

Question Techniques Used in Class: Expectations and Reality

HATIXHE LEKA (SEJDINI) PhD
Faculty of Foreign Languages
University of Tirana
hatixhe.sejdini@unitir.edu.al

Abstract:

Traditionally, questions have been the most powerful and effective tools teachers have been employing primarily for student assessment. Traditional teacher-centered classes have been based on the formula, teacher asking questions and students answering them. The questions served as a tool for assessing the mechanical repetition of the theory explained to the students in the previous classes. Teachers' and methodologists' struggle, involved in research for a change of approach, brought about novelty that proved to be beneficial to the student, who is the center of attention for teachers, educators, researchers, and the whole educational system. The nature of questions and the purpose they were asked for changed. In today's classes they can be asked by teachers and students in different approaches and for different purposes. This paper aims at contextualizing the results of the approach, the purpose questions are asked for, and types of questions that teachers use in classes.

Keywords: approach, assessment, teacher-centered classes, student-centered classes, factual, questions, inferential questions.

When it comes to the classification of questions, Bloom's Taxonomy, a hierarchy of increasingly complicated skills, is the most commonly referred one in the teaching context. These types of questions are included in Bloom's Taxonomy:

Knowledge – recall data or information

Comprehension – understand meaning

Application – use a concept in a new situation

Analysis – split ideas into sections; recognize the difference between evidence and inference
Synthesis – combine parts to form new meaning

Evaluation – make assessments on the worth of concepts or things

Bloom's taxonomy is the most well-known but there exist other classifications of questions, among which: lower cognitive and higher cognitive questions.

Lower-level cognitive questions like fact, closure, direct, recall, and knowing entail the recollection of information. Mental manipulation of data to generate or support a response require higher cognitive questions: *open-ended, interpretive, evaluative, inquiry, inferential, and synthesis inquiries*

Higher cognitive questions, according to traditional knowledge, lead to higher-quality responses and enhanced learning and accomplishment.

However, there is dispute when it comes to the kind of knowledge that students acquire through different types of questions. Some indicated that higher-level questions result in deeper learning, while others have concluded that they do not.

Lower cognitive questions, with reference to Bloom's Taxonomy: knowledge and comprehension questions, may be more advantageous for primary students and are also more effective when the purpose of the question is to transfer factual knowledge and commit it to memory, according to some research.

However, primary school teachers should not avoid all higher-level thinking questions. Primary students, undoubtedly, require opportunities to guess, imaginatively use, and modify the information supplied. Since reference is made to primary students and their level of academic knowledge is basic, the number of these types of questions should be limited and the teacher should be attentive to switch to lower cognitive questions whenever they notice puzzled and tired feedback from their students. Such questions should be asked less frequently.

Higher cognitive questions (application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) should account for a sizeable portion of the questions asked above the basic grades. According to evidence, using a combination of lower and higher-level questions is more effective than using only one or the other. Increasing the use of higher cognitive questions can translate into better academic results for older students, particularly those in secondary school, while showing no negative impact on lower cognitive question performance.

It is worth noting that students need explicit guidance on how to respond to these types of questions, namely involving drawing inferences. It has the potential to improve student achievement.

Questioning strategies are important educational tools for getting students to interact in the classroom (Dillion, J.T. 1988). Teachers and educators use questioning strategies in their classrooms for a variety of reasons, including:

- to draw students' attention and encourage them to participate in class activities;
- to make students feel at ease and make speaking and collaboration assignments easier for them.
- to assess and monitor pupils' comprehension and progress
- to assess, and check students' comprehension and improvement
- To develop critical thinking skills
- To review previous lectures
- To review previous lessons
- To nurture insights
- To assess accomplishment or proficiency in aims and priorities
- To enhance autonomous learning

When analyzing texts or introducing new grammatical topics, questioning techniques can be used to generate participation, create background knowledge, help teachers get a first impression of students' general knowledge of the relevant topic (discussed).

1.1 Research Questions

This study arose due to the answers we needed to give to problems we encountered in our everyday teaching context. The present study aimed at seeking answers to the following research questions:

1. Why are questions used in the teaching context?
2. How often do teachers utilize questions to promote deeper thought and generate more detailed responses?
3. How do teachers make students ask questions in cases of reluctance?
4. To what extent can questioning techniques enhance students' speaking achievement?

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Design and Participants

Observation was employed as a means of research. Three classes made up of 25 students each were observed in this study. The groups were made up of children who were second and third year- students at the university.

2.2 Procedures

Teachers and students were observed at least twice a week in the text analyses classes for 3 months. The observation focused on the kind of questions the teacher used through the whole class and the approach she had towards the questioning process during each lesson.

Techniques observed: teaching steps, questioning techniques and items, were analyzed, and synthesized to highlight key concepts which underpin questioning techniques in text analyses classes.

Participants were explained the aim of the observation and guaranteed anonymity and the fact the observers were going to be passive participants in the class.

2.3 Teaching steps

The teaching steps were divided into the following categories: (A) working on a text, (B) reading for general comprehension, (C) paraphrasing of the text (D) questioning technique evaluation and analyses with the teacher.

The first step, (A) working on a text, involved the establishment of background knowledge concerning a text which students were required to focus on. Before the students started to analyze the text, the teacher started to ask questions that aided the student's general comprehension of the topic under discussion. The questioning techniques were employed to encourage students' participation and interaction. Through the establishment of background knowledge about the text, students had opportunities to practice expressing their thoughts, opinions, and feelings before they started reading for comprehension and paraphrasing. This was followed by the second stage (B/C), reading for general comprehension. Students read the text to get a general idea and then are asked to reread it and start to explain the text. Whenever the teacher's intervention was required, she tried to either stop and discuss with the students or go back to the section she thought needed a second thought. Once the text was explained, the students proceeded with (c) activity 3, answering questions after the text.

2.4 Data Collection instruments

To collect data, speaking and reading activities were observed. Data was also collected using teachers' feedback at the end of each lesson with reference to their diaries and the interview conducted with them.

Interview items

Some of the questions the teachers under observation were asked are:

1. Do they always start their lesson with a question?
2. What kind of questions do they usually use at the beginning of the lesson?
3. Do they prepare questions in their lesson plan?
4. What kind of questions do they usually employ?
5. Do students ask questions?
6. What type of questions do they ask?

7. In cases of students' reluctance to ask questions, what questioning techniques do they use to stir debate or make students ask questions?

2.5 Findings and Discussions of Findings

The research findings are presented in two sections.

The teachers' approach to the implementation of questioning techniques and her evaluation of students' questioning and speaking achievement.

The teacher usually designates the class beforehand, and the questions are also part of her schedule. Apart from the frequent questions in the books used, she pays attention to supplementary questions. Despite this, the schedule is not strictly followed when employing questions in the class. There are always unexpected turns.

The teaching approach is designed to encourage students to participate and to allow them to freely exchange ideas with the teacher and with one another. In various assignments, all the instructional phases on questioning strategies aided the engagement process. Students had opportunities to orally interact with both peers and the teacher in English in the first teaching phase, for example, by answering questions from the book and by the teachers' intervention whenever innovative ideas came forth. In the second instructional stage, they were given the task of reading the text and discussing it with one another. As a result, students had plenty of opportunities to orally converse and actively participate in all the teaching phases. All this assisted them in developing language speaking abilities. The teachers' instruction delivered through the integration of questioning techniques served as a model to them.

Questioning strategies, according to the teacher, are good because they create a relaxing, enjoyable, and welcoming learning environment.

According to Akey, there is a positive association between this kind of relationship with students' level of engagement and their academic gain (Akey, T.M. 2006). This could be considered one factor affecting the students' language learning improvement.

Whenever teachers introduce a new text to their students, they engage them in a questioning activity where the questions vary from knowledge questions which require remembering information or material previously learned to comprehension and evaluation questions which require understanding meaning and making judgments about the value of ideas or products.

If they wish to explain a grammar, they ask knowledge questions that gradually encourage students to repeat earlier learned concepts which correlate to the new grammar issue, as well as questions that encourage them to contribute to the explanation and understanding of the new material.

If teachers' purpose is to revise prior knowledge, they begin with an opening remark and then ask questions for revising purposes, confirming knowledge, or recalling issues discussed in prior classes. In the process of lesson plan preparation, they always dedicate some space to the questions to be asked during the lesson, but teachers agree that every time they proceed based on the context of the day-to-day situation. That means that questions may arise even as they are teaching or having discussions with the students, schedule not being followed strictly.

Teachers try to employ questions of all types, but it is the section or type of skill under tutorial that usually dictates the kind of questions they ask.

Regarding students, the teachers notice they usually feel reluctant to ask questions, especially at the beginning of a class. They find it easier to consult each other rather than the teacher. Students seem more prone to ask questions as the lesson approaches the end or the following class. The cause lying behind this is that once they

have studied the new lesson themselves, exhausted the sources for helpful information and still feel that there is some aspect they do not master or understand properly, then they turn to teachers for help. The questions they ask are of several types. They ask for clarifying difficult issues or comparative and contrastive ones, since mother tongue influence continues to have a strong impact on them.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

It could be concluded that questioning techniques proved to be effective for building self-confidence and enhancement of speaking abilities of the students. For this reason, questioning techniques are a strong tool which aims to enhance the speaking skills of students. The implications of the findings are that key elements of significant importance in the enhancement of their answering questions and speaking abilities are relaxing environment, teachers' right approach and choice of questions, teachers' assistance, and encouragement by positive feedback. These techniques can help learners feel willing to participate in discussions, organize and clarify their thoughts so that they can express the intended meaning more effectively.

Researchers think that instruction involving questioning is more effective than instruction without questioning. Questioning is one of the nine research-based strategies presented in classroom instruction that works (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock. 2001).

The teachers explained that a pleasurable and relaxing atmosphere helps learners gain confidence in expressing themselves. Questioning techniques were effective for the enhancement of speaking abilities. They helped learners to organize, clarify their thoughts, build self-confidence, and enhance fluency. Teachers facilitate the learning process by assisting learners in practicing target skills:

- by producing a suitable environment to enhance students' performance.
- by creating effective learning situations and designing engaging activities
- by assisting learners in practicing target skills

Regarding grammatical mistakes made by learners in using the target language, teachers try to focus on their ability to convey meaning.

Among others some questions arise and need to be addressed with regards to the questioning process in the classroom:

How many questions would do well a teacher to make? When in the course of a lesson? Questions have a positive impact in the learning context, but the decision on the number of questions to be asked should be taken based on the complexity of the issue under discussion and the age of the students. It may be necessary to include explicit instruction and a reduced number of questions to promote student learning of complicated concepts.

When to ask questions? Research supports the idea that questions posed prior to reading are effective for older students, those with high ability. It is not as effective for younger students and low reading and comprehension ability readers, who tend to focus only on the material that will help them answer the questions.

Recommendations

All teachers usually prepare a plan and write out the questions to be used in a lesson. They try to adapt the types of questions to the students' appropriate age and ability level. Their feedback on students' answers is crucial. It has been demonstrated that teachers may facilitate the questioning process by requiring further explanation when a partial answer is given. Teachers should proceed until a correct response is provided.

Negative feedback should be avoided. Positive comments and praising words are the right approach to encourage students.

Experienced teachers try to find ways to correct and adapt their approaches by being careful critics of their classroom activities and results. Colleagues could also be a good assistance to our improvement of performance. Training of teachers is also particularly important. Participation in seminars, conferences and exchanges improves teachers' performance in their class.

The best thing to do, time after time, is to reflect and question the questions.

Limitations of the study

This is just a modest study in the vast field of teaching. Further studies should be conducted to help confirm the effectiveness of questioning techniques to promote language learners' speaking proficiency. Moreover, there were time and sample size limitations to the study. A larger sample size needs to be used in a replication of the study.

REFERENCES

1. Akey, T.M. (2006). School context, students' attitudes and behavior, and academic achievement: An exploratory analysis [online]. Available from: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/419/full.pdf> [2009,10]
2. Borich, G. D. (2004). *Effective teaching methods*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
3. Dillion, J.T. (1988). *Questioning and teaching*. London: Croom Helm.
4. Hyman, R. (1979). *Strategic questioning*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
5. Linder, C. (1977), *Oral communication testing: A handbook for the foreign language teacher*. Illinois: National Textbook Company
6. Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock. (2001). "*Classroom instruction that works*"
7. Moore, K. D. (2005). *Effective instructional strategies*. London: Sage Publications.
8. Paulston, C.B. and Bruder, M.N. (1976). *Teaching English as a second language: Techniques and procedures*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Winthrop.
9. Vygotsky, L.S. (1987). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.