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The Role of Elicitation Questions in Language Learning

A Function-Based Framework

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Transcription

Persian examples are rendered in transcription. The symbols represent the sounds similar to the English sounds except for the cases stated in the following:

Symbols	Persian Words	Closest English Sounds
Vowels:		
/a/	/ham/ “also”	sad
/aa/	/aan/ “that”	far
/e/	/yek/ “one”	red
/o/	/to/ “you”	for
/u/	/tu/ “inside”	do
/i/	/?in/ “this”	feet
Consonants:		
/ch/	/cheraa/ “why”	cheek
/sh/	/shomaa/ “you”	shoe
/zh/	/zharf/ “deep”	pleasure
/?/	/?in/ “this”	…….
/x/	/xaane/ “home”	…….
/q/	/daaq/ “hot”	…….

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CHAPTER 1

Different Approaches to Questioning

1.1 Definition of Question

Questioning is not only one of the most important skills in language learning, but also one of the main objectives of learning English in our schools. 'Questioning' here refers to the act of asking or putting or using questions through which a good number of functions can be served. Educators have long recognized the effect of teacher questions on the thinking process of pupils. According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1992), 'questions' in general, refer to the utterances which are addressed to a listener/reader and ask for an expression of fact, opinion, idea, etc. Although there are a number of definitions, it seems that the term 'question' has never been clearly defined. With the changes occurring within the linguistic theories, the term has been characterized in different ways. Since the inception of linguistics considering language as a specialized tool or system for the expression and communication of thoughts, feelings and purposes; and question as an instrument for getting information, linguists have attempted to provide different theories of language.

1.2 Structuralism

One of the important schools of linguistics which was established in the early decades of the twentieth-century was Structuralism. Structuralists paid more attention to the form than meaning and described linguistic elements in terms of structure. In fact, syntax and form played a central role in this analytical approach. The result of structural practice was the ability to produce a range of forms, but not the ability to use forms appropriately. In other words, in the structural view the interest was in the form of language rather than the function. In this view an utterance is identified as a 'question' because it is interrogative in form and it is regarded as a syntactic category. However, many linguists gradually began to shift their attention to language in its context and social setting, and to language users and their purposes of communication.

1.3 Functionalism

The new approach in which linguists emphasized the study of language in relation to its setting, participants, and their relationship was called Functionalism. Different from the structuralists who studied language as an, autonomous system with little reference to its meaning and social functions, functionalists tried to study language as a means of social interaction and analyze different ways in which people use language in order to fulfill some functions such as requesting, greeting, etc. within the social organization. They focused on meaning and function rather than grammatical elements, so they provided a

principled way of linking function and form. In this approach, linguists defined 'questions' as a semantic class which is primarily used to seek information on a specific point.

1.4 Pragmatics

Recently, linguists have realized that performing certain functions in a language might extend beyond the surface of the language, thus they are concerned with the analysis of human discourse and communicative interaction. Meanwhile, the attention of many linguists has shifted from sentence to text. According to Thomas (1995), there are many times that people state sentences in their real-life and normal situation, but they mean more than what they exactly say. This relatively new area of linguistics which is one of the three divisions of semiotics, (i.e., the scientific study of sign and symbol system) is concerned with the study of language in use and with the relationship between utterances and the context in which they occur, that is, Pragmatics. This approach not only studies the exact and literal meaning of words and sentences, but also deals with the aspects of meaning that has to do with the intention of the speaker. Thomas (1995: 23) further defmes pragmatics as"... meaning in interaction, since this takes account of the different contributions of both speaker and hearer as well as that of utterance and context to the making of meaning". Elgin (as quoted in Chastain, 1998: 68) considers pragmatics as ". . . the interaction between a sequence of language and the real world situation in which it is used". Meaning in this sense has a central role in communication which occurs in social organization. So, the study of semantics to understand utterances becomes more and more important. Pragmatics takes into consideration both the study of meaning and parts of linguistics which connect language with social, psychological and philosophical aspects of linguistics. In this context, 'question' can be characterized as an utterance with a particular illocutionary force, which refers to the speaker's communicative intention in producing an utterance.

1.5 Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis

There are two major approaches in relation to the analysis of conversation within pragmatics. Levinson (as reported in Rostampour, 19974: 4) holds that these two approaches are ". . . discourse analysis and conversational analysis". Sinclair and Coulthard (1995: 8) propose that "Grammar is concerned with the formal properties of an item; discourse with the functional properties, with what the speaker is using the item for". In discourse category an utterance is identified as a 'question' because it expects an answer or some verbal performance from the addressee. Franck (as cited in Tsui, 1995: 32) maintains that:

> Conversation is an interactive process, during which the meaning and illocutionary force of utterance are negotiated between the speaker and the addressee, not interchange of utterances with speaker-determined illocutionary forces.

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) explain that there are three major acts (i.e., the lowest rank of discourse) in all forms of spoken discourse -- elicitation, directive, and informative -- which occur in classroom discourse as the heads of initiating moves. They declare that ". . . the meaning of an utterance is its predictive assessment of what follows" (12). Thus, an utterance which expects a linguistic response of supplying a piece of information is characterized as an elicitation. In this regard Tsui (1995) considers the term 'Elicitation' as any utterance whose function is to elicit an obligatory verbal response or its non-verbal surrogate. The six subcategories of 'Elicitation' are formulated as follows:

1) Elicit: inform

The first subcategory is Elicitations which invite the addressee to supply a piece of information.

2) Elicit: confirm

The second subcategory is Elicitations which invite the addressee to confirm the speaker's assumption.

3) Elicit: agree

The third subeategory, elicit: agree, invites the addressee to agree with the speaker's assumption that the expressed proposition is self-evidently true.

4) Elicit: commit

The fourth subcategory is Elicitation which differs from the above three subcategories in that it elicits more than just a verbal response from the addressee. It also elicits commitment of some kind.

5) Elicit: repeat and 6) Elicit: clarify

The fifth and sixth subcategories of Elicitation are metadiscoursal and refer to the discourse itself. One prospects a repetition of the utterance preceding the Elicitation and the other prospects a clarification of a preceding utterance or preceding utterances.

Tsui (1995:81-88)

Tsui (1995: 89) maintains that ". . . any utterance in the initiating move which prospects an obligatory verbal response can be characterized as an *elicitation* irrespective of its syntactic form". She adds:

> This characterization avoids the inconsistency of using syntactic criteria for some utterances and discourse criteria for others. It avoids confusing labels such as 'exclamatory questions' and 'declarative questions' -- where, in the former, the term question' refers to the interrogative form, whereas in the latter, the term 'question' refers to the discourse function. It also avoids the lumping together of utterances which have different discourse consequences, such as the characterization of questions as requests.