
EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING TECHNIQUES

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Question formation is a basic part of teaching and learning English. However, we often focus on the ability to form the question properly and not as much on the quality of the information the question is seeking. Whether teaching English language learners or students who want to be English teachers, teachers need to carefully consider the intent of questions.

If students are expected to provide simple factual information, a question such as “What kind of pet do you have?” will elicit that information. However, if you want your students to discuss their preferences for certain types of pets or the advantages and disadvantages of different pets, then another type of question must be asked to promote discussion—in other words, a discussion question. The purpose of discussion questions should be to guide and stimulate discussion, not just to acquire information.

What makes a good discussion question? A question that results in a Yes/No answer or one that elicits only factual information is not likely to promote discussion. More fruitful are open-ended questions that elicit factual information as well as opinions and differing perspectives.

Suppose your class is discussing environmental issues. One may pose the question, “Do you recycle?” The appropriate answer of “Yes” or “No” stimulates no discussion. The questioner could then add the qualifier, “Why or why not?” However, this type of add-on still may not promote much discussion, especially with lower-level or younger learners. The respondent might say, “Yes, I recycle because it’s the right thing to do.” On the other hand, consider this question: “If you were going to design a recycling public-service poster for your city, what would you focus on, and why?” With appropriate scaffolding, even upper

Because of the interactivity this technique encourages, it would be appropriate for almost any type of class. The first step is to choose a topic that you would normally use and present it in whatever way fits the topic and your class. The only criterion is that the topic should be one that promotes discussion—that is, a topic on which students can express their opinions and perspectives.

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Next, divide the students into an even number of groups. The ideal group size for this activity is four students. The group will have two identities: in Part 1 of the activity, they will be Group 1; in Part 2, they will be Group 2. As Group 1, students write three open-ended discussion questions about the topic the class has been studying. Once students have completed this task, they give the questions to another

group (Group 2). Although I prepared a handout (see the sample at the end of this article) and gave a copy to each group, students could just as easily prepare this activity themselves using notebook paper.

As Group 2, students orally respond to the questions they received. Tell them not to write their answers, but to read the questions aloud and discuss them as they would in a small- group discussion.

Next, tell groups to write a critique of each question. Ask students:

- Did the question stimulate much discussion? Why? Why not?
- How could the question be improved to be a better discussion question?

You might want to write these questions on the board.

Between Yes/No questions and open-ended questions, along with observations about how the latter promote more discussion. Conclude by having students summarize the characteristics of effective discussion questions. You might want to list those characteristics on the board

This multistep technique engages students in authentic discussion at several levels and uses a variety of language skills and functions. Because of the technique's simplicity, it could be used with almost any age and level of student, except very young learners and beginners. To start off, students have to be familiar enough with the topic to be able to develop their questions; that may require them to read about or do research on the topic and to discuss it with classmates. Or, students can develop questions about a topic the class has recently studied.

Writing the questions will provide opportunity for discussion about how to properly phrase them. As students answer another group's questions, they are discussing the topic again, perhaps from a different perspective than they did originally because each group will approach the topic differently. Then as students analyse, discuss and write about the quality of the question they have to use appropriate language to explain the strength and weakness of each question.

Finally, the whole-class discussion about the most effective questions and suggestions for improving weaker questions promotes speaking about the topic using relevant vocabulary; it also engages students in the functions of comparing and contrasting the various questions, making suggestions, and perhaps agreeing and disagreeing. These are all skills and functions that students at the upper – beginner level and beyond can manage and continue to develop.

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