

Elicitation: A Powerful Diagnostic Tool for Actively Involving Learners in the Learning Process

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Abstract

This paper attempts to show the importance of elicitation in language classrooms for teachers and learners as well. Elicitation helps in motivating English language learners. Most of the teachers think that applying elicitation in language classrooms promotes interest among students, set a stress free environment, and increases students' participation. However, all teachers do not share the same attitude towards elicitation because of some drawbacks. Therefore, this paper discusses the effectiveness of using elicitation as a powerful diagnostic tool for actively involving learners in the language classrooms, the merits and demerits of elicitation, necessity of language teachers to focus on this technique in a skilled way that helps the learners develop their English language skills, and some factors affecting the teachers in using the elicitation techniques. For this purpose, a mini-research was conducted where 30 undergraduate students and 15 non-native language teachers of a university in Saudi Arabia were chosen as participants in carrying out the study. This paper also offers some suggestions for both experienced and novice teachers to focus on some criteria for applying elicitation techniques for motivating students and having variety in the language class.

Keywords: Application, demerits, effectiveness, elicitation, merits, motivation, language classes, teachers' awareness

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Introduction

Drawing out language or information from students helps in creating a more learner-centered classroom and a stimulating environment, getting the students more involved and engaged in the lesson. The process by which a teacher tries to get all the language and other answers from the students before finally giving them the solution is known as elicitation. The British Council Teaching English website defines elicitation as a “technique by which the teacher gets the learners to give information rather than giving it to them.” According to the Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1985), elicitation is defined as “Techniques or procedures which a teacher uses to get learners to actively produce speech or writing.” According to Scrivener (2012), eliciting is a technique of drawing information from students, generally by asking questions, instead of using teacher explanation. It leads to greater involvement, encourages thinking, and pushes students to self-discoveries.

Elicitation can be applied in all language classes, especially skills courses such as Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. The teacher can elicit ideas, feelings, meaning, situations, associations and memories. Elicitation is a useful diagnostic tool for the teacher, providing vital information about what the learners know or do not know, and therefore, a starting point for planning a lesson. Eliciting also encourages teachers to be flexible and to move on rather than dwell on information which is already known.

The attention of the researchers about elicitation in class was drawn by the fact that in most of their classes, the majority of the learners preferred to remain silent or inattentive if they were asked to volunteer or participate in class. There were only a few students who showed activeness during elicitation. As a result, the researchers began to ponder whether students liked to be passive only in their classes or in other classes as well. Therefore, the researchers wanted to find out about the experiences and interactions of their other colleagues in applying elicitation techniques in class.

In spite of the merits of the techniques of elicitation, all teachers who participated in this study do not share the same positive attitude in using elicitation in their class. Some teachers feel that as modern classes are student-centered, elicitation is a must for the learners. Still, others think that elicitation is a waste of lesson time because of the reluctance of most of the learners to volunteer or participate in class. Moreover, there are other issues such as inexperienced teachers' lack of skill in applying the elicitation techniques in their class, and sometimes experienced teachers overuse elicitation in their lessons. Apart from these, there are other factors such as dealing with learners who are extremely weak in using the target language and lack of confidence of learners in using the target language correctly. This study has a lot of import in the Saudi EFL context because before teachers are recruited in any institution, it needs to be ensured that teachers have at least some kind of teaching experience. They need to be familiar with some elicitation techniques which they can apply effectively in stimulating all learners, mainly passive learners.

Based on the teaching experiences and observations of the researchers, it has been found that lack of teaching experience and training of teachers, both the learners and teachers have a difficult time having an interactive class. Hence, all teachers need to have a thorough knowledge of designing elicitation in the class to make their students actively produce speech or writing. Before moving on to the objectives of this paper, we can take a look at the positive and negative sides of

elicitation and try to relate with the teachers' mixed attitude towards applying this technique in their classes.

1.1 Merits of Elicitation in the language classroom

Eliciting is an essential technique and should be used regularly, not only at the beginning of a lesson but whenever it is necessary and appropriate. There is no specific time for elicitation during a lesson. It can be used during any of the engage, study, and activate sections of the lesson. Anything in a lesson can be elicited: vocabulary, grammar, experiences, and ideas. The following are the advantages of elicitation:

1. Students are focused during elicitation: According to Case (2009), when teachers ask different types of questions to the learners, they are focused and try to participate actively in class.
2. Eliciting shows what students already know: By starting with easy questions and working your way towards more difficult ones, you will be able to boost their confidence with the first ones and realize the limits of their knowledge once their answers start to become incomplete or wrong. Finding out what students do and don't know will also help you spend lesson time on the most important things, and help you plan future lessons with that in mind.
3. Learners take a more active role in the learning process by bringing their life experiences and knowledge of the language with them into the classroom.
4. Elicitation shows teachers if the students are listening and grasping information.
5. During elicitation, there is more student talking time (STT) rather than teacher talking time (TTT).
6. Students learn to guess during elicitation. They are encouraged to try, even if they can only answer partially.
7. Students are exposed to useful incidental language during elicitation.

1.2. Demerits of Elicitation

There are some limitations in elicitation which are as follows:

1. Eliciting can be time- consuming: Teachers need to plan their elicitation and make sure when they use some visuals, it will cut down on the amount of time eliciting will take.
2. Elicitation does not always mean more student talk time (STT) because if they do not have any idea, students can be silent (Case, 2009).
3. During elicitation, learners are allowed to participate in the learning process by expressing their acquired or intuitive knowledge, but a particular student can dominate answering elicitation questions.
4. Students might show reluctance during elicitation because either they are shy or afraid of making mistakes in front of their peers. Ur (2012, p.118) states that the students are often frustrated to speak in a foreign language in the classroom because they are scared of criticism or losing face.
5. Eliciting can be culturally unsuitable: Some students are used to the teacher giving all the answers and do not expect teachers to wait for them to come up with it.
6. Eliciting can be annoying or repetitive: To avoid this, teachers can introduce variety by using different methods of elicitation such as pictures, realia, sketches, mime, guessing from context, questioning, short student-directed activities, etc.
7. Too much reliance on elicitation: Inexperienced teachers may dwell too long with the elicitation techniques, so the valuable class time gets lost from the main focus of the lesson.

2. Objectives of the study

Eliciting is a useful diagnostic tool for the teacher, providing vital information about what the learners know or don't know, and therefore a starting point for planning a lesson. The research paper aims to find out answers of the following research questions:

1. Do all teachers have a positive attitude towards using the elicitation techniques in their class?
2. Is it essential for teachers to discover how much their students already know before giving information in their lessons?
3. Do teachers feel that when they encourage students to come up with some answers before or during a lesson is a waste of time in the class?
4. Are all teachers familiar with the elicitation techniques, and how often should elicitation be applied effectively in the language classes?

3. Literature Review

Elicitation is an essential tool used for engaging students in a lesson and facilitating students' participation. The term elicitation was introduced by Sinclair and Coulthard in 1975 to describe utterances in the classroom, which elicit verbal responses (Ramiro, 2002). Nunan (1999, p. 306) explains that elicitation is a procedure by which teachers stimulate students to produce a sample of the structure, function, and vocabulary items being taught. During elicitation, learners are involved in the process of understanding and discovering language. Walsh (2013) defines elicitation techniques as 'strategies used by teachers to get learners to respond.' He believes that during elicitation, questioning is one of the principal ways in which teachers control the classroom discourse. In other words, these are techniques used by teachers before or during the lesson to get information about the depth of knowledge of the students. Later, Tsui (as cited in Jafari, 2014, p.3) adopted the term elicitation and defined it as any utterance whose function is to elicit an obligatory verbal response.

The types of questions selected by teachers for elicitation and the kind of responses to these questions have been investigated by some researchers. The types of questions asked by teachers are classified as: open and closed questions, display and referential questions, and yes/no questions. According to Thornbury (1996), most of the questions that teachers ask in classrooms are display questions. He also defines display questions as the questions to which teachers already know the answers. In the view of some linguists, teachers prefer the display questions for elicitation, but these do not lead to communicative responses from students that much. Dalton-Puffer, (2007, p.69) observes that 'answers to display questions are seen as notoriously restricted, quite often consisting of one word.' As a result, it is felt that display questions are not aimed to promote discussion but to check comprehension. The other types of questions that teachers hardly ask are the referential questions that have no specific answers. Further, he adds that 'referential questions are frequently seen as more 'natural' and are expected to generate student answers that are somehow qualitatively better, more authentic, more involved, longer and more complex' (p.69). Similarly, Ellis (1994) finds that the reason for asking this type of question is to let students express opinions and exchange information. Elicitation is commonly used to involve students in the teaching and learning process actively. Hence, the most common exchange in the classroom is eliciting exchange.

Alsubaie (2015) observes that teachers need to work harder on their elicitation skills, especially the ability of asking open questions to practice actual elicitation in the classroom, which will generate learners' more comprehensive responses and classroom interaction. In her findings, she indicated that teachers used three types of questions to elicit information from their students: Yes/No questions, Closed/ Display questions, and Open/Referential questions. In the findings of her study conducted in the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdul Aziz University, Saudi Arabia, she concluded that not all referential questions were enough for successful interaction. Moreover, during elicitation, teachers at King Abdul Aziz University used yes/no questions more frequently than the other types of questions. Similar to the view of Alsubaie (2015) on the mastery of elicitation techniques by teachers, in the study of Husna & Amri (2018), it has been pointed out that before entering the class and starting the lesson the teacher has to prepare to support the teaching process. Having proper training with the skills of applying some elicitation techniques will help teachers to increase the confidence level being sure of what they have to do in class. In another study conducted by Usman et al. (2018), the importance of elicitation has been emphasized, especially in speaking classes. The study highlights that speaking as the most essential skill needs to be taught by various strategies, and one of them is by using elicitation effectively in the classroom by which teachers can provide opportunities for students for practicing speaking. According to Usman et al. (2018), teachers used six types of elicitations: elicit: inform, elicit: confirm, elicit: agree, elicit: commit, elicit: repeat, and elicit: clarify in their speaking classes to improve the speaking skill of the learners.

As some studies have found that teachers overuse the yes/no questions to elicit, it can be said that a balance is needed between all types of elicitation questions for a positive classroom atmosphere where students can practice and experiment with the language. Not only that, teachers need to be skilled enough to use elicitation techniques effectively.

From the studies of other researchers, it is evident that elicitation is a powerful diagnostic tool for actively involving learners in the learning process. Still, every practicing teacher needs to be familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of this technique because it has been found that there are many cases when teachers have to deal with extremely low levels of learners and applying the elicitation technique becomes difficult for them. In the studies carried out by researchers so far, it has not been mentioned about the factors which affect the teachers in using the elicitation techniques in the class effectively.

4. Methods

The research instruments for this study were derived from quantitative as well as qualitative research methods. The quantitative method included two different questionnaires for teachers and students; the qualitative method included a semi-structured interview only for the teachers. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method because according to Berelson (1952), it is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of the communication. As for the responses of the questionnaires, they were counted and calculated without using any software because the simple computational technique was preferred for this study.

4.1. Data Collection

In order to find out if the English Language teachers of a university in Saudi Arabia used the elicitation techniques correctly and effectively in their classes, and how often they used elicitation with their learners, a survey was carried out through a combination of questionnaire and an interview for the teachers. For the students, only a paper-based questionnaire was administered to them. The questionnaire for the students consisted of closed questions, but for the teachers, there was a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. The interview (only for the teachers) was a semi-structured one. According to Nunan (1992), in a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a general idea of where he or she wants the conversation to go, and what should come out of it, but does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions. Topics and issues rather than questions determine the course of the interview. This type of interview gives the interviewee a degree of power and control throughout the interview. Not only that, this form of interview gives one privileged access to other people's lives. Keeping in view the advantages of the semi-structured interviews, the researchers have used this because of its flexibility. Regarding the paper-based questionnaire for students, this tool was used because a questionnaire is a relatively popular means of collecting data. In the opinion of Nunan (1992), as questionnaire items can be relatively closed or open-ended. As closed questions are easier to collate and analyze, our questionnaire consisted of simple questions and asked about one thing at a time. It was not confusing for the students because the language level of the students, the brevity and clarity of the questions, and the extent to which learners have the knowledge needed to answer the items were taken into consideration. As the investigators work at the tertiary level, they have employed the observational, descriptive, and analytical approaches to come to a conclusion about the findings. Along with the tools of the present study, they have used their observations, experiences, and interactions with their EFL learners as well.

4.2. Participants

The survey was carried out at the Department of English at a university in Saudi Arabia, where fifteen non-native language teachers/ instructors (all female) and thirty undergraduate female students participated. The students were Arabic L1 speakers doing B.A. Honors in English. Because of the ease of assembling the sample, simple random sampling was chosen for this study.

While selecting the population for conducting this research, a large number of population could not be taken. In the case of both teachers and students, they were apprehensive of answering or discussing any real classroom scenarios although they were assured that they would not be subjected to any harm in anyway. However, the population who participated in this research was informed that the confidentiality of their names and the responses involved in the study would be maintained.

4.3. Data Analysis

For analyzing the data, first of all, the researchers selected random samples of interviews and questionnaires. Next, the semi-structured interviews of fifteen teachers were transcribed. Then they counted and calculated the percentages of the responses obtained from teachers' questionnaires and interviews and students' questionnaires.

4.4. Limitation of the Methodology: From the observations, experiences, and interactions with the colleagues of a working place, it can be said that sometimes, when teachers are being interviewed, some answers are given just for the sake of answering questions. There is no way of verifying how far the answers are correct; therefore, the researchers have to rely on the given answers of the interviewees. For this study, actual classes were not observed because most of the teachers felt threatened about their classes being observed.

5. Results and Analysis of Data

5.1. Analysis of Data of Teachers

The results of the study show that 66.66% of the experienced teachers used some elicitation techniques in their classes, and they noticed that motivated learners were the first ones to respond. They have strongly expressed their views that elicitation is very important for the learners because, through the application of elicitation, teachers can know about the depth of knowledge of the learners. These teachers believed in the learner-centered class and planned their lesson accordingly. The techniques used by the experienced teachers were as follows:

- * Brainstorming ideas
- * Pre-lesson discussion
- * Rhetorical questions/ Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- * Showing a picture or a video clip, etc.
- * Asking for synonyms and antonyms (especially in vocabulary class)

The experienced teachers observed that a group of students was not used to elicitation, and they were shy to participate. Not only that, some of the students knew the answers to the questions asked during elicitation, but they were not confident. These teachers also pointed out the drawbacks of using the elicitation techniques in their class because most of the learners were used to the passive way of learning rather than volunteering to take an active role in the class.

The teachers with no teaching experiences or training that is, 33.33% of them did not know how to use the elicitation techniques with their learners and revealed that there was a shortage of motivated learners to be found in their classes. The investigators have found that in the classes of novice teachers, students had only restricted opportunities to participate in the communicative and interactive uses of language and hence had restricted opportunities for language learning. Most of the time, students were silent and listened to the teachers talking the whole time in the class.

Table 1: *An Overview of Experienced and New Teachers' Attitude towards the Elicitation Techniques.*

Group	Participants (N=15)	Experienced Teachers (10)	New Teachers (5)
(1) Experienced Teachers having positive views			66.66%
(2) New Teachers (not skilled in using elicitation techniques)			33.33%

5.2. Analysis of Data of Students

The findings show that of the two groups of learners- active and passive learners, the active learners wrote that they expected their course teachers to use the elicitation techniques in their class. Still, the passive and reluctant learners wrote that they did not want their teachers to use the elicitation techniques during the lessons. In answer to the question, if the learners preferred to be elicited in the class, 66.66% of them expressed that they liked to be encouraged by teachers and wanted to be active learners. On the other hand, 33.33% of the learners showed that it was a waste of lecture time when teachers tried to draw out information from them, and they preferred to be passive recipients of information in the class.

Table 2: An Overview of Active Learners and Passive Learners' Attitude towards the Elicitation Techniques.

Group	Participants (N=30)	Active Learners (20)	Passive Learners (10)
(1) Active learners with positive views			66.66%
(2) Passive learners with negative views			33.33%

6. Discussion

Based on the data analysis of both teachers and students, the researchers concluded that most of the experienced teachers tried to apply the elicitation techniques in their class. On the contrary, due to a lack of teaching experience, the new teachers faced some difficulties in using elicitation in their class. It is felt that all the teachers need a proper knowledge and skill. This is also the view of Alsubaie (2015), who observes that teachers need to work harder on their elicitation skills, especially the ability of asking open questions to practice actual elicitation in the classroom, which will generate learners' more comprehensive responses and classroom interaction. It is also mentioned that a skillful teacher will balance all types of elicitation questions. In the same study, it has been pointed out that after asking questions, teachers should give ample time to the learners to help them to think and formulate answers. However, in the present study, the researchers felt that weak learners were not aware of the importance of the elicitation techniques, and because of their low proficiency in English, they were shy or unwilling to participate in class. Hence teachers sometimes have to move on when there is a long silence on the learners' part. Sometimes it is also the case that the same kind of silent response is being repeated almost regularly. In such a case, teachers sometimes feel that instead of waiting for the learners to answer, they decide to move on with the lesson or focus on display questions. As Dalton-Puffer (2007, p.69) points out that 'answers to display questions are seen as notoriously restricted, quite often consisting of one word.' The researchers here support the technique of using display questions as it helps learners with low proficiency levels to at least participate in the class.

It has been mentioned earlier that elicitation can be applied in all language classes, however, in the study conducted by Usman et al.(2018) and Husna &Amri (2018), the researchers have emphasized on elicitation which is to be used in speaking classes because they felt that of all the skills, speaking was the most important skill for the learners. However, the findings of this research

show that the technique of elicitation should not only be confined in the speaking classes. This is a technique that should be applied in all language classes.

Based on the above discussion, the findings of this research indicate that there are some factors which affect the teachers in using the elicitation techniques in the class which are as follows:

Lack of skill and knowledge of teachers: Recruitment of inexperienced teachers in some institutions is an essential factor that is responsible for those novice teachers lacking in knowledge and expertise in using the techniques of elicitation in their class.

Lack of confidence of students in class participation: Students might show reluctance during elicitation because either they are shy or are afraid of making mistakes in front of their peers.

Passive recipients of information: Some students are used to the teacher giving all the answers and do not expect teachers to wait for them to come up with it. They do not like to be autonomous learners and feel that the lesson time is wasted during elicitation.

The short duration of a class: In some institutions of Saudi Arabia, all the lectures are not of one and a half hours. Some of the classes are of only 50 minutes, and while planning their lessons, teachers find it quite challenging to include the techniques of elicitation in the class.

Late arrival of students in class: Some students have the habit of coming late in class. The late arrival of these students disrupts the lesson, and both the teacher and the other students are disturbed, especially during elicitation.

Reluctant students: There are times when teachers come across extremely reluctant students to speak in class or volunteer to answer some questions or so. In these circumstances, teachers are at a loss in drawing out information from the students and wasting the lesson time.

Large class size: It is a fact that although some institutions are aware of the ideal class size nowadays, still it is found that in some classes, there are 45-50 students in one section. For a large class size, teachers have to struggle hard to include elicitation techniques. Also, it is seen that during elicitation, sometimes all the students would raise their hands to answer a question. In such a case, teachers find it difficult to select the student to answer the question. Some students could feel that the teacher is not paying attention to them. If this practice goes on a few times in class, other students might be demotivated and prefer to remain quiet.

Low level of learners: It is often found that in some classes, there are students who do not have an excellent linguistic competence. Therefore, applying the techniques of elicitation with such students becomes ineffective for teachers.

It is because of the above- mentioned factors that teachers have a mixed attitude-positive and negative towards using the elicitation techniques for their learners.

8. Conclusion:

Traditional teacher-centered classes are given a new outlook when elicitation techniques are used because it is an effective way of getting learners to produce language. Students have some knowledge, both of the language and the real world, so this knowledge needs to be activated and used constructively. However, teachers should not try to use it at every opportunity, as it will result in repetition. If used effectively, elicitation can turn the English Language classes into a more learner-centered class. It is evident that certain factors are responsible for not allowing teachers to use elicitation effectively in their classes. Although most of the teachers would like to have active learning in their classes, very often, they come across the obstacles mentioned above. There is no denying the fact that the key to successful eliciting lies in an artful interaction between the teacher and the learner. Hence it is worth taking a look at the following techniques which can be used by teachers to make their classes more learner-focused:

1. Students who volunteer during elicitation needs to be praised with gestures or short comments.
2. Students should be provided with some input from the teachers such as prompts, associations, and reminders to jog their memories.
3. If it is a class on vocabulary, teachers should present the meaning of a word first, rather than going from word to meaning.
4. During elicitation, students should be provided with sufficient context or information. Language and ideas cannot be elicited without some guidance from the teacher.
5. During brainstorming activities, learners can extract from each other, building their confidence.
6. If there is a long silence on the part of the learners during elicitation, it should not be continued, and learners need to be provided with the language. Besides, teachers should wait to give students time to think and formulate their responses. Moreover, while dealing with such students, teachers can focus on the display questions or only on the yes/ no questions to help the learners in having some class participation.
7. Open-ended questions are to be avoided because learners may not have the language to answer them.
8. Concept checking techniques can be used to ensure that learners are on the right track.
9. Students should be allowed to practice saying any complicated item, first together with others (choral drilling), then nominating students randomly so that you can focus on individual learner problems (individual drilling).
10. Teachers should allow students, especially shy students, to discuss questions in pairs or threes, and then ask the groups to report back. According to Boynton (2003), students need to know that group work is practice.
11. According to Scrivener (2012), while applying the elicitation techniques, teachers need to make sure that the class can hear both the question and the answer. It is essential that everyone can listen to the answers given by other students.

It needs to be remembered that eliciting is just one of the many techniques which should be used in the classroom. Teachers need to have thorough knowledge about using the elicitation techniques for their learners, and they must be skilled in applying this tool for an active language learning environment. Further researches on the elicitation techniques with both Arab and non-Arab teachers could be undertaken by researchers who would like to investigate how teachers can be trained in an effective way to master the art of elicitation and promote higher levels of interaction in the class.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire for Teachers

Drawing out information from the learners

This survey aims to find out if students are encouraged to come up with information before or during a lesson rather than the teachers giving it to them.

Please answer the following questions:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Do you think that it is essential to discover how much your students already know before you give the information in your lessons?					
2. Do you feel that teachers are supposed to pass on all information to students rather than asking students to participate in class?					
3. During a lesson, do you think it is vital to notice students who like the process of discovering and understanding the target language themselves?					
4. Do you think that when you encourage your students to come up with some answers before or during a lesson, it is a waste of time in the class?					

5. Please write briefly *how* you try to draw out any information from your learners before/during a lesson, and *how often* do you apply the technique of drawing out any information in your class?

Appendix B: Questionnaire for students

Please answer the following questions:

	Yes	No
1. Do your course teachers try to discover how much you know before they give you the information in your lessons?		
2. Do you like the idea of brainstorming a topic before your teachers help you out?		
3. Do you feel that teachers are supposed to pass on all information to students rather than asking students to participate in class?		
4. Is learning in an active way better than learning passively?		
5. During a lesson, do you like the process of discovering and understanding the target language yourself?		
6. Do you think that when your teachers encourage you to come up with some answers before or during a lesson is a waste of time in the class?		