**Helping EFL Students by Asking Quality Questions**

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**Abstract**

One of the most significant teaching acts is questioning. For thousands of years, teachers have known that it is possible to transfer factual knowledge and conceptual understanding through the process of asking questions. Its trend in the teaching and learning practice in EFL context has been as well developed. This article focuses on the description of two main categories of questions which are frequently used in the classroom. The habit of asking high-level questions that should be developed and types of questioning practices teachers should avoid in their teaching are further discussed accordingly.

**Introduction**

Questioning is one of the most popular modes of teaching. Questions have been cited as not only the most often used, but also the single most important strategy used after lecturing by instructors in the realm of teaching and learning (Ellis, 1993, Foster, 1983). It appears that teachers have mistakenly equated quantity of questions with quality. In 1912, Stevens stated that approximately eighty percent of a teacher's school day was spent asking questions to students. Gall (1970) cited several studies in which elementary teachers used 64 to 180 questions in one class period. Teachers ask between 300-400 questions each day (Leven and Long, 1981). Dillon 1987 (cited in Orlich et al. 1994) reported that of observations of 27 teachers showed an average of 80 questions per class per hour. A case study done by Tung-Tao in 2007 showed that an average of 180 questions was asked per lesson by an EFL teacher in Taiwan. More contemporary research on teacher questioning behaviors and patterns indicate that the practice has hardly changed. This article aims to give the message that if teachers are to teach logically, they must be knowledgeable in the process of framing questions so that they can guide the students' thought process.

**Why do We Need to Ask Questions?**

Teachers ask questions for several reasons. The following are the possible reasons:

* To encourage students to talk constructively and on-task
* To signal an interest in hearing what students feel and think
* To help teachers keep students actively involved in lessons; stimulate their interest and awaken their curiosity
* To encourage a problem-solving approach to thinking and learning
* To help students externalize and verbalize knowledge learning; provide students with the opportunity to openly express their ideas and thoughts
* To encourage thinking aloud and exploratory approaches to tasks
* To help students to learn from each other; questioning students enables other students to hear different explanations of the material by their peers
* To monitor learning
* To deepen students thinking level and increase their ability to conceptualize
* To help teachers to pace their lessons and moderate student behavior
* To help teachers to evaluate student learning and revise their lessons as necessary.

Questions are generally categorized under two main types:

* Yes/No questions
* Wh-questions

The first type begins with a verb (to be, have, do or a modal verb) and requires a single word or a very brief response, for example, Are you going to the party tomorrow? Can you swim? The second category begins with an interrogative word (what, were, why, when, how). They are also known as information questions, because they ask the responder to provide particulars.

Categorizing wh-question type can be done in a number of ways. The following is one simple method:

1. **a data recall question**

It requires the learner to remember facts and information without putting the information to use, for example, 'What are the four rules of number?'

2. **a naming question**

It asks the learner simply to name an event, process, phenomenon, etc. without showing insight into how the event is linked to other factors, for example, 'What do we call the set of bones which cover the lungs?'

3. **an observation question**

It asks learners to describe what they see without attempting to explain it, for example, 'What happened when we added salt to boiling water?'

4. **a control question**

It involves the use of questions to modify learners' behaviour rather than their learning, for example, 'Will you sit down, Kashif?

5. **a pseudo-question**

It is constructed to appear that the teacher will accept more than one response, but in fact he/she has clearly made up his/her mind that this is not so, for example, 'Do you feel involving in violence was a good thing, then?'

6. **a speculative or hypothesis generating question**

It asks learners to speculate about the outcome of a hypothetical situation, for example, 'Imagine a world without trees, how would this affect our lives?'

7. **a reason or analysis question**

It asks learners to give reason (s) why certain things do or do not happen, for example, 'What motivates some young people to get involved in drug abuse?

8. **an evaluation question**

It is one that makes a learner weigh out the pros and cons of a situation or argument, for example, 'How much evidence is there for the existence of an after-life?'

9. **a problem solving question**

It asks learners to construct ways of finding out answers to questions, for example, 'Suppose we wanted to discover what prompts birds to migrate, how could we go about it?'

Question types 1-5 are more 'closed' than types 6-9. Types 1-5 demand shorter answers, less thought and little competence in language use by the learners. Types 6-9 are more demanding.

**Questioning Procedure**

Although the act of asking questions has the potential to greatly facilitate the learning process, it also has the capacity to turn a learner off to learning if done incorrectly. In this line of nature, not all teachers are well aware of effective questioning procedure. Teachers should know that asking questions and allowing the whole class to answer in chorus is generally a poor method of questioning. Despite the fact that this method could stimulate a dull class or encourage learners to participate, it also has some disadvantages. Choral answers permit the learners' attention to wander, decrease individual thought, and restrict the teachers to monitor feedback from the class.

Following a certain frame of questioning procedure is of great importance. The learners’ mental participation can be achieved through the following simple five parts questioning procedure explained below. The basis of this rule is on the psychological principle that when a question is asked and then followed by a pause, all learners will attend to the communication. The nonverbal message (pause) shows that any learner in the class could be called to for a response. Therefore, the attention level of the learner remains high. The technique of framing thus entails:

1. **Ask the question.**

The teachers should state the question clearly and concisely. If a question is complicated, it may be necessary to rephrase it. It is imperative that the question is stated first before naming the learner to respond.

2. **Pause.**

After asking a question, pausing is important so that everyone has time to think. Waiting time is essential when asking high-level question.

3. **Call on the learner by name.**

Learners should be randomly selected to answer the questions so that they try to formulate the answer.

4. **Listen to the answer.**

A good technique that teachers can use to ensure that the learners are attentive is to ask another learner to respond to the answer given.

5. **Emphasize the correct answer.**

The teachers could ask probing questions to have the respondents' response clarified, to support a point, or to extend their thinking.

**Characteristics of Good Questions**

In order to teach well, it is widely believed that one must be able to question well. Asking good questions fosters interaction between the teacher and his/her students. Rosenshine (1971) found that a large amount of student-teacher interaction promotes student achievement. Thus, one can surmise that good questions fosters student understanding. The learners should be able to understand the questions asked and the meaning of the questions should be clear to them. However, it is important to know that not all questions achieve this. The followings are some points that need to be considered by teachers:

* Questions asked must be according to the level of the learners.
* Questions with definite answers should be encouraged.
* Challenging questions that require learners to compare, evaluate, or draw inference should be asked.
* A question should not have a 'trick' or 'catch' to it.
* Yes/No questions should be avoided.

Moreover, teachers spend most of their time asking low-level cognitive questions (Wilen, 1991). These questions concentrate on factual information that can be memorized (ex. What year did the Civil War begin? or Who wrote *Great Expectations*?). It is widely believed that this type of question can limit students by not helping them to acquire a deep, elaborate understanding of the subject matter.

High-level-cognitive questions can be defined as questions that require students to use higher order thinking or reasoning skills. By using these skills, students do not remember only factual knowledge. Instead, they use their knowledge to problem solve, to analyze, and to evaluate. It is popularly believed that this type of question reveals the most about whether or not a student has truly grasped a concept. This is because a student needs to have a deep understanding of the topic in order to answer this type of question. Teachers do not use high-level-cognitive questions with the same amount of frequency as they do with low-level-cognitive questions. Ellis (1993) claims that many teachers do rely on low-level cognitive questions in order to avoid a slow-paced lesson, keep the attention of the students, and maintain control of the classroom.

Teachers should ask a combination of low-level-cognitive and high-level-cognitive questions. They should also determine the needs of their students in order to know which sort of balance between the two types of questions needs to be made in order to foster students understanding and achievement.

**How to ask questions that foster student achievement**

In a research review on questioning techniques, Wilen and Clegg (1986) suggest teachers employ the following research supported practices to foster higher student achievement:

* phrase questions clearly;
* ask questions of primarily an academic nature
* allow three to five seconds of wait time after asking a question before requesting a student's response, particularly when high-cognitive level questions are asked;
* encourage students to respond in some way to each question asked;
* balance responses from volunteering and non-volunteering students;
* elicit a high percentage of correct responses from students and assist with incorrect responses;
* probe students' responses to have them clarify ideas, support a point of view, or extend their thinking;
* acknowledge correct responses from students and use praise specifically and discriminately

**Practices to be Avoided**

* Repeating ones’ own questions
* Repeating learners' answers
* Answering ones’ own questions
* Questioning for chorus answering
* Not allowing learners to complete a long response
* Not attending to the responding learner
* Selecting the same learner respondents

**Conclusion**

It is imperative that teachers should inculcate the habit of asking more thought provoking questions so that learners' involvement in the process of learning increases. Teachers should also make sure that the teaching materials provide an opportunity to ask focused questions that require learners to compare, contrast, persuade, and determine cause and effect, which would develop their process of thinking.

All teachers must become aware of the kinds of questions they ask and the kinds of responses that these questions elicit. If the teachers desire a response at a selected level of thinking, then appropriate questions must be framed that will elicit proper response level from the students. Although evidence is somewhat inconclusive, there appears to be a direct relationship between the level of questions asked by the teachers and the level of learners' responses. If this generally accepted assertion is valid, then teachers must achieve a high degree of sensitivity and awareness to use questions in the most efficacious and appropriate manner. Rather than emphasizing a right answer, teachers should use questions to stimulate higher cognitive achievements and to make information more meaningful.

Sanders (1966) states, "Good questions recognize the wide possibilities of thought and are built around varying forms of thinking. Good questions are directed toward learning and evaluative thinking rather than determining what has been learned in a narrow sense". With this in mind, teachers must be sure that they have a clear purpose for their questions rather than just determining what knowledge is known. This type of question planning results in designing questions that can expand students’ knowledge and encourage them to think creatively. To conclude, good questions and good questioning techniques can make a fair teacher good and a good teacher great.

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