The contextual adaptation of English teachers' questioning strategies*

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Abstract: In order to guarantee an interactive classroom atmosphere, English teachers pay much attention to the questioning strategies when they use question-answer teaching method. This paper makes a comprehensive analysis on English teachers' questioning strategies from the perspective of adaptation theory. It shows that the utilization of teachers' questioning strategies is not arbitrary, but adapts to the contextual factors, i.e., adapts to the mental world, the physical world and the social world.

Key words: English teachers; questioning strategies; adaptation theory

1. Introduction

Since the mid 1990s, "teacher research" has been advocated by many western researchers. In this field, the role of teachers' talk attracts great attention. Nunan (1991) held that "if we want to enrich our understanding of language learning and teaching, we need to spend time looking in classrooms". Teachers' talk is a tool to impart knowledge, and serves as a crucial source of input as well. Brock (1986) stated that teachers' talk, such as the kind of questions teachers ask, can significantly affect the quantity and quality of student interaction in the lesson. Questioning is one of the most common techniques used by teachers.

Perrott (1982) and Jacobsen (1999) both put forward 4 questioning strategies used by teachers, including self-explaining, prompting, probing and redirecting. Self-explaining is used by teachers to move the obstacles from students before asking questions. Prompting is an effective strategy adopted by teachers to help students when they do not know how to answer a question (Perrott, 1982, p. 62). Probing is to have students supply additional information in order to have better, more complete answers when the students' answer is correct but insufficient because it lacks depth (Jacobsen, 1999, p. 162). Redirecting means "the same question is directed to several students" (Perrott, 1982, p. 79).

Norton (1989) and Ornstein (1990) put forward 5 questioning strategies: sequence of questions, directing, probing, increasing wait-time and encouraging students' questions. Sequence of questions refers to the order of teachers' questions, that is, teachers should raise questions from the simple to the difficult step by step. Directing means teachers should ask question firstly and then ask students to answer. Probing refers to asking follow-up questions (Norton, 1989, pp. 23-26; Ornstein, 1990, pp. 28-30). In Bond's (2008) opinion, classroom management problems occur if students are dissatisfied or bored, they may exhibit off-task behavior as a way to let the teacher

know that the instruction is failing to meet their needs, or students may misbehave if they are unclear about the expected behavior. And he stated that questioning strategies were used by teachers to minimize the classroom management problems. In this paper, the authors will apply the adaptation theory to analyze the teachers' questioning strategies used in college English teaching based on the research the authors have done so far.

2. The adaptation theory

Adaptation theory was first proposed by Verschueren (1987, p. 52) in his *Pragmatics as a Theory of Linguistics Adaptation* in 1987, and then he published his work *Understanding Pragmatics* in 1999, which gave a detailed and comprehensive explanation about the adaptation theory. According to the adaptation theory, the use of language must consist of continuous making of linguistic choice, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal and/or language-external reasons, and choice-making must be adapted to the context in which people are located in order to achieve their communicative purpose (Verschueren, 2000, pp. 55-56).

In adaptation theory, communicative context consists of the language users, the mental world, the physical world and the social world. The mental world activated in language use contains cognitive and emotive elements. Specifically speaking, the mental world includes personality, emotions or affect, beliefs, desires or wishes and motivations or intentions in these 2 elements. The social world with which linguistic choice-making is interadaptable includes person deixis, social setting or institutions, culture, religion, age, level of education, gender, etc.. The physical world mainly consists of temporal reference (absolute and relative time) and spatial reference (absolute and relative space). As for temporal reference, Verschueren (2000) made a distinction between event time, time of utterance and reference time. Besides, the physical world also includes such things as the utterers and interpreters' bodily postures, gestures, gaze, physical appearance, physical conditions and biological property, etc.. The using of language is a process of making choice, a dynamic process of adaptability—adaptation to the contextual factors (Verschueren, 2000).

3. Adaptation to the mental world

3.1 Adaptation to cognitive elements

Questioning is a good and convenient way for teachers to check students' comprehension of vocabulary, grammatical items, syntactic structures, main or particular ideas of texts, and so on. However, students' cognitive elements or language proficiency have a great influence on the strategies teachers adopt in their questioning procedure. For example, an English teacher may ask the question "How about women who were normally inactive?", but when she realizes that her students cannot answer the question due to the unfamiliar word of "inactive", she may explain its meaning with an additional sentence "inactive means…" to make her students understand the question better. If she finds the question is too general to be answered, she may ask alternative question, offering several choices for students to think about. In these ways, questioning strategies used by English teachers accommodate to the cognitive elements.

3.2 Adaptation to emotive elements

The students' emotive elements, such as self-confidence and anxiety, play an important role in the process of their second language learning, and also have a direct influence on their learning behavior and learning results. According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), foreign language anxiety refers to the fear or apprehension occurring

when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language (pp. 157-194). In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom, there are some unconfident students and they are not willing to answer teachers' questions. In this case, teachers may ask simple questions first to increase students' self-confidence and then come to the difficult ones, or increase the wait-time to allow students to have more time to think, or direct some students with encouraging words, etc.. All these questioning strategies used by teachers agree with students' emotive elements.

4. Adaptation to the physical world

4.1 Adaptation to classroom conditions

Teaching and learning in the English classroom are a process of communication, and the spatial distance between teachers and students is a critical factor in the communicative process. Classroom conditions like the size of the room, the pattern of seating, etc. play an important part in how to use the questioning strategies, so teachers tend to take the physical conditions of the classroom into consideration. In a large classroom, they usually raise their voices or slow down consciously or walk close to the students so as to make all the students including those sitting at the back of the classroom understand clearly their questions and get actively involved into the question-answer activities.

4.2 Adaptation to students' physical feedback

Teachers' questioning and students' answering are interactive, and apart from students' verbal feedback, teachers may get valuable information from students' physical feedback, such as their paralanguage, body language and facial expressions, and adopt appropriate questioning strategies. It is common that teachers usually look around the whole class after asking a question. If they find most of the students are shaking heads, or frowning, or displaying a puzzled feeling on their faces, they will know that the students have difficulty in giving an answer and most probably they will repeat the question or self-explain it to lower its difficulty or give some hints to prompt students to solve the problem. Many interviewed teachers agree that eye contact and looking around the whole class are beneficial for the question-answer process in English language classroom.

5. Adaptation to the social world

As people know, human beings cannot live alone, and they belong to some society or community. The language they use also has this feature, namely, social human beings use various languages in different situations. Besides, the questioning strategies that teachers adopt in teaching college English are the result of teachers' choices. The selection of teachers' questioning strategies is not arbitrary, but an adaptive process.

5.1 Adaptation to social relationship

Classroom is an institutional setting with the asymmetrical role distribution between the teacher and the students. The teacher is the institutional authority to control the classroom discourse and there is a social distance between the teacher and the students (FU, 2008, p. 78). However, the social distance between the teacher and students is not advantageous for teacher's teaching and students' learning processes to some degree. So sometimes the teacher may use a question to establish a comfortable relationship with students, or to reduce the social distance between them to some extent. For example, people can find in teachers' questions the frequently used "our", "we" and "us" rather than "your" and "you", like "Can you sing a song for *us* now, for *we* have heard…?". The questioning strategy of using first personal pronoun may effectively shorten the social distance between the

teacher and students.

5.2 Adaptation to social roles

It is advocated that college English should be student-oriented, i.e., students are the center of teaching; however, it is still teachers' duty to keep the classroom in order and organize the activities according to the teaching objectives. Teachers may use different questioning strategies to act as organizers, instructors, initiators and other roles that they should play in the modern college English teaching. Questions are often heard to be asked in English classroom, like "Are you clear?", "Have you got it?", "Do you have any question in this part?", "S1, could you translate this sentence into Chinese?", "S3, would you please read this paragraph for us?", "S4, what's your idea about this news?", etc..

5.3 Adaptation to students' face awareness

The notion of "face" put forward by Goffman (1967) is something related to those emotional concepts, such as embarrassment, humiliation or losing face. People all know that Chinese put their "face" almost in the first place and they are afraid of losing face, so do students in the college English classroom. However, in the process of asking questions, teachers require students to answer their questions, and this speech act threatens students' negative face by asking them to do something. When students can answer the questions clearly and fluently, this threatening act may not have influence on students; but when students do not know how to answer those questions, they will lose their faces, and feel embarrassed or humiliated in the whole class. Therefore, teachers tend to use questioning strategies, such as increasing wait-time to help students answer the questions fully and satisfactorily, or prompting students by giving some hints before asking students to give an answer, or probing students to have students offer additional information to make more complete answers instead of correct but insufficient answers, etc..

5.4 Adaptation to classroom atmosphere

Freiberg and Stein (1999) defined classroom climate as the mood or atmosphere that was created in the teacher's classroom through the rules set out, the ways the teacher interacted with pupils and the ways the physical environment set out. Lots of researchers show a positive and active classroom atmosphere can raise students' learning interests, stimulate their motivation and potential of learning, it can also improve the relationship between teachers and students. As people know, the more students participate in the classroom interaction, the more active and positive the classroom atmosphere will be. Therefore, teachers may adopt questioning strategies, like directing or redirecting, to encourage more students to get involved into the classroom activities. Besides, teachers' encouraging words, such as "come on", "good", "excellent", and their facial expressions are also important for the classroom atmosphere.

6. Conclusion

The study on teachers' questions has attracted many researchers' attention these days. It is well-documented that teachers' questions are of great importance for students' English learning processes: It is by teachers' questions that students are got involved into class interaction and stimulated to think and learn. According to the adaptation theory, this paper explores the contextual adaptation of English teachers' questioning strategies. The utilization of teachers' questioning strategies is a process of making choices, which is a dynamic process due to the properties of variability, negotiability and adaptability, and it is not an arbitrary process, but an adaptation process. It is found that the questioning strategies adopted by teachers in the college English language classroom adapt to the mental world, such as cognitive elements and emotional elements, adapt to the physical world and

adapt to the social world like social relationship, social roles, students' face awareness, classroom atmosphere, etc.. Therefore, there is no right or wrong for each questioning strategy, and teachers just adopt different questioning strategies in different contexts for different teaching purposes.

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