

ASKING QUESTIONS, TEACHING QUESTIONS

In the March 2005 issue of *Essential Teacher*, a publication of TESOL, Inc. Sheryl Slocum has an article about asking effective questions that started me thinking. In any classroom, but very importantly in an ESL classroom, questioning is a critical skill to develop by both learners and teachers.

Learners at all levels need to be able to ask comprehensible questions. Of course, beginners need to be able to answer basic information questions, but they also need to be able to ask essential information and direction questions, too. Questions, such as “*Is this the #68 bus stop?*” “*When is my appointment?*” “*What is your name?*” “*Where is the washroom?*” are basic, but important functional questions.

It is important, however, that as learners develop language skills, they learn to ask and answer increasingly complex questions. While at *Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB)* Stage 1 teachers are concentrating on simple, concrete, factual question asking and answering, by Stage 2, question asking should be focused on increasingly complex, abstract types.

This takes planning. Left to spontaneity, teachers may inadvertently concentrate on simple question types or accidentally introduce a much too complex question for the learners’ level of competence. Teachers need to plan the types of questions they will ask in class so that their learners are helped to understand and respond to increasingly sophisticated language. They also need to be selective and intentional about the types of questions they teach their learners to ask.

Slocum mentions Bloom’s taxonomy of questions and also refers to a taxonomy developed for teachers by A.V. Ciardiello. Although intended for mainstream classroom teachers of NSs, it is a very useful framework for ESL teachers. Ciardiello identifies 4 types of questions:

Level 1 – Memory Questions

These questions elicit simple reproduction of facts or other items of remembered content. The thought processes involved are: naming defining, identifying, designating, or giving yes/no responses. Memory questions usually begin with *who, what, where, when*.

Level 2 – Convergent Thinking Questions

These questions represent analysis and integration and lead you to an expected end result. The thought processes involved are explaining, stating relationships, comparing and contrasting. Convergent thinking questions usually begin with *why, how, in what ways*.

Level 3 - Divergent thinking Questions

These questions represent intellectual operations where you are free to generate your own ideas or perspective. The thought processes involved are predicting, hypothesizing, inferring or reconstructing. Divergent thinking questions usually begin with *imagine, suppose, predict, if...then, how might, can you create, what are some possible consequences ...*

Level 4 – Evaluative Questions

Evaluative questions deal with matters of judgment, value and choice and are characterized by their judgmental quality. The thought processes involved are valuing, judging, defending or justifying choices. They may begin with *defend, judge, justify, what you think about..., what is your opinion about...*

I think that it is fairly easy to see a correspondence between the question types and the language demands at various *CLB* levels. At *CLB* Stage 1, the questions that we ask and teach are generally level 1 questions, especially at *CLB* 1 and 2. However, by *CLB* 3, teachers should be introducing some easier forms of level 2 questions. By *CLB* 4, level 2 questions should make up a significant portion of the questions being asked and taught with some simpler forms of level 3 questions being introduced.

Stage 2 learners should be increasingly asking and answering level 3 and 4 questions. By *CLB* 7 and 8, the variety and complexity of questions should be cognitively and linguistically demanding, especially for learners planning on further academic training or those entering professional fields.

To incorporate appropriately complex questioning into lesson plans, teachers need to be well-planned. Explicitly listing the questions that you will ask and/or teach in lesson plans is critical if you want to be intentional in your teaching. A good place to begin is to consider the types of questions you generally use with your learners now. Are they appropriate for the *CLB* level and needs of your learners? Then, it becomes a matter of analyzing the themes or topics you are working on with your learners and developing different types of related questions that you can ask and teach.

References

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