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QUESTIONING: THE SENTENCE AND BEYOND

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In the previous article* it has been argued that in the English language classroom it is unnatural and inappropriate for pupils to respond to certain types of questions with full-sentence answers. Moreover, pupils who do so may, in fact, have a less firm grasp of English than those who can and do answer with correct short answers. To summarise, dependent sentences (i.e. sentences which depend on a question) are preferable in this context to independent sentences (i.e. sentences which can exist on their own).

Unfortunately, if we leave it at that, we are left with a paradox. On the one hand, we say that teachers should restrict their pupils to answering questions with short responses consisting of single words or short phrases (since this is what native speakers of English actually do). On the other hand, teachers have the far more important long-term aim of stretching pupils beyond using simple words and phrases to using complete complex sentences; to achieve this they employ the most basic and most frequently employed teaching technique – questioning.

Are we, therefore, in the process of replacing artificial full-sentence answers with realistic short answers actually stunting pupils' ability to handle larger units of language such as full sentences? And, after all, isn't the real motive of the teacher's or textbook's instruction "Answer in complete sentences" to develop that very ability? Surely, not a bad motive at all.

The way out of this dilemma is to make a distinction between different types of questioning or elicitation techniques. Most certainly teachers *would* hinder pupils' language development if they restricted themselves solely to those types of questions which logically require short answers. There are, however, other types of questions and elicitation techniques which can be used to train pupils to speak and write full sentences plus, more important,

* "When In Doubt Give A Long Answer" by Edward Ash.

connected sentences (known as *discourse*). Some of these other types are the subject of this article. I will begin with single sentences first and later move on to the elicitation of discourse.

When we are talking about the elicitation of a full sentence answer, we are, of course, assuming that the teacher already knows which particular sentence she wishes to be elicited in full. Let us imagine that in a reading comprehension lesson (which may later go on to a reproduction-in-writing lesson) the teacher wishes to elicit an independent sentence from the bold printed sentence in the reading passage below**.

“The group first assembled outside the school at six-thirty. The bus arrived, we all got on and off we went. Five hours later we arrived at Malacca. After that, we checked into our hotel. **At twelve o’clock we had some mee goreng at some stalls near the river.** Afterwards, we went on a sight-seeing tour of the city.”

We can see that the following questions *fail* to elicit independent sentences.

<i>Question</i>	<i>Dependent Short Answer</i>
1. What time did they have lunch?	(At) twelve o’clock.
2. What did they have for lunch?	Mee goreng.
3. Where did they have lunch?	At some stalls (by the river).
4. Where were the stalls?	By the river.

** I do not intend in this article to discuss the pros and cons of factual-recall type questions in reading lessons.

The first type of question we can use to elicit a full sentence is *a question containing the verb 'do' or 'happen'*.

Question

After they checked into their hotel, what happened (next)?

OR

Before they went on a sight-seeing tour of the city, what did they do?

Full-Sentence Answer

They had some mee-goreng at some stalls by the river.

A second technique is to use *alternative-type questions*.

Question

After they had checked into their hotel, did they go on a sight-seeing tour or did they have some mee-goreng at some stalls by the river?

Full-Sentence Answer

They had . . .

Two variations of alternative-type questions are illustrated below. The first is what may be called the "incomplete alternative".

Question

After they had checked into their hotel, did they go for a sight-seeing tour or what?

Full-Sentence Answer

They had . . .

The second variation is what I like to call the "ridiculous alternative".

Question

After they had checked into their hotel, did they have buffaloburgers at McDonald's near the Rats Cinema?

Full-Sentence Answer

(No), they had . . .

The reader will have noticed that as yet we have not elicited the original full sentence word for word ("At twelve o'clock" has been deleted). However, the time adverbial is only necessary if we

are paying attention to the time sequence. If we are concerned with this then we can use a third method, *sentence cuing*, that is we help pupils to produce a full sentence by starting the sentence for them.

TEACHER: Yes, they checked into their hotel and at twelve o'clock . . . ?

PUPIL 1: They had some mee-goreng at some stalls by the river.

TEACHER: Yes, now repeat that, Siew May, "At . . .

PUPIL 2: "At twelve o'clock they had some mee-goreng at some stalls by the river."

TEACHER: Good.

A fourth method is to use *visual clues* perhaps in combination with sentence-cuing. These may consist of *gestures or mime* (e.g. teacher taps watch to elicit time, mimes eating noodles, etc). Alternatively they may consist of *illustrations* (e.g. blackboard illustration of stalls or river, teacher points to a particular part of the picture above the reading passage in the textbook, etc.)

The reader will have noticed from the exchange between teacher and pupils above that we are no longer simply concerned with the elicitation of a single sentence standing in splendid isolation divorced from its surroundings. We are viewing this sentence in relation to the sentences which precede and follow it. We are, therefore, no longer looking at the sentence but at sentences. Moreover, one of the ways of teaching a controlled composition lesson is to get pupils to first read a passage, turn it over and then, with the teacher's help, reproduce it first orally and secondly (perhaps with a controlled or guided writing exercise) reproduce it in writing.

Since we are now concerned with the linking of sentences to form a piece of connected discourse, elicitation by sentence-cuing will frequently involve the use of linking words. In narrative passages, such as our example passage, sequencing words such as 'First', 'Then', 'Next', 'After that', 'At twelve o'clock' and 'Finally' could be used. In descriptive passages, additive words such as 'Moreover', 'Furthermore' and 'In addition'; contrastive words such as 'However', 'On the other hand'; or resultative words like 'Therefore', and 'As a result' could be used.

Associated with the teaching of discourse (oral or written composition) is *back-tracking*, that is the linking together of sentences which have previously been elicited individually (perhaps with the teacher sentence-cuing).

E.g. TEACHER: Right, now put the last three sentences together.
Five hours later . . .

PUPIL 1: Five hours later the bus arrived at Malacca.

TEACHER: After that . . .

PUPIL 2: After that, they checked into their hotel.

TEACHER: At twelve o'clock . . .

PUPIL 3: They had some mee goreng at some stalls by the river.

TEACHER: Good. Now, John, I want you to say all three sentences.

PUPIL 4: Five hours later, etc.

Eventually, with more practice, the pupils should be able to reproduce whole chunks of text, the size depending on the class level and ability. Similarly, the teaching of summary-writing can begin with the teacher having prepared a written summary of a text or part of a text. Without actually showing this summary to pupils, she elicits from pupils an approximation to her target text using the types of elicitation described above.

In this article, the following question types and elicitation techniques will *naturally* elicit full-sentence answers from pupils:

- 1 Questions containing 'do' or 'happen';
- 2 Alternative-type questions (standard, incomplete, 'ridiculous');
- 3 Sentence-cuing;
- 4 Visual clues (mime, illustration);
- 5 Back-tracking and reproduction of text extracts.

Remember when you next stand in front of a class and you say, "Answer in a full sentence, please" you are not teaching correct English. If you were, you wouldn't need to say that. If short answers are appropriate, you must accept them. If you really want full sentences from pupils, simply change your questioning technique.