

## *Questions and Mutual Understanding in L2 Classroom*

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### **Abstract**

An integration of questions in the teaching of L2 is strongly supported in educational arguments. However, the nature of the constructs that underlie these questions in order to ensure mutual understanding is not defined. Many assessments of learners have shown that learners provide answers which are considered correct but not the appropriate one to the question posed by the teacher. This paper investigates the construct that underlies an assessment which ensures the mutual understanding of a learner and the teacher in an L2 classroom. Corpus for this study is drawn from Nigerian high school learners of English.

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## Introduction

Asking questions is the preoccupation of every teacher and a very important one too if mutual understanding must be achieved because questions are used by the teacher to check on how the mind of the learner is processing the information taught and to also enhance the learner's learning by subtly guiding his thoughts. Douglas (2010) while describing the setting of a normal second language (L2) classroom, observes that teachers are constantly assessing their students not so much because the teacher is assessing his/her methodology of teaching but principally to make inferences about the learners' language abilities. The inferences drawn from these assessments are very important to the future of the learner because they define the learner's potentiality for higher duties where the language ability is crucially important. Therefore, asking the questions correctly such that it will not only test the learner's language ability but reflect the specific information the teacher sought, constitute effective questioning. An effective question is expected to demand from the learner to perform precisely the skill the teacher wishes to test (Cf. Hughes 2003).

Discussing how teachers can ask the best questions in class, Kelly, M. (2014) referred to Casteel (1994) "Effective teaching", as providing a definition of what constitutes an effective question. According to this source, effective questions are those that follow a clear sequence, are contextual solicitations, and are hypothetico-deductive. These types of questions are said to be effective because they have a high student response rate and increased quality of students' responses. It is also claimed that 80% of classroom questioning is based on low order, factual recall questions which do not foster a culture of enquiry that enriches understanding. Effective questioning however is said to enrich understanding because it makes thinking visible by identifying prior knowledge, reasoning ability and the specific degree of student understanding. What is particularly impressive about effective questioning is that it is said to remove misconceptions.

According to Kelly (2014), questions that follow a clear sequence, are contextual soliciting and are hypothetico-deductive, will be without misconceptions. The implication made here is that these types of questions would enhance mutual understanding. But how can one identify a question that follows a clear sequence, is contextual soliciting and hypothetico-deductive? The source provided the answer to this by explaining that clear sequence questions are the simplest form of effective questioning and consist of little questions that gradually build up to a larger overall question. The little questions are said to be important because they establish the basis for the overall question.

The problem with these little questions is that it is not clear what shape they take and how they establish the basis for the larger overall question. Contextual soliciting questions on the other hand are said to provide a context that prompts an intellectual thought. According to the source, this type of question sometimes uses a conditional language that relates the context to the information required. As much as this may sound simple and straight forward, it is difficult to say in definite terms that the context of the question does prompt the information required in the mind of the student. This is because many context soliciting questions have been asked by teachers but the student has missed the specific information the teacher required

because the context prompted another idea quite different from what the teacher intended to communicate.

Here is an example of a context soliciting question: Re-do this short passage so that it can serve as a suitable paragraph in your letter to your former Head of Department.

*Life as a corper is not as easy-going as it was in your days. The miserable allowance of Nine Thousand Naira is not enough for feeding. I've been able to buy some pots for cooking. I can't travel because I don't have enough money for that.*

It is obvious that the question seeks to know if the student can recognize the appropriate style of the letter to be a formal letter. However, is the student expected to provide the features of a formal letter in terms of the addresses, salutation and so forth or to simply write out the contracted words in full and change slangs to formal expressions? Hypothetico-deductive questions are like context soliciting questions in that they provide a context but the context is a hypothetical one. This type of question makes use of verbs like assume, suppose and so forth. The hypothetical context is supposed to serve as a link to the information the teacher seeks in the question. The issue in question is how to ensure that the student and the teacher have a mutual understanding of the specific information sought in the question.

Experience has shown that teachers and examiners ask questions and expect a particular sort of answers as appropriate (c.f. Edwards and Mercer, 1987). Often times, the student's answer is not wrong but is not just what the teacher expected. The teacher seeks and expects specific information but specific information cannot be given if the student is not aware that it is specific information and must be treated as specific. The teacher's expectations fall under an implicit rule which the student does not share with the teacher. This is why there must be mutual understanding between the teacher and the student in the questions posed by the teacher. The issue of mutual understanding falls within the scope of Pragmatics. For this reason, we shall treat mutual understanding under the theoretical framework of Relevance theory.

### **Theoretical Background**

Pragmatics is generally defined as the theory of utterance interpretation. The basic question in utterance interpretation is: what is the intention of the speaker in the utterance? Relevance theory of pragmatics proposes that utterance interpretation is an inferential process whose premises are the logical form of the sentence uttered and the context. Most importantly, the crux of Relevance theory is to demonstrate that correct interpretation (mutual understanding) of utterances is determined by the propositions that are most relevant to the context. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), in a communicative situation such as questioning in an L2 classroom, it is expected that the communicator first provides the ostensive stimulus which must be sufficient for the addressee to derive the specific intended message.

According to this source, addressees in a communication situation must focus their attention to what appears to be the most relevant information in the communication they receive because their duty in a communication situation is to take in what is provided and infer the intended meaning. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), every act of communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance, implying that a communicator intentionally creates in his speech that which

makes his intention recognizable to the addressee. Psycholinguistics evidence shows that addressees in a communication situation tend to select the most salient interpretation from a range of contextually available interpretations.

The most salient interpretation is usually one that the assumptions are made manifest in the communication and cost the least processing effort to construct (Gernsbacher 1995). We are optimistic that Relevance theory can provide a descriptively adequate mutual understanding in an L2 classroom.

### **Mutual understanding in the classroom**

An L2 classroom is a formal context where abstract logical problems and hypothetical problems are solved. Such a situation requires that the transmission of instruction depends upon mutual understanding which is defined by a sharing of the rules of interpretation. The transmission of instruction in an L2 classroom is one of a model of communication where the transmitter attempts to select and send a particular message he intends to communicate from a set of possible messages. In the attempt to decode the message, the receiver may meet with assumptions that act as noises because they interfere with the signal transmission and distract the receiver from the intended message.

If the message was well coded, we expect that it will raise assumptions that will form contingent affordances that will guide the receiver to the intended message. These affordances can then be added to the context background information to derive implications that help interpret the message. Sometimes, the interpretation received does not match with the transmitter's intended message even though it may match sometimes. But often times, the receivers' interpretation is based on a selection of a set of background assumptions as premises for the derivation of the expected contextual implications which is the interpretation of the message received. The selected set of background assumptions depend either on their degree of accessibility in a particular context, or on the potential contextual implications they yield.

The student who is the receiver of an instruction infers the teacher's (transmitter) intended meaning from evidence that the teacher has provided in his linguistically-coded information (c.f. Sperber and Wilson, 2002). This linguistically-coded information is, according to Sperber and Wilson (1995) presumed to contain the lexical information that is relevant and would guide the student in this case to the teacher's intended meaning. In order for the student to interpret the teacher's instruction, the student needs to perceive a relevant link in the lexical information he has received from the instruction.

Whatever link the student perceives, is what will guide his interpretation of what is the teacher's intended meaning. To demonstrate the need for mutual understanding to exist between the teacher and the student, the following sample instructions were drawn from a Nigerian High School teacher's terminal examination questions and the answers given against each question represents the responses of 30%- 36% of his student. The presentation of the data has also attempted to summarize the teacher's marking guide in order to demonstrate the teacher's intended meaning and expectations for each of the questions exemplified.

The instruction for question 1, was: *Change the following sentence into indirect speech.*

1. The saint said to his disciples, “God is omniscient.”  
The student’s response was:
  - Jesus said to his disciples God is omniscient.  
The instruction for question 2, was: *This sentence is ambiguous. Rewrite it to achieve specificity and precision.*
2. Mary can only speak English.  
The student’s response was:
  - Mary would speak English if only she attends classes and focuses on it.  
The instruction for question 3, was: *Re-do this short passage so that it can serve as a suitable paragraph in your letter to your former Head of Department.*
3. Life as a corper is not as easy-going as it was in your days. The miserable allowance of Nine Thousand Naira is not enough for feeding. I’ve been able to buy some pots for cooking. I can’t travel because I don’t have enough money for that.  
The student’s response was:
  - Dear Sir,  
Youth service is not as easy as it was in the days of old, because of devaluation of Naira in the country and the increment in transport.

Question 1, failed to enhance mutual understanding between the teacher and the student. Even though this question may be a lower level question but that is not why it failed to enhance mutual understanding between the teacher and the student. The question failed because its construct does not underlie mutual understanding. In this question, what the teacher sought was evidence of ability to recognize, identify and use the features of an indirect speech. Even though the absence of inverted commas may suggest that the student recognizes and can identify the features of an indirect speech but the change of the subject of the sentence from **the saint** to **Jesus** indicates that the student was actually not thinking in the same line as his teacher. It is common knowledge that Jesus had disciples and also taught them that God is omniscient but the same cannot be said of **the saint**. It is therefore most probable that the student was questioning the veracity of the teacher’s statement, ‘**The saint said to his disciples, “God is omniscient”.**’, rather than simply changing the sentence to its indirect speech form. The student and his teacher obviously did not share meaning in the question the teacher asked.

Question 2, also failed to enhance mutual understanding between the teacher and the student though it is a contextual question and therefore should be an effective question. The question failed to enhance mutual understanding between the teacher and the student because its construct does not underlie mutual understanding. In this question, what the teacher sought was evidence of ability to recognize, identify and avoid vague words, dangling modifiers, pronouns with no specific antecedents and imprecise structuring with no logical ordering of ideas. The teacher sought for evidence of ability to use precise words to be informative. What the student has done in her answer is giving over and above the interpretation of the sentence given rather than simply achieving specificity of the imprecise structure, **only speak English**. If we take a close look at the sentence given by the student, we will realize that the student has actually been informative but has not addressed the teacher’s expectation because the student was obviously not thinking in the same line as her teacher. The

answer the teacher would have considered appropriate in that situation would be either: **Mary can only speak English, she cannot write it** or **Mary can only speak in English she cannot speak in French.**

Question 3, failed to enhance mutual understanding between the teacher and the student. Although question 3 is regarded as an effective question (question 3 is a contextual question), nevertheless, the construct does not underlie mutual understanding. In question 3, what the teacher sought was evidence of ability to recognize and identify when to use a formal language, and the ability to identify and use the features of a formal language. The student's answer shows that she can identify when to use a formal language and the features of a formal language. The salutation the student used indicates that the student knows that the teacher is expecting a formal letter and therefore a formal language.

But the student's answer is considered inappropriate here because the teacher expected that this ability be demonstrated on specific words in the short passage given. For example, the slang, *corper*, in **Life as a corper**, should be rephrased as **a National Youth Service Corps member**, *easy-going*, should be rephrased as **easy**, while **miserable allowance**, should be rephrased as **meagre allowance**, and all the contracted words be written out in full as in; **I've : I have, I can't : I cannot, I don't : I do not.** These expectations of the teacher fall under an implicit rule which the student does not share with the teacher.

These questions as posed by the teacher are good but they are not effective because they have not communicated to the student the teacher's expectations. If the teacher is seeking specific information, the communication should make manifest evidence of the teacher's intended meaning. Pragmatic studies of verbal communication start from the assumption that essential features of human communication (both verbal and non-verbal) is the expression of intentions in which the audience infers the speaker's intended meaning from evidence that the speaker has provided ( Sperber and Wilson 2002).

Human verbal communication requires an utterance as input and such utterance must be manifest by ostensive provisioning of an addressee with evidence in the utterance to enable him infer the speaker's meaning. The implication here is that to grasp the communicative intention of a speaker in the course of an utterance communication, the addressee has to infer what is behind the speaker's utterance. Sperber and Wilson propose that in order to save an addressee of the communication from going through a lot of fruitless processing, a speaker aiming at optimal relevance, phrases her utterance in such a way as to facilitate early and correct disambiguation, reference assignment and enrichment. With these in place, mutual understanding is ensured.

### **Constructs that define questions of mutual understanding**

In an ostensive-inferential communicative model like a verbal communication, the speaker shows the hearer his informative and communicative intention by means of ostensive behaviors (the verbal stimulus), thus providing the addressee with the necessary grounds of judgment for inference. Sperber and Wilson (1995:vii) suggest that "individuals must focus their attention on what seems to them to be the most relevant information available" and this is because the role of the addressee in a

communication is to take in what is said and infer the intended meaning. The communication which in this case is the teacher's question, must contain lexical information that would necessarily enable the student infer the teacher's intended meaning therefore providing grounds for mutual understanding between the teacher and the student.

An utterance is said to automatically create expectations (through the words) which guide an addressee towards the speaker's meaning. It is in fact claimed by relevance theorists (Carston, Sperber and Wilson), that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise and predictable enough to guide an addressee towards the speaker's meaning. The source, Wilson and Sperber (2004), opines that an addressee's goal is to construct a hypothesis about the speaker's meaning which satisfies the presumption of relevance conveyed by the utterance. We therefore expect that a teacher's question must be explicit on the teacher's expectation so that teacher and student can have mutual understanding of what is expected.

In line with this expectation, an explicit question must have words which are relevant to and convey the expectations of the teacher. Let us consider question 1 above in this regard. *Change the following sentence into indirect speech*, has not specified that the ability to recognize, identify and use the features of an indirect speech is what is required and no more. The sample direct speech given (The saint said to his disciples, "God is omniscient."), contains information that connects with background information that the student has available to yield conclusions that matter to him (c.f. Wilson and Sperber 2004).

This background information is that it is common knowledge that Jesus had disciples and also taught them that God is omniscient. In order for the teacher to avoid the student meeting with assumptions that interfere with the teacher's intended meaning and distract the student from the intended message, the teacher should introduce specific information that will not allow for misconceptions. Let us consider rephrasing question 1 as: *Using the sample of a direct speech below, change it into an indirect speech to demonstrate the features of an indirect speech*. With the introduction of the word sample, the student will understand that the direct speech given is not representative of real life and therefore does not need to consider its truth or falsity. More so, the introduction of the information *to demonstrate the features of an indirect speech*, makes the teacher's intention manifest so that the student now understands exactly what the teacher expects from him. Misconceptions are herein avoided.

Even though question 2 is a contextual question, it is not constructed to enable mutual understanding. The question, *This sentence is ambiguous. Rewrite it to achieve specificity and precision*, does not contain any word that would counter the likely misconceptions the words, *precision and specificity*, would arouse in the mind of the student. What the teacher sought for was evidence of ability to recognize, identify and avoid vague words, and imprecise structuring with no logical ordering of ideas while using precise words to be informative. The student understands that precision and specificity translate into being informative and the student was informative. The question did not make relevant that evidence of ability to recognize, identify and avoid vague and imprecise structure was needed. The question merely said, *Rewrite it to achieve specificity and precision*. However the student can achieve specificity and precision is entirely the student's business.

However, if we rephrase the question to read, *This sentence is ambiguous. Rewrite the ambiguous item to achieve specificity and precision*, the teacher's intention to evaluate the ability to identify the imprecise word becomes apparent to the student. The student would then know that there is a particular item she has to focus on. The rephrasing of the question as indicated above enables mutual understanding between the teacher and the student. The question is constructed to make manifest, what is relevant to understanding the teacher's expectation. Without the introduction of *the ambiguous item*, in the question, *Rewrite the ambiguous item to achieve specificity and precision*, the student would not be properly guided to the teacher's expectation.

In the case of question 3, the teacher sought evidence of ability to recognize and identify when to use a formal language, as well as identify and use the features of a formal language. But above all, the teacher expected that the ability to identify and use the features of a formal language should be demonstrated on specific words. While the question had indicated in an ostensive manner the teacher's intention as far as seeking evidence of ability to recognize and identify when to use a formal language and the ability to identify and use the features of a formal language, the question did not do same for the teacher's intention as far as seeking this ability to be demonstrated on specific words. The question: *Re-do this short passage so that it can serve as a suitable paragraph in your letter to your former Head of Department*, makes manifest the teacher's intention to evaluate the ability to recognize and identify when to use a formal language, as well as identify and use the features of a formal language.

The words that make these intentions manifest are, *letter to your former Head of Department*. But if the question were to be rephrased as, *Re-do this short passage so that the words would be appropriate to fit into a letter to your former Head of Department*, the teacher's intention that the ability to identify and use the features of a formal language be demonstrated on specific words, would have been made manifest to the student. This intention would have been inferred from *so that the words would be appropriate to fit into a letter to your former Head of Department*. The mention of *the words* would have stimulated the student and guided him to the teacher's intention so that the student would then focus on specific words rather than going through a lot of fruitless processing. The construct that defines questions of mutual understanding is the strategy that the teacher employs to make manifest his intentions and expectations to the student in order for him and the student to have mutual understanding of the instruction given in the classroom. This unique relationship between the teacher and the student is enabled by the use of this strategy to construct effective questions.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Based on the above analysis, we argue that though clear sequence questions, contextual solicitations, and hypothetico-deductive questions are said to be effective because they have a high student response rate, increased quality of students' responses and are without misconceptions but the nature of the constructs that underlie these questions in order to ensure mutual understanding is not defined.



When teachers and examiners ask questions, they expect a particular sort of answers as appropriate. Often this expectation is available to the teacher or examiner alone. The student cannot access information that is not made available to him. Therefore, for effective communication and comprehension, there must be mutual understanding between the teacher and the student.

We have attempted to provide strategies that would construct questions that ensure mutual understanding in an L2 classroom. The corpus for this study was drawn from Nigerian High School learners of English.

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