

An Assessment of EFL Learners' Ability to Identify and Interpret Rhetorical Questions: A Pragmatic Perspective Study

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Abstract

The concept of rhetorical questions and their role in conveying pragmatic meanings has been of interest to many researchers in the field of language learning as these questions form one of the pillars in language communication. The main purpose of this empirical study is to find out whether learners are able to recognize rhetorical questions as well as their pragmatic functions, i.e., their illocutionary force. A total of 30 junior students majoring in English, participated in this study. The data were collected via a 25-item test followed by post-performance. They listened to 19 dialogues, and were asked to identify and interpret the pragmatic meanings of the rhetorical questions contained. Data analysis showed that while it was relatively easy for the test-takers to recognize rhetorical questions, they encountered some problems when trying to interpret their pragmatic functions. Complexity of speech acts, availability of contextual clues, background knowledge, and natural reasoning seemed to be the main variables that affected the test-takers' inferencing. Making combinations between various ideas contained in a single dialogue in addition to lack of proper courses geared towards developing this skill, seemed to be responsible for learners satisfactory or unsatisfactory achievement.

Keywords: comprehension, context, identification, implied meaning, pragmatics, rhetorical questions

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Introduction

The fact that human beings have got the desire to be recognized as distinguished, powerful and effective figures in society is unquestionable. Therefore, they try, for example, to be highly educated, physically powerful, and socially effective. Playing with words has had a magic effect on the listener or reader. For this reason, people often resort to using certain styles and techniques in conversation in order to produce an effect on listeners. In order to express their purposes, they sometimes tend to use verbal means either directly or indirectly. The art of oratory or persuasive speaking is termed 'rhetorics'. According to Yankah: 1994: 3568, rhetorical questions (henceforth RQs) are one of the styles used to have an effect on interlocutors.

Scholars and rhetoricians have studied the styles speakers select to produce a highly effective discourse. They also have tackled the techniques used for getting a persuasive discourse by using different expressions, some of which are syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, poetic, etc. Linguists (e.g. Han 2002: 202, Han, 2014:1, Lee-Goldman, 2006:1) point out that while an ordinary question seeks information or answer from the hearer, an RQ producer does not expect to elicit an answer; rather, he/she has another goal in mind: to exert the utmost powerful effect on the addressee. Rohde (2006:134) states that RQs are examples of utterances whose form does not match their functions. Quirk et al (1985: 804) holds that an RQ is interrogative in structure but displays a strong assertive force and generally does not expect an answer. They maintain that for rhetorical yes/no questions, a positive question is equivalent to a negative assertion and a negative question is equivalent to a positive assertion. As for wh-questions, the positive question equals a statement in which the wh-element is replaced by a positive element (Benjamin, 1972:2). Thus, an RQ is a statement put in the form of question as a style for expressing meaning. RQs gain their force as challenges or assertions from their interactional context rather than from their linguistic form, therefore they fall within the field of pragmatics. Consider the following structures:

- a. *I am hungry.*
- b. *I haven't eaten anything for the last ten hours.*
- c. *Do you expect a hungry man to be able to work?*

It can be noticed that the above three sentences have three different structures; nevertheless, they have a single function: request, i.e., the speaker asks for food. It can be deduced that the RQ structure is a strategy used by a speaker or a writer to convey message. These questions are not real questions, rather they are one of the implicit discourse devices used to carry out certain speech acts. In the example below the

A. *You can certainly lift that suitcase on your own, because it is very light.*"

B. *How light do you think this suitcase is?*

speaker wishes to refute the addresser's claim by using an RQ which can be expressed by the statement, "*You have obviously misjudged the weight of this suitcase. It is too heavy for me to lift.*"

The idea that an RQ does not need an answer is debatable. The present researcher argues that if we admit that an answer is not given to an RQ because the speaker and the addressee know the answer to it, or because it is too obvious to answer, then we have to concede that it is an ordinary question. On the other hand, since it is submitted that an RQ is an assertion in origin, an answer to the question is improper. Actually, these thought-to-be answers to questions, or reactions, or comments on speaker's assertion are indirect speech acts that carry various messages. And this is a very common phenomenon, simply because interlocutors in every day conversation often react to or comment on what they hear. Caponigo & Sprouse (2007: 8) state that "answers are optional with RQs and either the Addressee or the Speaker can give them." Rohde (2006:142) states that "The Addressee, however, may actually respond in certain cases: (i) if the rhetorical intent was misunderstood, (ii) if the question was an "exam-question", or (iii) if the response confirms or acknowledges the implication of the rhetorical question. In the example below, the addresser is not interested in an answer, however, what seems to be an answer is not an answer; instead, it is a reaction expressing the addressee's dissatisfaction with the addresser's remark. Thus, the speaker's utterance has the illocutionary force of sarcasm.

A. *Do you understand what I mean?*

B. *I'm not stupid.*

One of the major conclusions that Ilie (1994) arrives at is that English rhetorical questions constitute a special category of questions, which are neither answerable nor unanswerable. The present researcher claims that even when an answer to a RQ (a comment) is not articulated, it is there in the mind, and that opting to produce an answer orally or keeping it hidden in the mind depends on the listener's judgment. For example a speaker's utterance, "*You're my dearest friend, how did it strike you I stole your wallet?*" Pragmatically speaking, though an oral response is not needed in this situation, it is possible that an addressee would give a one like "*Yes, I'm sure you're the only one who stole my watch.*" This seemingly puzzling paradox could not change the fact that the deep structure of the addresser's question is a statement. And in reality, the recipient's response is a reaction (refusal) to the statement, "*I didn't steal your wallet because you're my dearest friend*". It goes without saying that an utterance in conversation can take various structural forms, depending on the circumstances and justifications under which it is vocalized; nevertheless, the kernel sentence which is derived from the intended meaning of the speaker is a decisive one in that it determines the original grammatical structure and its propositional (literal) meaning. But the intended meaning is a pragmatic one. For this reason, RQs are better studied from a pragmatic perspective, simply, because utterances in any language do not have fixed meanings. This is the reason why the possibility of mastering a foreign language in an area where English is not the indigenous language is utterly imperfect whatever efforts are made in this concern. In fact, language learning embodies all aspects of life a community exercises. Thus, depending on the surface structure might lead to misunderstanding and breakdown in conversation. Rohde (2006: 164) states that the answers for RQs are "predictable by both participants in the sense, rhetorical questions are

redundant interrogatives". The purposes behind making RQs are covert ones and there are definitely reasons that stimulate a speaker to use this style.

Functions of Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are thought to be one of the main features of any language, including the Arabic language, simply, because they are used intentionally and rationally (Thomas,1995) to realize certain goals. Some of these questions have become conventional polite speech acts strategies, and, thus, have to be properly used in certain situations. These conventional RQs make our language more beautiful and interesting, as it arouses hidden feelings of sympathy, anger, admiration, etc. To this end, an RQ producer usually uses a unique sort of tone that must accompany its structure. With the help of tone, an addressee would easily recognize the function of utterances, including RQs. People also use RQs as a mitigating device. For example in the utterance "*Dad, Don't you want to get started on that project*"? The speaker uses an RQ to convey a request because a direct command is too impolite to get the addressee accept the speaker's suggestion.

According to Lee-Goldman, (2006:2), and Koshik, (2005: 36) an RQ is used as a challenge statement to convey the addressers commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressees' mental recognition of its obviousness and acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity. Wang (2014:43) points out that because RQs are interrogative in form, they denote statements which are used to challenge the previous utterance or action of the hearer. Therefore, they often occur in environments of disagreement (Wang, 2014: 46). According to Frank (1990), RQs are also used to enhance the force and impact of the standpoint or argument advanced in order to win over the addressees and ensure their support, or even to challenge or attacks an opponent.

RQs can be used by a speaker to induce, reinforce, or alter assumptions, beliefs, or ideas in the addressee's mind. In politics, business, social and cultural situations, the ability to manipulate the audience by playing on their emotions, usually tells who is an orator and who not (Abioye, 2011: 290) is. They encourage the listener to reflect on what the implied answer to the question must be. An RQ may serve as subtle way of insinuating an idea that might be challenged by an audience if asserted directly. Sometimes an RQ is asked only as a thought-provoking and stimulating tool in discussion. Such questions are capable of inspiring new thoughts, ideas and even further debate. It is, thus, a clever way to avoid a conversation coming to a halt. Chen (2011: 613) mentions two reasons for using RQ: first they can perform face-threatening acts as well as face-saving acts. An RQ is used for the sake of persuasive effect rather than as a genuine request for information. Zillman (1972:164) argues that in natural conversation or debate, a speaker is most likely to elicit a respondent's admission of agreement in response to a good argument. RQs would not be used with poor argument because an overt response would likely result in disagreement and thus would have undesirable consequences for

the persuader. Thus, a speaker who uses RQs would generally be more persuasive than one who does not.

In Iraq, it is noticed that people in their everyday conversations, whether young or old, employ RQs abundantly. To the present researcher's knowledge, a considerable number of RQs have become conventional enough to be instantly perceived by them. It is also noticed that RQs are commonly used by individuals who are exposed to emotional occurrences. The Example below depicts a situation in Iraq where it can be felt that the respondent is indignant, expressing her emotional denial by using a rhetorical structure and a special tone for this occasion. Socially speaking, the wife uses a specific structure of RQ that is relevant to her husband's social status and their balanced and intimate relationship.

Husband: *Where is the staples, Widad?* الزوج: وداد, وين راحت الكابسه؟

Wife: *What shall I do with it?* وداد (الزوجة): يعنى ما تكلى شسوى بيها؟

Identifying and Interpreting Rhetorical Questions

Holtgraves (2008a: 21) admits that recognition of speaker's intention is particularly problematic because people frequently mean more than what they say. Haverkate (1997:222) explains that in formulating RQs, the speaker communicates more than that which he actually states; because the literal performance of the interrogative act implies the performance of a non-literal assertive act. People usually use various ways to express their intentions for one reason or another. These intentions are called speech acts. These speech acts are divided into two groups: direct and indirect. Speech act theory suggests that illocutionary force recognition plays a critical role in the comprehension of conversation remarks. Rhetorical questions are considered indirect speech acts in that they are used to convey meaning implicitly. Here, the speaker conveys meaning beyond the surface level of the linguistic form (Grice, 1975: 3, Brown & Levinson, 1978:274). Koshik (2005:3) states that RQs are widely used by English speakers to perform different actions such as challenges, accusations, complaints, pre-disagreements, etc.

Holtgraves (2008b:362) indicates that recognition of illocutionary force of implicit performance represents an inference process; the speech act is not literally present in the sentence and must be inferred. Wang (2014: 42) holds that the hearer's understanding of the message communicated counts most in the identification of rhetorical questions. Ilie (1994) proposes a pragmatic framework for the interpretation of the discursive and argumentative functions of non-standard questions. Her investigation involves three types: argumentative non-standard questions: expository questions, rhetorical questions and echo questions. She concludes that among the three types, rhetorical questions are more argumentative, because they imply that the speaker is firmly committed to their implied answer. Benjamin (1972: 5) argues that every question has within it the kernel (deep structure) of the statement which spawns it. According to Rohde (2006:135) to measure the felicity of RQs, one has to make sure whether the participants share an answer and whether that answer is obvious. Three conditions are required to decide whether a question is a rhetorical one: 1. obvious answer 2. the un informativity of an answer. 3. similarity of speaker and addressee's answers.

In order to recognize and interpret a rhetorical question, one has to carry out the following activities:

1. A listener has to recognize the literal meaning of an utterance prior to comprehending the indirect meaning. After deciding that the literal meaning is defective, he/she starts to search for an indirect interpretation (Holtgraves, 2008a:28). In case the RQ is a conventional one, there is no need for extracting the literal meaning.
2. Examining the grammatical structure of an RQ. Mostly, a positive question is equivalent to a negative assertion and a negative question is equivalent to a positive assertion.
3. Full comprehension of linguistic context in which an utterance is emitted. The recipient has the ability to make association between utterances and finally come up with the intended meaning.
4. The mutual understanding of both the addresser and the addressee on the subject matter being talked about. There is a hidden agreement between them that the question raised has a purpose and function other than that of seeking information. Thus, it is the job of the addressee to locate and read the real meaning of what is hidden in the speaker's mind. Once this agreement is not attained, there will be misunderstanding that requires putting the stream of meanings on the right track.
5. Understanding the familiar social and cultural norms of the society as these traditions and values might signal particular meanings.
6. Recognizing the tone that accompanies the production of an RQ. Tone helps us differentiate between different voices. It gives us a clue as to why the speaker uses a certain type of tone and, thus, helps us recognize and interpret an RQ as whether it is a request, agreement and so on.
7. Making use of paralinguistic features such as facial expressions, eye movements and gestures which may help a listener to identify RQs, infer implied meaning and add support, emphasis, or particular meaning to what people say.

Background

Most of the research have investigated the types, functions and nature of RQs (e.g. Chen, 201, Lee-Goldman, 2006, Rohde, 2006), the differences between them and ordinary questions (e.g. Han, 2002), how to interpret them (e.g. Wang, 2014, Han, 2002, Egg, 2007) and their effect on the addressees. Coponigro & Sprouse (2007) studied the differences between RQs and ordinary question. They found there were no differences between RQs and ordinary questions in their structures. The distinction between them is just a pragmatic one in nature. The results of Cole's (2010) study showed that RQs were produced by a minority of students who studied English in a second language context and students had few problems resulting from RQ use. Howard (1990) conducted four experiments to examine the effect of RQs on message persuasion. The results showed that RQs elicit judgement on the topic of the request when they are received, and that the availability of relevant information is a critical factor, determining whether a or not a message persuasion occurs. Benjamin (1972) investigated listeners' ability to perceive RQs. Results indicated that listeners who heard a speaker's RQ in an argumentative context generally perceived the utterances as statements rather than RQs. The results of Petty & Cacioppo's study (1981) showed that a message with strong arguments became more persuasive; and a message with weak arguments became less persuasive with rhetorical questions. Abioye (2011:290) carried out a study to determine whether RQs contribute to the effectiveness of newspaper messages. It was found that preference for RQs was higher than other stylistic alternatives. Ilie (1994) used an integrative approach based on the pragmatic framework for the analysis of questions and

response elicitation. A pragmatic classification of questions had been developed in terms of their elicitation force. The elicitation force was ascribable to the addresser of the question according to his/her explicit and implicit intentions when performing the act of questioning. Al-Fadda (2010) investigated the possibility of achieving functional equivalence when translating RQs in Haddith from Arabic into English. The results showed that partial equivalence could be achieved and there were certain linguistic and non-linguistic signals and strategies used by translators to convey the functions of the original RQs. The present researcher thinks that familiarity with the various functions of RQs is of paramount importance for natural language learning. The reason behind conducting this study is that, to the present researchers' best knowledge, no fieldwork study has been done in this specific area. The main purpose of the study is to give answers to the following questions:

- a. To what extent can learners of English recognize rhetorical questions?
- b. To what extent can learners of English recognize and interpret the illocutionary force of rhetorical questions?

Method

Subjects

The subjects participating in this study consisted of 30 randomly-selected Arabic-speaking first-year undergraduate students at Al-Iraqiya State University, Iraq. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23. They were full-time students, majoring in English. All the students had studied English, among other subjects taught in Arabic, for 8 years before joining the department. In Iraq, pupils used to start learning English at the fifth year of their primary stage. All the students have to pass the ministerial examinations before moving to the stage that follows. Those who intend to enrol in the department of English are to pass an admission written test as well as an interview. Most of the students joined the English department because they were interested in in this area of specialization. Their proficiency in English was varied considerably. They were exposed to English mainly through their classes because English was their medium of instruction. They had got no instruction or an idea about RQs, despite the fact that they understood and produced such kind of questions in their everyday oral communication in Arabic. Therefore, it was expected that the results of this study would not be influenced by their previous education variable. The staff members held Ph.D. or M.A. degrees in linguistics, literatures, or methods of teaching English. The reason behind recruiting these students to carry out this study is that the researcher has been their own instructor and a member of the department staff. It was hoped that the subjects would fully cooperate with the researcher.

Instrument

In order to give answers to the study questions, a listening task, comprising 19 items was developed by the researcher. Each item of the test was composed of a dialogue. In each dialogue, the addresser or the addressee produces one or more than one RQs. All the RQs except number 7 take place in a disagreement environment. It is noteworthy to mention that all the dialogues include both ordinary and rhetorical questions in order to make answering the first study questions feasible, i.e. the test-takers has to differentiate between the two groups of questions.

All the dialogues were created by the researcher except three ones, namely, dialogues 1, 14, and 15. The test includes 25 RQs; 6 of them were composed by the researcher. The researcher borrowed the other 19 RQs from a variety of resources and created situations and dialogues in which these RQs were included. It can be admitted that these dialogues are artificial ones, however, their occurrences in real-life situations is of high frequency. The RQs in the dialogues have various pragmatic functions (See Table 2). It is thought that this type of test is more accurate in measuring the learners' ability to identify the RQs as well as their functions. The listener could make use of non-linguistic context: speaker's facial features, gestures, tone and setting to identify and interpret the RQs. She/he would be able to make connection between the utterances and come up with an inference of the implied meaning.

Some of the questions are not followed by explicit answers that are directly related to the given questions. For example in item 8 the addresser's question is followed by another question where there is no relation between them on the propositional level. The vague relation between the two utterances may drive the addressee to skip the literal meaning and start to look for a meaning that would be in harmony with the speaker's question. Thus, on the pragmatic level, there is quite a reasonable and logical relation between the son's request and the mother's refusal that is put in the form of an RQ.

Item 8. **Son:** *Mum, please, may I watch T.V.?*

Mother: *Aren't you taking your physics exam tomorrow morning?*

Test administration

The volunteers in this study were given an account on the meaning of RQs and showed how to do the task. Two illustrative examples were given: the first was in the colloquial Arabic Iraqi language, while the second was in English. They were incentivized so as to be serious and do their best by adding two extra marks to their second term examination in the subject matter the researcher was teaching. They were advised to work hard as the task would evaluate their intellectual abilities. They were also asked to write their names on their answer sheets. In presenting the dialogues, a female student and a male student took part in the dialogues as either speakers or addressees, while the researcher took the other role. It was thought that this way of presenting the dialogues would make the heard speech more natural. Bachman,(1990:112) considers context of situation as the central construct in the study of language and that the meaning of a speech act is determined by the components of situation such as the participants, the setting, the topic and the purpose. After hearing a dialogue, they were asked to put a mark on the utterance they thought it was an RQ and then write down its function in the discourse. The participants were strongly encouraged to explain how they managed to interpret an RQ and the problems. The test was conducted at 10 o'clock in the morning, on the 21st of May, 2015, in room no.30.

As soon as the test was administered, the answers were scored by the researcher. One score was given for each correct response but no score was given when the answer was wrong, or when an item was left out. The highest mark would be 30 while the lowest would be zero. Participants' answers were tallied for each item and for the whole group in respect to the dual

objectives of the study: identification of RQs as well as their illocutionary functions. The test scores were added in totals, besides; each RQ's score

was computed. The quantitative results were used to provide qualitative analysis of the speech acts recognized by the subjects.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 below was designed to answer the first study question: "To what extent can learners of English recognize rhetorical questions? Results show that the majority of the participants were able to recognize the RQs. 527 (%77) of their answers were correct, while the number of incorrect answers was 158 (%23). This result gives concrete evidence that a considerable proportion of the participants were able to identify the RQs in the contextualized situational dialogues and make distinction between them and the ordinary questions contained in the dialogues. The reasons for this positive result could be attributed to the oral presentation of the material where all contextual clues were available at the listener's disposal. The situation created by the dialogues makes it easy for the listener to combine the meanings of the utterances and identify the RQ in question. The other important factor that plays a fundamental role in recognizing RQs is the tone used

Table 1. Number of correct and incorrect answers with their percentages

Serial no. of dialogue	Serial no. of RQ.	No. of correct answers	%	No. of incorrect answers	%
1	1	20	60	10	30
2	2	26	86	4	13
3	3	10	33	20	66
	4	26	86	4	13
4	5	23	76.6	7	23.3
5	6	27	90	3	10
6	7	28	93	2	6.6
7	8	23	76	7	23.3
8	9	20	60	10	33
	10	21	70	9	30
9	11	24	80	6	20
	12	17	56	13	43
10	13	18	60	12	30
	14	14	46	16	53.3
11	15	26	86	4	13
12	16	23	76	7	30
13	17	27	90	3	10
14	18	21	70	9	30
	19	27	90	3	10
15	20	27	90	3	10
16	21	30	100	-	-
17	22	20	60	10	33
	23	21	70	9	30
	24	21	70	9	30

19	25	25	83	5	16.5
Total	-----	527	77	158	23.3

when producing an RQ. The present researcher stresses that most of the dialogues set were representative of the life, habits and conventions in the Iraqi society. Tone, facial expressions and the joint understanding of the topic are the main avenues that lead a listener to identify an RQ and then react in the appropriate way. Some of the RQs have become so conventional that they almost need no effort to recognize. Some students revealed that when an RQ happened to be the first question in a dialogue (e.g. RQ 15) they mistakenly took it for an informative question. In addition, when an RQ is followed by a statement on the part of the addressee (e.g. item10) some of the participants thought it was an ordinary question (%43). It can be concluded that the identification of RQs hinges on combining meanings rather than on grammatical structures. The process of RQs identification is an initial step in the process of attaining their relevant interpretations.

The second study question is concerned with the learner's ability to recognize and interpret the illocutionary force of RQs. The total number of scores is 750. Statistical analysis (Table 2) shows that the majority of the examinees (%64.8) were perplexed when asked to assign the appropriate function to the RQs mentioned in the dialogues. It shows that only %35.2 of them managed to decide the illocutionary force of the utterance. The reason for this might stem from the fact that at the undergraduate level there have been no courses geared towards developing the learners' pragmatic competence. These learners had not got instruction or practice on how to recognize or interpret RQs. Recognizing the function of RQs seems more complicated than making distinction between them and ordinary questions. The learners' good performance in recognizing RQs is due to their intuition and the contextual clues available. Khamees (2010:322) states that "learners depend on their natural reasoning and past experience to identify speech acts". The ineffective participants seem incapable of going beyond the literal meaning when interpreting utterances. Some students disclosed that they used to understand the spoken or written language literally, denying having instruction or exercises on inferring meaning expressed implicitly.

The other problem encountered by the participants is the chain of inferences needed to realize the function of an utterance. Flowerdew (1990:86) states that "One sentence can express more than one act." One has also to distinguish between simple and multiple indirect speech acts. The first performs only a primary speech act, while the second is embedded into another speech act. Naturally, one RQ may be used to realize many different illocutionary forces, and it is only because of the inferencing processes that we manage to identify the right one. Complex speech acts require the listener to go through more than one cognitive processing step to accurately recognize the pragmatic function of an utterance. Evidently, most of the poor students managed to untie the first or the second knot of an utterance, but they could not go further. They usually

mentioned that an RQ had an opposite meaning. For example, when doing the task of item 3, “*Don’t you know it cost me five dollars?*”, many participants wrote that they thought the utterance was a statement, meaning that the pizza cost the addressee 5 dollars. These learners lack the ability to make combinations between utterances to extract the real meaning. Actually, the utterances that follow or precede an RQ would help the participant decide the purpose behind producing it. Item 11 gives evidence of the complex nature of RQs.

Table. 2. Recognizing functions of rhetorical questions, number of correct and incorrect answers and their percentage.

no. of RQ	function of RQs	no. of correct answers	%	no. of incorrect answers	%
1	disagreement	14	46.7	16	53.3
2.	rebuking	12	40	18	60
3	rebuking	11	36	19	63
	sarcasm	12	40	18	60
4.	advice	8	26.6	22	73.3
5	complaining	10	33.3	20	66.6
6	sarcasm	10	33.3	20	66.6
7.	agreement	7	23	23	76.6
8	refusal	5	16.6	25	83.8
9.	Warning	12	40	18	60
	complaining	8	26.6	22	73.3
10	apology	9	30	21	66
	rebuking	12	40	18	60
11	refusal	9	30	21	66
12	rebuking	10	33.3	20	66.6
13	rebuking	13	43.3	17	56.6
14	Warning	14	56	17	56.6

15	request complaining	12 12	40 40	18 18	60 60
16	advice	10	33.3	20	66.6
17	protesting	15	50	15	50
18	complaining disagreement disagreement	20 3 6	66.6 10 20	10 27 24	33 9 86
19	sarcasm	10	33	20	66
Total	25	264	35.2	486	64.8

Item 11: Woman: *Would you please turn off the heating?*

Man: *Won't the house plants get frozen and die?*

In order to understand the man's utterance, the addresser has to identify the positive structure of the question (assertion). Second, she attempts to refuse the speaker's request in a polite way, using a warning style. It seems this is the reason why some test-takers assigned the assertion function to the RQ, while others considered it as either warning or refusal. Item 5, 8,12,13,15 and 18 are examples of utterances whose meanings are illusive and, thus, difficult to grasp. These utterances have three illocutionary forces each. The dilemma here is that some participants perceived an RQ as carrying a specific illocutionary force, while the speaker means something else.

Some ineffective participants complained that they had not got the chance to review their answers because they had to catch up with the flow of the on-going oral speech. Others expressed their disappointment as they lost a lot of time trying to understand the literal meanings of utterances. Forgetfulness was one of the main reasons that impeded their ability to decide the right type of speech acts carried by utterances. On the other hand, effective participants seem to make use of linguistic and non-linguistic contextual clues to understand the purpose behind emitting an utterance. For example, in item 9 (RQ.9) the learners revealed that the utterance "*I don't smoke.*" sparked the idea of the harmful effects of smoking which in turn facilitated the process of deciding the illocutionary force of the RQ that followed.

Item 9. George: Could you spare me a cigarette?

John: I don't smoke. Have you thought over your health and the money you spend on smoking?

Familiarity with the social and cultural use of language has a substantial effect on the process of comprehension. The unsatisfactory result of item 7 (7 scores: % 23) gives an evidence to this effect. Table 2 shows that %76.6 of the test-takers failed to understand the function of the RQ,

simply because they were not acquainted with such kind of figures of speech put in the form of an RQ either in class or in their native language.

Item 7: *John, do you really love me?* John: *Is the rain wet?*

Conclusion

The main objectives of this study are to investigate whether EFL learners are able to recognize RQs and interpret their indirect meanings in order to decide their pragmatic functions. It also sheds light on the problems they encounter in this respect. Rhetorical questions are often used as indirect speech acts. The findings showed that the learners are adequately able to recognize RQs when presented orally in speech. However, their ability to assign a specific function for a rhetorical question is not satisfactory. The results revealed that the participants were able to understand the propositional meaning of an utterance, but the majority could not recognize the illocutionary force embedded in that speech act. A considerable number of participants did not make use of contextual clues available to understand the purpose behind producing a certain utterance. Context seems to play a basic role in recognizing and interpreting RQs. It was found that an RQ that contains more than one speech act requires more cognitive processes to attain the intended illocutionary force. For this reason, when an RQ whose illocutionary force is embedded into another one, the participant might mistakenly choose the first one rather than the intended one. For example when refusal is embedded into warning, the listener might infer warning as the sound interpretation.

Implications

The results of this study indicated that interpreting RQs is much more complicated than might be expected as they are context sensitive. In the light of the study results, it is suggested that text books have to cover this important aspect of language communication. Bouton (1999) claims that learners do benefit from explicit instruction in the use of implicatures, and RQs can be considered as a form of implicatures. Learners have to be convinced that an RQ might be used to express various meanings. The learners are to be sensitized to the effect of contextual clues that could be used to identify and interpret RQs. It would be favourable if the learners are exposed to real life situation where people use such questions. The teacher is required to analyse and explain the reason behind using an RQ and how coherence can be made between seemingly unrelated utterances. Learner could be given time to reason and explore for themselves the real meanings of RQs.

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