Asking questions is a natural feature of communication, but also one of the most important tools which teachers have at their disposal.

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Questioning is crucial to the way teachers manage the class, engage students with content, encourage participation and increase understanding.

Typically, teachers ask between 300-400 questions per day, however the quality and value of questions varies. While questioning can be an effective tool, there is both an art and science to asking questions.

Every question demands a response (except in the case of requests and suggestions), so that questions inevitably generate communication. However the quantity of questions asked needs to be considered in relation to general time constraints and the need to keep teacher talking time to a minimum while maximising learner contributions.

* Types of questions
* Purposes of questions
* Effective questioning
* Conclusion

**Types of questions**

There have been a number of typologies and taxonomies of questions. Socratic questioning, exemplified by Paul’s taxonomy, forms the basis of eliciting, while Bloom’s taxonomy identifies six types of questions by which thinking skills may be developed and tested. In the context of language teaching and learning, Bloom himself maintained that;"***The major purpose in constructing a taxonomy of educational objectives is to facilitate communication...***" Classroom questions tend to fall into two broad categories:  
  
Display questions. These are designed to elicit learners’ prior knowledge and to check comprehension. They often focus on the form or meaning of language structures and items, and the teacher already knows the answer.

* What does ..... mean?
* When do we use .....?
* What comes after .....?
* What’s the opposite of .....?
* Where’s the stress in .....?

 Referential questions. These require the learner to provide information, give an opinion, explain or clarify. They often focus on content rather than language, require ‘follow-up’ or ‘probe’ questions, and the answer is not necessarily known by the teacher.

* What do you think about .....?
* Have you ever....when/where .....?
* If you had .....what.....?
* What kind of .....?
* How do you .....?

The best referential questions are those that are **‘divergent’** or **‘open-ended’** in that they are broad, may have multiple answers, and require a higher level of thinking from the learners.

Open-ended questions are ideal for developing skills such as inferring, predicting, verifying and summarising, as well as eliciting more language. **‘Convergent’**or **‘closed’**questions have more narrowly defined correct answers which can be recalled from memory and require little reflection or originality. Closed questions are common in conventional tests.

**Purposes of questions**

Questions have a variety of purposes often related to the type and stage of a lesson.

* During the lead-in to a lesson, referential questions form the basis of brainstorming a topic, generating interest and topic-related vocabulary. Student’s responses may be recorded as a mind-map on the board, or as the first phase of a ‘what we know / what we would like to know/ what we know now’ framework, particularly in receptive skills based lessons where predicting content is a useful pre-reading / listening activity.
* When language is being presented, questions are used to elicit students’ prior knowledge, and guide them into recognising patterns and forming hypotheses about how the language is used. ‘Noticing’ questions are used to help learners identify language in context (‘What language does he use to talk about his plans?’, ‘How does she make a promise?’)
* Meaning and understanding need to be checked before language is practised. Concept-checking questions (CCQs) should demand short answers, be simple and asked often (‘Is he talking about the past, present or future?’, has the action finished?’, ‘Is time important?’, ‘ıs the meaning positive or negative?’ (Checking meaning and understanding is the subject of another article on this site.)
* Question-response is a common form of guided oral practice. Nomination is often essential in this stage, but the traditional ‘lockstep’ pattern of interaction should be minimised by asking students to ask and answer questions in open pairs across the class and in closed pairs. Student involvement nay be increased by asking students to nominate the person to ask the next question (student nomination).
* Globally designed materials often suggest form-based questions for language practice which are too general, outside the learners’ experience, or which produce obvious answers. Form-based questions may also be personalised and divergent in that they require elaboration. Thus ‘How often do you brush your teeth?’ is unlikely to either stimulate interest or generate language, whereas ‘How often do you argue with your parents?’ offers the opportunity for follow-up questions as well as producing the target structure.
* In skills lessons, questions may focus on strategies as well as language (‘Do you have to read everything to get the information?’, ‘Do you need to understand every word?’. ‘What do you think will happen next?’ Questions may also focus on process rather than product (‘How did you guess the meaning of that word?’, ‘Where in the passage did you find the information?’, ‘What helped you to understand what the speaker’s opinion was?’)
* Student nomination may also be used for obtaining the answers to exercises and comprehension tasks, but feedback on the tasks themselves is equally important and can be dealt with by questions such as ‘What was difficult about that question?’. ‘Did you have enough information?’ and ‘Did you enjoy that activity?’
* The success of many fluency activities depends on the use of open-ended referential questions, but the teacher can also increase motivation by expressing interest through questions. Some of the best discussions take the form of ‘chats’, often outside the classroom, when paraphrasing and clarification can take place more naturally.

Questions focusing on form, function, meaning, concept and strategies may all be termed ’guidance questions’, and differ from comprehension questions in that learners are not necessarily required to provide correct answers. The overall aim of these questions is to gradually raise awareness of language and skills and to help learners develop strategies for learning in a focused way.

Throughout the lesson, questions play an important role in classroom management, including general questions (‘Can you all see the board?’, ‘Have you got your dictionaries ready?’) and questions for checking progress ‘Ready?’, Have you finished?’. Questions designed to check instructions are vital in order to avoid interrupting a task in order to reinstruct or clarify the task. These questions should be kept simple (‘Are you working alone or in pairs?’, ‘Who’s in group B?’, ‘Are you going to write anything?') and spread around the class.

Many teachers find it difficult to estimate the amount of time needed for a student to respond to a question, often due to pressure of time, impatience or fear of silence. Rushing learners may result in mistakes and frustration. Sufficient ‘wait-time’ is needed for learners to comprehend the question, formulate an answer, process language and respond. Wait-time before nominating and after the initial response encourages longer answers, questions from the learners, self-correction and level of student involvement.

**Effective questioning**

As with all aspects of teacher talking time, it is not the quantity but the quality and value of questions that is important. When thinking about their questioning technique, teachers might use the following as a check-list:

* Decide on the purpose of questions.
* Minimise the use of "yes / no" questions except when checking meaning and understanding or encouraging weaker students.
* Ask a balance of referential and display questions.
* Use open-ended (divergent) questions to encourage opinions, elaboration and discussion.
* Ask questions about important rather than trivial content.
* Grade language in questions and try not to over-paraphrase.
* Personalise questions where possible.
* Avoid questions that contain the answer.
* Make sure that students clearly understand questions.
* Spread questions randomly around the class.
* Balance questions to the whole class with individual student nomination.
* Give enough time for students to answer.
* Anticipate students' responses.
* Give appropriate responses to questions, particularly where correction is required. and in order to extend the dialogue.

**Conclusion**

Clearly there is more to asking questions than the common division into ‘information’ or ‘wh’, ‘yes/no’, direct and indirect questions, though this is often how they are taught and how learners categorise them. Good questioning provides a model which hopefully will promote correct and intelligent questions from learners.

There are pitfalls such as over-eliciting when the learners have little collective knowledge, and bombarding students with questions of little relevance or importance. The questions ‘Do you understand?’, ‘Is that clear?’ and ‘OK?’ are unlikely to provoke a helpful response. It is also wise to avoid questions which may cause embarrassment or which may offend through sarcasm (‘Are you awake?’).

Given that little training is given in asking questions, and it is rarely mentioned in general ELT texts, teachers are left to develop the technique themselves, and are often unaware of how effective their questions are. The teacher’s questions are therefore a useful focus for peer observation and feedback on a lesson – an awareness-raising exercise for teachers themselves.

**Further reading**

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