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An Analysis of Extended Elicitation Patterns in ESL Classrooms

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In a preliminary study, Napisah Kepol investigates patterns of display questions in English as a Second Language classes. In classroom settings, display questions, also known as "test" or "known information questions", allow students to display their knowledge to the teacher, who has a correct answer in mind. As Kepol notes, research has shown that display questions are among the most common forms of questioning in the classroom, and recent studies have shown this to be true in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes as well. Long and Sato (1983) report the massive use of display questions over referential questions in ESL settings. White and Lightbown (1984), who also report on the extensive use of display questions by ESL teachers, describe the strategies employed by teachers to help students produce the correct or expected answer. When students give an incorrect, a partially correct answer, or no answer at all, the teacher may help the student in several ways. Mehan (1978) calls this type of interaction an "extended elicitation sequence" and has described this pattern in L1 elementary classroom settings. He states that teachers work to get the correct answer to the initial display question by using one of the following three elicitation strategies:

- a) Prompting replies: the teacher continues to question the student, adding information as clues or prompts, until a correct response is received;
- b) Repeating elicitations: when the student cannot answer the question or refuses to answer, the teacher repeats the question to the same or other students until a correct response is received;

c) Simplifying elicitations: the teacher reduces the complexity of the question, breaking it down into simpler components or simplifying it in other ways.

Kepol observed ESL classes in two universities in the Philadelphia area. The students in these classes ranged in age from 18 to 45, and all were studying English in preparation for academic and professional pursuits. The classes selected for observation represented several levels of language proficiency.

Focusing on extended elicitation sequences, Kepol found that the ESL teachers she observed relied on many of the same strategies for extending elicitations that Mehan (1978) found in L1 elementary school classrooms. Kepol refined Mehan's "simplifying elicitations" category to include four subcategories:

- a) Simplifying elicitations: (as above) the teacher breaks the question down into simpler, step-by-step elicitations but without providing clues or prompts;
- b) Posing choice questions: the teacher provides short yes/no questions which lead students toward the correct response;
- c) Rephrasing of question: the teacher restructures the grammar, syntax, or vocabulary of the question, while retaining the meaning of the original question;
- d) Evaluating for student self-check: the teacher asks further questions of the student which cause him/her to reconsider the answer to the first question.

In addition, Kepol defines two other categories of teacher response in extended elicitations: "teacher self-response", in which the teacher closes the extended sequence by providing the answer; and "leading students to find clues", in which the teacher asks questions which refer the students to texts or classroom materials where the

answer can be found.

The distribution of strategies in Kepol's data is shown below:

Strategies	Frequency of occurrence	% of total
<u>Teacher Elicitation:</u>		
Prompting	11	31.4%
Repeating	6	17.1%
Simplifying		
Simplification of elicitation	(4)	(11.4%)
Posing choice questions	(2)	(5.7%)
Rephrasing question	(7)	(20.0%)
Evaluating for student self-check	(2)	(5.7%)
Subtotal, simplifying	15	42.8%
<u>Teacher Response:</u>		
Teacher self-answer	2	5.7%
Leading students to find clues	1	3.0%
Total	35	100.0%

From these preliminary results, Kepol hypothesizes that simplifying and prompting appear more often as strategies in the data because they can be accomplished in so many different ways. She suggests that prompting strategies may be analyzed into subcategories as she has done with simplifications. According to Kepol, extended elicitation strategies help the ESL student find ways to communicate in class, and do not simply test his/her knowledge of the language. Lastly, she concludes that her study supports the findings of Long and Sato (1983), and White and Lightbown (1984) that ESL and L1 classrooms are similar with respect to strategies of classroom discourse.

Long, M. & C. Sato. (1983). Foreigner talk discourse: forms and functions of teachers' questions. In Classroom-oriented research on second language acquisition. H. Selinger & M. Long, (eds.). Rowley, MA: Newbury House. 268-285.

Mehan, H. (1978). What time is it, Denise? Asking known information questions in classroom discourse. Theory into Practice 18: 285-294.

White, J. & P. Lightbown. (1984). Asking and answering in ESL classes. Canadian Modern Language Review 40: 228-244.