

Questioning, Scaffolding, and Classroom Interaction in Primary Schools in Uganda

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600302>

Received: 28 May 2026; Accepted: 03 June 2026; Published: 22 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This study investigated questioning strategies, scaffolding practices, and classroom interaction processes in primary schools in Bududa District, Uganda. Guided by Interactional Sociolinguistics, Speech Act Theory, and the Interaction Hypothesis, the study examined how teachers organize classroom discourse, negotiate meaning, and facilitate learner participation through verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed, and data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured teacher interviews, teacher questionnaires, learner questionnaires, and focus group discussions. The study involved 80 teachers, 120 learners, 10 head teachers, and observations from 15 classrooms across rural and semi-urban primary schools. Findings revealed that classroom interaction was predominantly shaped through directives, explanations, questioning sequences, and scaffolding strategies. Open-ended, referential, and probing questions significantly enhanced learner participation, negotiation of meaning, and uptake, while excessive reliance on display questions often restricted interaction to brief responses. Teachers frequently employed scaffolding techniques such as prompts, reformulations, repetition, clarification requests, and guided feedback to support comprehension and sustain participation. Non-verbal communicative resources including gestures, gaze, facial expressions, and tone complemented verbal interaction by reinforcing meaning and regulating classroom participation. The findings further revealed notable differences between rural and semi-urban classrooms, particularly in learner participation patterns, questioning practices, and dialogic interaction. The study concludes that effective classroom interaction depends largely on teachers' pragmatic competence, particularly their ability to balance authority with learner-centered communication. The study contributes to classroom discourse scholarship by providing empirical evidence from multilingual Ugandan primary classrooms, a context that remains underrepresented in interactional sociolinguistics research. The study recommends integrating pragmatic awareness, dialogic communication strategies, questioning techniques, and multimodal interaction skills into teacher education and professional development programs.

Keywords: classroom interaction, questioning strategies, scaffolding, learner participation, pragmatics, Bududa District

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Effective classroom interaction is central to successful teaching and learning processes. In classroom settings, teachers use language not only to transmit knowledge but also to organize participation, regulate learner behaviour, negotiate meaning, and scaffold understanding. Classroom discourse therefore functions as a dynamic interactional process through which teachers and learners collaboratively construct knowledge (Gumperz, 2020; Searle, 2020).

Recent studies in educational linguistics emphasize that teacher communication styles significantly influence learner participation, engagement, comprehension, and uptake (Islam, Khalil, & Sagheer, 2025; Munir, 2025). Interactive classroom communication characterized by questioning, scaffolding, clarification requests, and dialogic exchanges creates opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning and actively participate in learning processes. Questioning strategies, particularly open-ended and referential questions, are increasingly recognized

as important interactional resources that stimulate critical thinking, elaboration, and learner-generated responses (Uştuk, 2024; Saballa, 2025).

Scaffolding also plays a crucial role in classroom interaction by enabling teachers to support learners progressively toward higher levels of understanding. Through prompts, repetition, reformulations, guided explanations, and feedback, teachers help learners bridge gaps in comprehension and participate more confidently in classroom activities. Such interactional support aligns with learner-centered pedagogical approaches that encourage collaborative meaning construction rather than passive reception of knowledge.

In multilingual classroom contexts such as Bududa District, teacher communication extends beyond verbal language to include gestures, gaze, tone, facial expressions, and other multimodal resources that reinforce meaning and participation. These interactional features are especially important in rural Ugandan classrooms where linguistic diversity, varying proficiency levels, and sociocultural norms shape classroom discourse practices.

Despite growing interest in classroom interaction globally, empirical research focusing on questioning, scaffolding, and classroom discourse in Ugandan primary schools remains limited, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings. Most existing studies emphasize general teaching effectiveness while paying limited attention to the interactional organization of teacher talk and learner participation. This study therefore sought to examine how questioning strategies, scaffolding practices, and communication styles shape classroom interaction and learner uptake in primary schools in Bududa District, Uganda.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many primary school classrooms in Bududa District continue to be characterized by teacher-centered communication dominated by directives, display questions, and authoritative interaction patterns that limit active learner participation. Although contemporary pedagogical approaches emphasize dialogic teaching, scaffolding, and learner-centered interaction, classroom communication in many Ugandan primary schools remains largely transmission-oriented. Excessive reliance on directive and authoritative talk may restrict opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, ask questions, clarify misunderstandings, and actively participate in classroom discourse.

Studies conducted in other educational contexts suggest that interactive questioning, scaffolding strategies, and dialogic communication significantly enhance learner engagement, comprehension, and uptake (Alexander, 2023; Saballa, 2025). However, there is limited empirical evidence on how questioning strategies and scaffolding practices operate within multilingual primary school classrooms in Bududa District. Without such context-specific evidence, teacher education programs may inadequately emphasize pragmatic competence, interactional organization of talk, and learner-centered discourse practices. This study therefore investigated questioning strategies, scaffolding practices, and classroom interaction processes in primary schools in Bududa District, Uganda.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

General Objective

To examine questioning strategies, scaffolding practices, and classroom interaction processes in primary schools in Bududa District, Uganda.

Specific Objectives

- i. To analyze the linguistic and interactional organization of teacher talk in primary school classrooms.
- ii. To examine how questioning and scaffolding strategies influence learner participation and uptake.
- iii. To establish how verbal and non-verbal communication mediate meaning negotiation in classroom interaction.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. How is teacher talk linguistically and interactionally organized in primary school classrooms in Bududa District?
- ii. How do questioning and scaffolding strategies influence learner participation and uptake?
- iii. How do verbal and non-verbal communicative resources mediate meaning negotiation in classroom interaction?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by Interactional Sociolinguistics, Speech Act Theory, and the Interaction Hypothesis. Interactional Sociolinguistics, advanced by Gumperz (2020), emphasizes that meaning is socially constructed through interaction and contextual interpretation. This framework was useful in analyzing turn-taking, participation structures, repair sequences, and classroom discourse organization.

Speech Act Theory (Searle, 2020) provided a framework for examining how teachers perform communicative actions such as directing, questioning, praising, clarifying, and correcting learners during classroom interaction. Teacher utterances were analyzed not merely as grammatical structures but as purposeful social actions influencing learner participation and classroom dynamics.

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 2021) informed the study's focus on negotiation of meaning, learner uptake, clarification requests, and scaffolding processes. The theory argues that language learning and comprehension develop through interactional exchanges where participants negotiate understanding through feedback, reformulation, and clarification.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provided a comprehensive framework for understanding how classroom interaction shapes teaching, learning, and learner participation in multilingual primary school contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classroom Interaction and Teacher Talk

Classroom interaction refers to the communicative exchanges that occur between teachers and learners during instructional activities. Research indicates that teacher talk significantly shapes participation patterns, learner engagement, and classroom climate (Alexander, 2023). In many classrooms, teacher discourse is dominated by directives, explanations, and evaluative feedback, reflecting institutional authority and pedagogical goals.

Interactional sociolinguistic studies further demonstrate that classroom communication is collaboratively constructed through turn-taking, questioning, repair, and feedback sequences (Gumperz, 2020). Teachers therefore play a central role in regulating interactional flow and facilitating learner participation.

Questioning Strategies and Learner Uptake

Questioning is one of the most significant interactional resources in classroom discourse. Open-ended and referential questions encourage elaborated learner responses and stimulate critical thinking, while display questions often restrict responses to short confirmation sequences (Uştuk, 2024).

Research by Saballa (2025) shows that probing and follow-up questions enhance learner uptake by encouraging clarification, elaboration, and reformulation of ideas. Effective question sequencing also supports incremental learning, moving learners from recall toward comprehension, analysis, and evaluation.

Scaffolding and Meaning Negotiation

Scaffolding involves temporary instructional support that enables learners to accomplish tasks beyond their immediate ability level. Teachers scaffold learning through prompts, guided explanations, reformulations, clarification requests, repetition, and feedback (Long, 2021).

Studies indicate that scaffolding strengthens learner participation and comprehension by reducing anxiety and supporting negotiated meaning construction (Munir, 2025). In multilingual classrooms, scaffolding frequently includes code-switching, gestures, repetition, and multimodal explanations.

Non-Verbal Communication in Classroom Interaction

Non-verbal communication forms an important part of classroom discourse. Gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, posture, and intonation reinforce verbal meaning and regulate participation (Islam, Khalil, & Sagheer, 2025). Teachers frequently use gestures and gaze to allocate turns, emphasize concepts, and maintain learner attention.

Multimodal interactional resources are particularly significant in multilingual and lower primary classrooms where learners may rely on visual and paralinguistic cues to support comprehension.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to capture authentic classroom interactions in natural settings. This design enabled the researcher to generate detailed descriptions of teacher talk, questioning strategies, scaffolding processes, and learner participation patterns without manipulating classroom environments (Creswell, 2021; Flick, 2020).

Research Approach

A qualitative approach was adopted because it allowed the researcher to examine the contextualized meanings of classroom discourse and interactional processes. The approach facilitated deeper exploration of how teachers and learners negotiate meaning through classroom communication (Patton, 2022).

Area of Study

The study was conducted in selected rural and semi-urban primary schools in Bududa District, Eastern Uganda. The district was selected because of its diverse sociocultural communication practices.

Respondents

The study involved:

- 80 teachers,
- 120 learners,
- 10 head teachers,
- and 15 classroom observations.

Participants were drawn from Primary Four to Primary Seven classes.

Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select teachers and head teachers with relevant classroom experience. Stratified random sampling ensured representation of learners across class levels, while classrooms for observation were selected through purposive and random procedures.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data was collected through:

- classroom observations,
- semi-structured teacher interviews,

- teacher questionnaires,
- learner questionnaires,
- and focus group discussions.

Classroom observations focused on questioning strategies, scaffolding practices, turn-taking, learner participation, and multimodal communication. Interviews and focus groups provided participants' perspectives regarding classroom interaction and learner engagement.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant school authorities. Informed consent was secured from teachers, head teachers, and learners' guardians. Confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the study (UBOS, 2022).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically. Classroom interactions were examined using pragmatic and interactional categories such as directives, questioning sequences, scaffolding, repair, learner uptake, and multimodal communication. Recurring patterns were identified and interpreted in relation to the study objectives and theoretical frameworks.

FINDINGS

Linguistic and Interactional Features of Teacher Talk

Table 1: Linguistic and Interactional Features of Teacher Talk

Feature	Example	Frequency	Interactional Function
Directives	"Open your books."	High	Organizing classroom activities
Open-ended questions	"Why do plants need sunlight?"	High	Promoting elaboration
Referential questions	"Explain this in your own words."	Moderate	Encouraging negotiation of meaning
Scaffolding prompts	"Can someone rephrase that?"	Moderate	Supporting comprehension
Praise	"Excellent answer."	Moderate	Reinforcing participation
Clarification requests	"What do you mean?"	Moderate	Repairing misunderstandings
Non-verbal cues	Gestures, gaze, pointing	High	Reinforcing verbal meaning

The findings revealed that classroom discourse was predominantly organized through directives, explanations, questioning sequences, and scaffolding strategies. Directives were commonly used to regulate classroom activities and maintain instructional flow. However, many directives were mitigated through politeness markers and inclusive language.

Questioning strategies emerged as important interactional resources for stimulating participation and negotiating meaning. Open-ended and referential questions frequently generated elaborated learner responses, while display questions often restricted interaction to short responses.

Scaffolding strategies such as prompts, repetition, clarification requests, and guided reformulations enabled learners to participate more actively and comprehend lesson content more effectively.

Extract 1: Questioning and Scaffolding

Teacher: "Why do plants need sunlight?"

Learner: "For growing."

Teacher: "Good. Can you explain how sunlight helps them grow?"

Learner: "It helps them make food."

Teacher: "Excellent. That process is called photosynthesis."

Analysis

The teacher employed probing and follow-up questioning to scaffold learner understanding progressively. Praise tokens such as “Good” and “Excellent” functioned as interactional reinforcement, encouraging continued participation. The questioning sequence facilitated negotiated meaning construction consistent with the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 2021).

Influence of Communication Styles on Learner Participation

Table 2: Learner Participation Patterns

Participation Type	Frequency	Classroom Style
Voluntary oral responses	High	Dialogic classrooms
Choral responses	Moderate	Mixed interaction style
Learner-initiated questions	Moderate	Inquiry-oriented classrooms
Group discussions	Moderate	Collaborative classrooms
Minimal participation	Low	Authoritative classrooms

The findings showed that dialogic and interactive communication styles generated higher learner participation compared to highly authoritative communication patterns. Learner-initiated questioning occurred more frequently in classrooms where teachers encouraged clarification, inquiry, and collaborative discussion.

Authoritative classrooms dominated by rigid directives and display questions recorded minimal learner contribution and reduced negotiation of meaning.

Extract 2: Clarification and Learner Uptake

Teacher: “What is evaporation?”

Learner: “When water disappears.”

Teacher: “Not exactly disappears. What happens to the water?”

Learner: “It changes into vapour.”

Teacher: “Very good. That is evaporation.”

Analysis

The interaction demonstrates repair and negotiated meaning construction. Rather than directly rejecting the learner’s response, the teacher used clarification and guided reformulation to support accurate conceptual understanding. The sequence illustrates scaffolding and interactional repair processes within classroom discourse.

Questioning Strategies and Learner Uptake

Table 3: Questioning Strategies and Learner Uptake

Question Type	Example	Learner Uptake
Open-ended	“Why do plants need sunlight?”	High
Referential	“Explain in your own words.”	High
Probing	“Can you give another example?”	High
Clarification	“What do you mean?”	Moderate
Display questions	“Is water a liquid?”	Moderate

The findings indicate that open-ended, referential, and probing questions generated deeper learner engagement and more elaborate responses. These questioning forms promoted critical thinking, negotiated meaning, and learner uptake.

Display questions, although useful for checking factual understanding, frequently limited interactional depth because learners often responded with brief confirmation answers.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study contributes to classroom discourse scholarship by providing empirical evidence on questioning, scaffolding, and classroom interaction within multilingual Ugandan primary school classrooms. The study extends Interactional Sociolinguistics and the Interaction Hypothesis into rural African educational contexts by demonstrating how teacher talk, questioning strategies, scaffolding, and multimodal communication shape learner participation and negotiated meaning construction.

The study further contributes context-specific insights into how sociocultural norms and multilingualism influence classroom interaction patterns in Ugandan primary education.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study focused on selected primary schools in Bududa District and therefore may not fully represent classroom interaction patterns in all Ugandan primary schools. Additionally, the study primarily relied on thematic interactional analysis and did not employ detailed conversation analysis transcription techniques, which may have provided more extensive micro-level interactional insights.

CONCLUSIONS

Classroom interaction in Bududa District primary schools is predominantly structured through directives, questioning sequences, explanations, and scaffolding strategies. Teachers' pragmatic competence significantly influences learner participation, uptake, and negotiated meaning construction.

Interactive and dialogic communication styles generated higher learner participation than authoritative classroom communication patterns. Open-ended, referential, and probing questions were particularly effective in stimulating elaboration, critical thinking, and learner engagement.

Scaffolding strategies including prompts, clarification requests, reformulations, and guided feedback enhanced comprehension and learner confidence. Non-verbal communicative resources such as gestures, gaze, facial expressions, and intonation complemented verbal interaction and reinforced classroom participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teacher education programs should integrate classroom pragmatics, questioning strategies, and interactional communication into pre-service teacher training curricula.

Professional development workshops should emphasize dialogic teaching, scaffolding, negotiated meaning, and multimodal classroom interaction strategies.

Teachers should be encouraged to use open-ended, referential, and probing questions more frequently to promote learner participation and higher-order thinking.

Schools should promote reflective teaching practices and peer classroom observations to strengthen teachers' interactional competence.

Context-specific classroom discourse manuals should be developed to provide practical examples of effective questioning, scaffolding, and learner-centered interaction strategies in Ugandan primary classrooms.

Future studies should employ multimodal discourse analysis and conversation analysis approaches to investigate classroom interaction at a more detailed micro-analytic level.

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