

Do you question your students a lot? Is it a good idea to use questions in the classroom? This lesson will help you find out about questions as learning tools.

Task 1 – Kate’s question.

Kate was teaching a group of pre intermediate students the other day. She gave them these instructions and asked them a question afterwards:

Kate: ‘I want all the students who are letter A to stand over here and all those who are letter B to stand over there. Then I want you to find a partner from the other group and talk to each other using the questionnaires and make notes on your partner’s answers and then go back into your original group and tell each other about the answers you got. And then you should order them from the most to the least interesting.’


Kate: “OK? Do you understand?”

Students: [Silence]

Kate: ”Do you understand?”

One student: “Yes” [very quietly]



Why are the students reluctant to answer? Do you think they understand? Jot your ideas on a note pad, then check the answer key below 

Task 1 Feedback

Kate’s instructions are quite long and complicated and the students’ silence probably means they don’t understand them, at least not completely, and this makes them reluctant to answer. The students who eventually answer ‘yes’ may have understood the instructions, but they could just be saying ‘yes’ to save face or because they think that if they say ‘no’, they will invite more difficult questioning from Kate. The problem is that Kate’s question does not give her a clear indication of whether her students have understood or not.

Key skill

Questions are a useful teaching tool in the English language classroom because they increase student participation in the lesson. It can also mean that teachers become less reliant on very long explanations, which can be difficult for students to understand. Questions can be 'open' (i.e. the question begins with a 'wh-' word like 'what' or 'where') or they can be closed (i.e. a question that you can answer with 'yes' or 'no'). Questions can also be 'display' (the teacher knows the answer) or 'referential' (the teacher doesn't know the answer).

Task 2 – The questions we use



Letters a to f are example teacher questions. Match them to the categories 1 to 6 below.

Teacher questions

- a. Do we know exactly when the action happened in the past?
- b. So are you going to talk to one student or many students?
- c. What's a word that means very, very tired?
- d. Did anyone go to the movies at the weekend?
- e. Who knows who invented the worldwide web?
- f. So does a 'burglar' steal from banks or only from people's homes?

Categories	Teacher questions
1. eliciting language	
2. eliciting information	
3. checking classroom instructions	
4. checking a vocabulary concept	
5. checking a grammar concept	
6. social or personal	

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

There are many opportunities for teachers to use questions effectively during different stages of a lesson. Used appropriately, questioning keeps the students engaged and involved and helps to keep up the pace of the lesson.

Task 3 – Some problems with questions



In a to e below there is a description of problems that teachers can have when asking their students questions. Match the problems to the scenarios 1 to 5 below.

Scenarios	Problems
1. Teacher: So what kind of food do you eat for dinner in your family (2 seconds later) OK. Not sure? Not to worry.	
2. Teacher: OK, so first of all student A runs outside the classroom and reads a sentence and then comes back in. Student B then writes down what student A says, then its student B's turn to go outside. And they do the same thing. All right? OK, so Paulo, what do you have to do?	
3. Teacher: You might like to answer then and tell me where you're likely to find something like "rubbish"?	
4. Teacher: So you see this diagram on the white board – the one at the top with the little wiggly line. So do you think that's the present perfect, or is it this one with the little crosses on it?	
5. Teacher: So are you going to do the exercise or are you going to listen to the radio?	

Problems

- a. The answer to the question is too long and unmanageable for students.
- b. The answer to the question is so obvious it is not worth asking the question.
- c. The teacher does not wait long enough for the answer to the question.
- d. The teacher uses unnecessary language. She could probably just point to what is on the white board.
- e. The teacher could simplify her language in the question.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

Just asking questions is not enough. Teachers need to think carefully about what kinds of questions they ask and how they ask them. Questions should be easy for students to understand and they should have short, manageable answers. Teachers need to give students a little thinking time and not expect them to answer questions immediately.

Task 4 – Asking questions about language



Letters a to h below are labels for different questions that can check students' understanding of language. Some refer to vocabulary, while others refer to grammar. Match the labels to the questions 1 to 8 below.

Labels

- a. Checking the meaning of a new word.
- b. Checking the register (level of formality) of a new word.
- c. Checking the collocation of a word – the way it goes together with another word.
- d. Checking the connotation of a word – whether it has a positive or negative meaning.
- e. Checking the time reference of a grammar structure.
- f. Checking the probability of a grammar structure
- g. Checking the duration of a grammar structure.
- h. Checking the function (e.g. giving advice) of an utterance.

ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook

Questioning techniques: Unit 2 b)

Questions	Labels
1. If we say someone is “pretentious” is that good or bad?	
2. Can we say “make my homework”?	
3. Is a “reward” something you buy or something that a person gives you?	
4. Is he saying that it’s necessary or only that it’s a good idea?	
5. Did he do that once or more than once?	
6. Can you use this word when you are talking to your boss? What about your friends?	
7. Are we sure it happened or do we only think it’s possible that it happened?	
8. Did the action happen at a definite time in the past?	

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Thinking about your teaching ...

Record some of your lessons with a tape recorder and analyse how much time you spend explaining things to students and how much time you spend questioning them. Do you explain too much? How long does it take for students to answer your questions? Are your questions easy to understand?

Note your observations in your Teaching Log.

Taking it to the classroom ...

Whenever you think you need to give your students a reasonably long explanation for something, think about turning part of the explanation into a series of questions that guide students to an understanding of whatever it is you are focusing on. It might help to plan these questions until such time as you feel confident about asking them spontaneously in the classroom.

Want to find out more ... ?

In *The Self-directed Teacher* by David Nunan and Clarice Lamb (Cambridge University Press, 1996), there is further reading on using questions in English language classrooms.

See also section 2 of *Language Teaching Classroom Practice DVD & Workbook* by Heather Richards and Karen Wise (AUT University 2007).

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

1. c
2. e
3. b
4. f
5. a
6. d

Task 3 – Feedback

1. **Problem: c.** The teacher does not wait long enough for the answer to the question.
2. **Problem: a.** The answer to the question is too long and unmanageable for students.
3. **Problem: e.** The teacher could simplify her language in the question.
4. **Problem: d.** The teacher uses unnecessary language. She could probably just point to what is in the white board.
5. **Problem: b.** The answer to the question is so obvious it is not worth asking the question.

Task 4 – Feedback

1. d
2. c
3. a
4. h
5. g
6. b
7. f
8. e