

The Use of Questions in Classroom Language

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The question is the most frequently used move in classroom discourse. Its role is more for checking knowledge than seeking information. The teacher's role status gives him the right to choose both the topic of conversation and the person to be questioned – the learner, so in classroom dialogue we find a close correlation between role-relationship and verbal behaviour. The learner is not only obliged to answer the question but he must give the answer the teacher expects from him. Questions in classroom dialogue therefore carry a large part of command force in themselves. In the paper the classroom questions are analysed on a corpus of French lessons carried out in a number of Zagreb primary and secondary schools. It is shown that the classroom questions have various functions: they can ask for information but they can also transmit information; on the other hand, assertions can also contain interrogation. The role relations also reveal some psychological components, such as irony as the manifestation of the teacher's subjective attitude towards a message or a learner. In comparison with natural dialogue, the classroom dialogue mostly shows didactic goals i.e. the focus on the correct form of the utterance more than on its content, as well as the absence of the learner's personal opinion in the utterance.

After analysis of the corpus – 20 recordings of French lessons carried out in a number of primary and secondary schools in Zagreb (age factor – 12 to 13 and 15 to 17, proficiency level – beginners and intermediate), we have come to certain conclusions concerning classroom dialogue in L2.

According to the contemporary communicative approach to teaching/learning a foreign language, we wanted to find out whether the way to communicate successfully in a natural situation can be learned/taught in a classroom. While analysing our corpus we tried to compare, as often as possible, the characteristics of dialogue in the classroom situation with those of natural dialogue and analyse differences between them.

Considering the trinomial structure: question – answer – evaluation as typical of classroom dialogue, we analysed the form and function of each part.

In this paper we will present **the question**, its use and its functions.

1. Why use questions?

The role of questions is to elicit information, to get an answer, to compel a response, but also to install cooperation between speaker and hearer. They force two persons to enter into social exchange (Goody, 1978 : 22). In any kind of situation, questions place people in immediate interaction. They are a means of securing cooperation between interlocutors, of avoiding interruption in communication, of influencing the hearer in some way, of getting a reply. Questioning binds two persons in immediate reciprocity and impose a dialogue (Bachmann et al., 1981). Questions exchange with answers, and thus form pairs – adjacency pairs. When the first member of a pair is spoken, the other element of the pair usually follows to complete it. This is the typical scheme of classroom verbal behaviour, while in the natural situation inserted blocks of sequences can be found.

In natural, everyday situations, the questioned person frequently becomes the questioner, and in turn-taking a questioner becomes the questioned person. These roles alternate.

When a question is asked an assumption is made about the information the questioned person possesses. In a way, a questioner leads the questioned person to answer him according to his assumptions. If the assumption is correct, the questioner receives it back in the answer. If incorrect, he has to find another way to provoke the answer he seeks. Most open questions contain an assumption which comes to be embodied in the answer to the question. In this way a questioned person is restricted in his freedom of choice when giving the answer. The question becomes a frame for this answer. In a natural situation, one asks a question concerning unknown content, wanting to receive from the person questioned a piece of information one does not have. Asking for information by the questioner means his ignorance of the answer.

In classroom dialogue the situation is different (Benavada, 1981). The topic is imposed and the speakers are selected by the role superior interlocutor the – teacher (Soulé-Susbielles 1984 : 30). They do not make assumptions about the answer they want to get from learners. They ask them questions to which they – the teachers – know the answer in advance. These are not information seeking questions but control questions, sometimes called false questions (or quasi-questions), and the dialogue the pseudo-dialogue, which put the questioned person in a disadvantageous position. This brings us to the second point we want to discuss.

2. Questions and role relationships

The use of questions in communicative situation defines the role relation and the power of persons who converse (Goffman 1974). It is known that there are some dominant roles that automatically have power in certain communicative situations. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, have such a role status that gives them the right and even the duty to impose their will on others. These are institutionalised roles that influence the verbal behaviour of their participants. Often communication with people in such roles is prestructured and one can predict the verbal behaviour. The teacher–learner relation-

ship is always defined in terms of status inequality (Coste 1984 : 17). The intrinsic position of the teacher's role is that of superiority. It demands respect obedience on the one hand, but on the other secures distribution of knowledge in the classroom and has the responsibility for it.

In the classroom the person who asks a question – a teacher, is in a dominant position so that he puts the questioned person – the learner in a disadvantageous position, in a subordinate role. The questioner – the teacher has the initiative within his hands. He may ask who he wants, when he wants and about the topic he himself has chosen. So questions formulated by teachers in themselves carry a large element of a command force (Goody 1978 : 19). While in the natural situation the respondent may not know the answer or may even allow himself not to give the answer by saying *I don't know* often meaning *Leave me alone*, such a reaction is not permitted in the classroom dialogue. The learner is obliged to answer the question, and what is more, he must give the right answer, i.e. the answer the teacher expects from him (Soulé-Susbielles 1984 : 33). If not there are pedagogical sanctions.

There is a close correlation between role-relationship (hierarchical roles of speaker, superior – subordinate) and language behaviour (Goody 1978 : 35). This asymmetric situation causes inequality in the right to speak. The space of communication, too, the classroom with its rows of benches and the starshaped interaction, reinforces the central, superior role of a teacher which is evident in the number of turn-takings. The unilaterality of communication represents one active pole of the learner. The speech acts produced in the classroom are a reflection of role-relationship of speakers. Authority does not only come from the personal characteristics of a speaker. It is more the perception of the specific hierarchical role of the speaker. Some speech acts, such as orders and commands can be carried out only because of the superior social position and the power of the person who directs the turns during the communication and imposes his/her attitude over a subordinate.

3. Questions in the classroom

As it is known, the vast majority of questions directed from teachers to learners is to check the acquisition of the content of a lesson previously discussed (Soulé-Susbielles 1984 : 27). During such dialogues the accent is on the right form of utterances, much more than on semantic content. The learner's role is to obey the teacher's imposed form and content of the dialogue. He is asked to answer by full sentences thus proving that he has learned the content of the lesson. For ex:

Teacher: Le lycée de Marc avait organisé un séjour de combien de jours, Iva?

Learner: Un séjour... un... un séjour... d'une semaine.

T: D'une semaine... Bon, alors est-ce que tu peux répondre avec toute la phrase?... Le lycée de Marc...

L: euh... euh...

T: Le...

L: Le lycée de Marc avait organisé une semaine...

If we examine Searle's table of illocutionary acts (Searle 1969 : 66) and his system of rules which are a necessary condition for the realisation of a question, we can see that most of the rules cannot be applied to the classroom situation. The first preparatory rule

Speaker does not know the answer, most of the time is not true in the classroom, because the speaker – the teacher knows the answer when asking a question. Most of the time it is a teacher who asks questions. Learners put questions to their colleagues or a teacher when they are told to do so. For ex:

- T: Bon, alors, maintenant vous posez les questions en regardant les images... Tanja?
L: Qui a ttaché tous les passagers?
T: Qui aattaché tous les passagers?
L: Les gangsters a attaché tous les passagers.
T: C'est bien ce que Romina a dit?... a posé la question? Qui peut corriger?... Tu poses la même question, Krešo.
L: Est-ce que les passagers ont lavé les mains?
T: Qui... Commencez la question par qui...Vanasa.

In the comment to the rules for the realisation of a question, Searle points out that there are two kinds of questions – real questions and exam questions. Obviously the second ones – exam questions (*S wants to know if H knows.*) are most in use in classroom discourse. In a natural situation, in most cases, people put real questions (*S wants to find out the answer.*). Although rare, this type of question can however be found from time to time in classroom dialogue. When both the teacher or the learners spontaneously ask questions, it is either for parts of a lesson (or an utterance) which are difficult or ambiguous, or for information they do not possess. For ex:

- L: ... parce que... il y a des écoles avec un ordinateur seulement.
T: Et ici, il y en a combien?
L: Il y en a une vingtaine.. non... même pas... je ne sais pas.
T: Est-ce que vous vous en servez tout le temps, des ordinateurs?

or in these examples:

- T: Est-ce que quelqu'un aime les films d'épouvante?
L: Qu'est-ce que c'est?
T: Drakula, par exemple.
Ls: Ah oui... oui.
L: Est-ce que je peux demander un mot?
T: Oui, vas y.
L: Un C.E.S., c'est un...?
T: Collège d'enseignement secondaire.

In natural situation a question results from lack of information; one person questions the other when he/she does not know something. In the classroom, the situation is very often the opposite: The one who knows, questions the other who is at risk if he does not know (Benavada, 1981). This is one of the reasons that quite a lot of questions in the classroom remain unanswered. In the case when a learner is incapable of answering a teacher's question, the teacher often himself answers his own question, fearing, as we suppose, silence.

- T: Qu'est ce qui se passe avec son revolver?
L:
T: Le revolver...
L: Le revolver...
T: tombe...
L: tombe...
T: de sa...de sa main.
L: de sa main.
T: Oui.

There may be some other reasons for not answering a question like not understanding it (unintelligibility of a question), or tiredness and distractions of learners, or simply the wish to be left alone.

4. Functions of questions

In traditional linguistics, a question is described as a move by which a speaker asks for information, while by assertion he transmits the information. This criteria can however, be dangerous (Gschwind-Holtzer 1981 : 50). Analysing discourse, one can find examples which do not always enter this categorization. In the analysis of our classroom discourse, we have found questions the role of which was to transmit information and assertions which contained interrogation.

4.1. The Question – as Request for Information

1. T: Ily a aussi une autre saison quand les visites... euh... des lacs de Plitvice sont magnifiques?
2. C'est quand?
3. L: C'est au printemps.
4. T: En automne... Pourquoi, Nakić?
5. L: Parce que l'automne... un spectacle magnifique.
6. T: Oui... mais... qu'est-ce qui se passe avec la forêt en automne, Vlatka?
7. L: La forêt... il y a...
8. T: Les feuilles...
9. L: Les feuilles... mm... mm...
10. T: De quelle couleur sont les feuilles, Vanesa?
11. L: Rouge, jaune, brun...
12. T: Bon...il y a de toutes les couleurs...d'accord.

The purpose of this dialogue is to check the acquisition of some linguistic elements from the lesson and, at the same time, see if the learner is capable of using them in another context he is familiar with but which is not in direct connection with a lesson. The teacher puts an open question (U2) the aim of which is to make the learner think and give an answer according to his own opinion. As seen, the teacher does not even listen to the answer (U4). She is anxious to get on with the dialogue, not to interrupt it, so she gives her own answer (U4) and asks another learner to explain it. The following utterance (U6) shows great impatience on the part of the teacher because learners do not behave as she wants them to, they do not give her the answer she would like to hear. Her impatience becomes even more evident in U8 when she starts the utterance, thus leading the learner towards the answer she – the teacher wants to get. Let us examine another example:

1. T: Un film sensass... Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire?
2. L: Sensationnel.
3. T: Est-ce qu'il est vraiment sensationnel...pour vous aussi,
4. Ls: Oui, oui, oui.
5. T: Vous êtes tous contents?
6. Ls: Non... non... non.
7. T: Est-ce que c'est un peu pour les petits enfants?

8. L: Non.
 9. T: Non?
 10. L: Non.
 11. T: Non?... Ce n'est pas pour les petits enfants?
 12. Ls: Oui... oui... oui.

The teacher wants to clarify the meaning of a word so she puts a question (U1) to make sure that all the learners in the classroom understand the word properly. The U3 shows the way the teacher controls the dialogue and directs it towards the target she has chosen. She tries implicitly to suggest to the learners that the film they are talking about is not really sensational for them (U3). By this question the teacher in fact makes an assertion: *The film is not sensational, not even for you.* When the learners do not get what she is aiming at, the teacher's suggestive utterance (U7) implicitly says that the film is for small children and that the learners are far from being small. The non-understanding by learners of the teacher's ideas and their unexpected answer amaze her (U9 - rising intonation, U11 - repetition of the utterance U7). The learners' unexpected utterance make the teacher impatient until the end of the transaction when the dialogue finishes as she - the teacher wanted. The interpretation of utterances depending on a situational context in this transaction shows their implicit meaning and the real motivation for speech acts.

The following table will show the speech acts and the psychological situation of the two dialogues analysed:

table 1

UTTERANCES	TYPE OF EMOTION	VERBAL INDICES	INTONATION
1. Oui, mais qu'est-ce qui se passe avec la forêt en automne?	dissatisfaction	mais	irritated tone
Les feuilles...	impatience		irritated tone
2. Est-ce qu'il est vraiment sensationnel, pour vous, aussi?	implicit criticism warning	vraiment vous aussi	rising
Vous êtes tous contents?	amazement		rising
Est-ce que c'est un peu pour les petits enfants?	persuasion	un peu petits enfants	
Non?	surprise		rising
Non?... Ce n'est pas pour les petits enfants?	persevering in convincing		irritated tone

The role relations often reveal some psychological components like positive or negative motivation connected with the problem of foreign language teaching/learning: the learner has to produce

1. linguistically correct utterances,
2. content satisfactory utterances,

which have to fulfill teacher's hopes and wishes. If not, socio-affective motivation provokes all kinds of negative emotions like impatience, dissatisfaction, criticism, warning, etc.

4.2. information and Irony

Irony is a psychological manifestation (Gschwind–Holtzer 1981 : 56). It shows a speaker's subjective attitude towards a message and towards a hearer. It may have double characteristics: one is affective irony which is a sort of behaviour of attack aimed at certain target. The second is indirect, ironical, benevolent behaviour suggesting a meaning other than the literal one, intended by the speaker. It is an attitude often used in interactive communication as a substitute strategy for direct questioning or objecting which might be too strong. It gives a particular colour to the communication and is a key to the interpretation of some parts of discourse. It can appear through paralinguistic elements such as intonation or non-verbal behaviour (mimic). For ex:

- T: Un local, tu sais ce que c'est?
L1: Oui... c'est... euh...
L2: Place... place...
T: Une place?... en plein air?
L1: Ah non... c'est un endroit.

In this dialogue we can see that the teacher wants to be sure concerning comprehension of the word *local* but is not satisfied with the learner's explanation. The actual reason for the teacher's unsatisfactory reaction is his misunderstanding of the word *place* proposed by one learner, because this word is polysemic and can mean *position* and *square*. After the learner's explanation of the word the teacher expresses his amazement and criticism thus reinforcing the wrong meaning of the word *local*. He implicitly mocks the learner's ignorance.

Another example:

1. L: L'auteur pose les questions pas toujours intelligentes.
2. T: Donc, tu n'es pas d'accord avec les questions. Elles ne sont pas intelligentes pour toi.
3. L: Les questions sont inutiles.
4. T: Donc, tu dis que les questions sont inutiles.
5. On aurait pu laisser parler les élèves sans questions?
6. L: Oui, je pense que les élèves français ont un tas de choses à dire sans questions.

A learner expresses his own opinion on the text (U1), which as we know, does not often happen in classroom discourse. The teacher obviously does not agree with the learner's opinion and ridicules it by repeating the learner's utterance and by adding *pour toi* which shows a sort of ironical criticism of speaker's opinion. The same happens in the following pair of utterances (U3+U4). By repeating learner's utterance the teacher shows his disagreement with the opinion. He even adds an ironical assertion (U5) – in the interrogative form to reinforce his negative attitude towards the learner's opinion. What is astonishing in this dialogue, is that the learner does not give up (U6) in spite of his

inferior, dependent position but closes this transaction by confirming his own idea – oui (U6).

Criticism and irony are the rights of the superior. They are a way of showing the authority of speaker over hearer (Goody 1978 : 35). That is why this illocutionary act is a property of the teacher. The subordinate position of the learner imposes the attitude of reserve, obedience and excludes most personal reactions (Bachmann et al., 1981). For this reason we are even more surprised that in the above example the learner insists on his opinion in spite of the teacher's critical reaction expressed through irony.

We may suppose that the reason for this behaviour – teacher's ironical attitude towards the learners, the learner not relinquishing his ideas but, on the contrary, persisting in them – is the result of a more friendly atmosphere in this classroom than in other cases with other teachers. For, the teacher in this textual example is a native French speaker, who created a very friendly relationship with learners (they address each other by *tu*) and having no serious responsibility towards school curriculum, the parents, the other teachers, nor the duty of giving marks, he behaves in the classroom more like an animator than a teacher.

4.3. The Question as Transmitter of Information

In the previous examples we have considered some assertions playing the role of questions. Let us consider some more.

T: Est-ce que vous êtes au courant d'un phénomène qu'il y a en France qui est pas très connu... qui... phénomène du racket entre les élèves?

Ls: C'est quoi ça?

T: C'est à dire que des plus grands,... obligent ceux qui sont plus petits... à leur donner de l'argent... dans certaines banlieues de grandes villes.

By analysing this transaction we may conclude that it too, meets neither the preparatory rule nor the rule of the sincerity of the illocutionary act – question, as described by Searle (Searle 1969 : 66). The part of the preparatory rule *The speaker does not know the answer* cannot be applied to this utterance because the teacher knows the meaning of the word *racket* and wants to explain it to the learners. The same applies to the rule of sincerity: *The speaker wants this information* – but in our example he cannot obtain it from the hearer, for he does not possess it. For this reason the intention of the speaker – the teacher is not to get information from the hearer but to transmit it to him in the form of a question. The reaction of the hearer – learner clearly proves that he does not possess the information and cannot provide the speaker with it. So here again the interrogative form is a sort of cover for an assertion (Gschwind-Holtzer, 1981).

4.4. The Question as a Sign of Power

Considering the social inequality of interlocutors and the consequence of it on classroom discourse, one can see that the authority of a superior speaker influences utterances in the attempt to get the subordinate speaker – the learner – to realize the act as he – the superior wants it and has imagined it. In this way the acts of order and

command are carried out. According to Searle's rules (Searle 1969 : 66), they are future acts of a hearer. The rule of sincerity states that the *Speaker wants the hearer to do the act*, but at the same time, according to the preparatory rule, he *must be in a position of authority over the hearer*.

The classroom situation obviously makes possible the realization of the act taking into consideration the inequality in hierarchical position of interlocutors. The teacher's superior position gives him all the right to command over the hearer – the learner who is not permitted to express a wish, let alone an order. He must obey and answer the directives. If not there are pedagogical sanctions.

We consider that in this category of acts, could be classified all the teacher's calling of pupils' names following or preceding his questions (or even without a question). For example:

- T: Où est-ce qu'il s'est enfoncé, Eva?
T: Sanja... comment?

In these utterances the order is implicitly present in the form of imperative as for example: **repeat, say, answer, put a question, read**, etc. (Besse, 1980). After being named, how could a learner react but try to do what the teacher requires of him/her, behave as asked to behave, obey the directive. In our corpus some explicitly expressed commands can be found in the form of imperative or present tense. For example:

- T: Cette ville, elle s'appelle Chamonix... **Répète.**
T: **Commencez la phrase par...**
T: **Vous posez les questions en regardant les images.**

They could be turned into a more polite form – a question form, as for ex:

- Est-ce que tu **peux/pourrais répéter.**
Voulez vous / **est-ce que vous voudriez poser les questions en regardant les images.** etc.

4.5. Acts of Dependence

The act of dependence (Gschwind-Holtzer 1981 : 76) as a counterbalance to the act of power and authority is rather scarce in classroom discourse – in our corpus. It is a normal phenomenon considering the situation in which the right to speak is not equal. Still, it could be found in some examples of our corpus:

- L: Est-ce que je **peux** demander un mot?
T: Oui, vas-y.

or

- L: **J'aimerais** vous poser une question.
T: Hm.

In these examples the subordinate position of the learner is manifested in the request to ask a question realised by the verb *pouvoir* which conveys the idea of asking for permission, or in a polite form of a question expressed by conditional.

The non-replies to teacher's questions – that is silence can also be considered as acts of dependence. They are normal manifestations of learner's obedience or passivity

showing by that reaction their acceptance of the agreement of submission in the classroom (Benavada, 1981).

Ex:

L: Je n'aime pas les mathématiques.

T: Tu es allergique?

L: ...

or

L: L'année prochaine je ne reste pas ici.

T: Alors, tu vas aller où?... En France?

L: ...

These teacher's questions remain unanswered. They are a kind of rhetorical questions the aim of which is not to get an answer from a learner. The teacher can permit himself to joke with learners (colouring his utterances with slight irony) thus expressing commentary, in a form of a question, as a reaction to the learner's assertion.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the paper has been to show the functioning of questions in classroom discourse. Although classroom dialogue obeys the fixed scheme of verbal behaviour, a question-answer structure, its main role is a didactic one - to distribute knowledge which has to be taught/learned. This is one of the reasons why questions do not often serve to get information from the interlocutors but have also other purposes. The didactic goal of the discourse as well as the role of unequal relationship between teacher and learners distort the utterances and their purposes. The consequence of this is the absence of the learners' personal opinion in utterances and the exclusion of implicit or connotative meaning. Learners are seldom personally engaged in the verbal interaction being concentrated on the correct form of the utterance more than on its content.

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UPOTREBA PITANJA U RAZREDNOM GOVORU

U članku se proučava uloga pitanja, jednog od najčešćih poteza u razrednom diskursu na satovima stranoga jezika. U usporedbi s govorom u prirodnoj sredini, razredni je govor strukturiran s obzirom na didaktičke ciljeve i situaciju u kojoj se odvija. Hijerarhijski odnos sugovornika (nastavnik–učenik) odražava se na jezičnom ponašanju. Stoga je češće cilj nastavnikova pitanja provjera usvojenosti sadržaja i točnog jezičnoga oblika nego li dobivanje obavijesti od sugovornika–učenika. Na korpusu snimljenih i prepisanih snimaka razrednoga govora na satovima francuskoga jezika u nekim zagrebačkim školama autor analizira pitanja i pokazuje njihove različite funkcije.