of knowledge and scaffolding. This finding supports previous research into this brain area, which links initiations with teacher talk. Some scholars have argued that providing students with information, teacher explanations, asking questions, checking understanding or directing the class to carry out a task during lessons, still dominates some classes (e.g., Yu; 2009). Similarly, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) state that the I-Move as an informative process, "is an act whose function is to pass on ideas, facts, opinions, information and to which an appropriate response is an acknowledgement that one is listening" (p. 9). As lecturers ask the students questions during classroom talk, they have the purpose of equipping the students with oral skills.

Research Question 1.2: What kinds of questions are used by the students?

However, the findings of this study pointed out that in some cases the students ask questions because they are aware that spoken interaction is a two-way process. This finding corroborates the ideas of Cullen (2002), who have shown that there is need for students to initiate questions during classroom talk.   This finding is also consistent with Thornbury's (1996) position that student contributions identify, "... a healthy distribution of the 'ownership' of classroom discourse, which in turn would tend to promote more 'investment' on the part of the learner…." (p. 282). The students' initiations during classroom talk are important as they develop dialogic teaching.

11.0   Conclusion

The investigation of how the use of questions in a classroom improve the development of classroom talk in CSS classes of the University of Botswana shows a discrepancy between the open and closed questions. Even though there is this great difference in the use of questions, this is a step in the right direction because the CSS students need to develop their oral communicative competence. While appreciating the use of open-ended questions by the lecturers, there is still need to encourage the students to pose questions during lectures as these will develop their critical thinking and their interaction in the classroom. The above conclusion is an indication of the use of the aspects of the SCT, which result in the good use of the I-Move.

For most of the lessons observed, the lecturers pose open questions rather than closed ones to initiate classroom interaction. This suggests that they want best practice relating to the asking of questions in the classroom by way of building more on what has been said. These findings are consistent with those in the definition of concepts section, as it was found that the lecturers still provide information to the students (e.g., Allwright, 1984).

The overall results from the discourse pertaining to the use of questions in CSS classes revealed that, if open-ended questions are used the students have an opportunity to contribute massively to the classroom talk. However, in the case of closed-ended questions, cued elicitations, rising intonation,

fast pace contribute to short responses to the questions asked. In order for the lecturers to address the said shortcoming, they should impart the importance of quality classroom talk to the students.

12.0   Recommendations

The findings from this study recommend that there be professional training for the lecturers at the beginning of every semester so that when the lecturers start teaching, they apply what they gained from the training. The training might be in the form of a workshop where the lecturers will share their experiences of the classroom talk. Another recommendation is that there be further research in other tertiary institutions of Botswana such as Botswana International University of Science and Technology (BIUST), the Institute of Health Sciences (IHS), Botswana University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (BUAN), and the Colleges of Education. This is because the aforementioned also offer Communication and Study Skills. The findings could also be used to inform the national, regional and the international community about classroom interaction in CSS classes.

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