Questioning Levels and Techniques in EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Questioning is a commonly employed method to assist students in their learning processes. Numerous studies have revealed that the level of the questions posed by instructors significantly influences students` cognitive engagement and thinking skills. However, most of the questions instructors ask are lower-order questions, which have less impact compared to higher-order questions in fostering advanced cognitive abilities in students. Therefore, this article aims to increase instructors´ awareness on the effectiveness of appropriately using questioning in the classroom and to denote the levels of questions asked by instructors in an ESL context. Furthermore, this article outlines several effective questioning methods that instructors ought to master, including the use of waiting time, equitable distribution of questions, prompting techniques, redirecting inquiries, repeating and tailoring questions to align with text content and students' proficiency levels. This is essential for enhancing student motivation and promoting positive, critical, and creative thinking among students. It also improves the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Thus, the significance of this study lies in its potential to encourage instructors to improve their questing behaviour and make them more aware of the importance of the levels of questions, which are useful to develop students' critical thinking abilities.

Keywords: Questioning techniques, English language, foreign language.

مستويات وتقنيات طرح الأسئلة في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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ملخَّص البحث:

يُعتبر السؤال استراتيجية محورية في تسهيل عملية التعلم لدى الطلاب، وقد أظهرت العديد من الدراسات أن طبيعة ومستوى الأسئلة التي يطرحها المعلمون تؤثر بشكل كبير على تفاعل الطلاب المعرفي ومهارات التفكير لديهم، تشير الأبحاث إلى أنه بينما تهيمن الأسئلة ذات المستويات الأدنى على المناقشات في الفصول الدراسية، فإن فعاليتها في تعزيز التفكير العالي تظل محدودة، بالمقابل، فقد أُثبت أن الأسئلة ذات المستويات العليا تعزز من قدرات التفكير النقدي لدى الطلاب وتعميق فهمهم للموضوع . يهدف هذا المقال إلى زيادة وعي المعلمين بشأن التنفيذ الاستراتيجي لتقنيات السؤال داخل الفصل الدراسي، لا سيما في سياقات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثاني، كما يسعى أيضًا إلى تصنيف المستويات المختلفة للأسئلة التي يستخدمها المعلمون عادةً. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يحدد المقال العديد من طرق السؤال الفعالة التي ينبغي على المعلمين اتقانها، بما في ذلك استخدام فترة الانتظار، والتوزيع المتساوي للأسئلة، وتقنيات الدفع او تعزيز، وتحويل الأسئلة، والتكرار، وتكييف الأسئلة لتتناسب مع محتوى النص ومستويات طلابهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تقنيات طرح الأسئلة، اللغة الإنجليزية، اللغة الأجنبية.

Introduction

Instructors play a crucial role in facilitating the teaching and learning process, with one of the most important methods being the question- and- answer session. In the realm of second language teaching and learning, there is a wide

consensus that questioning is an essential teaching strategy. In this regard, Rahman and Mahmud (2016,p.107) stated "questioning strategies are the ways which are used to ask something to the students in gaining a purpose in teaching". Similarly, Davoudi and Sadeghi (2015,p.109) identified questioning as a key teaching and learning strategy. More to the point, Fries- Gather (2008,p.244) asserted that questioning is one of the most significant constructs in education. Research consistently demonstrates questioning is an effective method for stimulating student engagement, critical thinking, and overall learning outcomes (Wilen, et al. as cited in Wood and Carol, 2001,p.206). Affective questioning encourages students' participation and interaction during the class time. Iksan and Daniel (2015,pp.188-219) emphasized the importance of employing a diverse range of questioning strategies within the teaching and learning process. They posited that both content-based and management-related questions are integral to effective instruction and advocate for an enhancement in questioning techniques. A failure to engage in questioning during instruction might be attributed to several factors: (1) the instructor may be pressed for time; (2) lack a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter; (3) lack of concern for students` performance; (4) lack of motivation. According to these factors, the fact of not asking questions in the classroom causes negative effects and affects students' performance and teaching quality (Rahman and Mahmud 2016, p .107). By asking questions, instructors can engage students to think about the content of a lesson and simultaneously get feedback from students to demonstrate the effect of teaching (Atan Long, 1980,p . 135). Consequently, questioning serves as a vital tool for promoting classroom interaction, evaluating student performance, and stimulating intellectual development (Richards & Lockhart, 2000,p . 4).

Classroom interaction involves teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, group discussion and all types of class participation (Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi, 2017,pp.85-108). According to Harvey and Light (2015), the quality of these interactions directly influences the overall teaching and learning process, with greater interaction enhancing communication and, in turn, improving students' cognitive and social skills. Questioning, when employed effectively, can significantly increase both the quality and quantity of classroom interaction (Wangru, 2016,pp .8-24). In the same vein, Rahman and Mahud (2016,p. 107) affirmed that proper questioning makes interaction and communication between teacher and students more meaningful. Researchers agree that "questioning strategies are essential when encouraging, extending and more importantly, challenging students' thinking" (Diaz et al., 2013, p. 164).

One notable hypothesis suggested that students tend to forget 80-90% of what they learn through factual questions but remember 80-85% of the knowledge gained through higher-order questioning (Savage, 1998,p . 291). Higher-order questions have been shown to promote the development of students' critical

thinking skills (Davoudi & Sadeghi, 2015,p.107). By using open-ended questions, instructors can enhance students' higher-order thinking abilities, encourage them to construct their own knowledge, and develop a deeper understanding of the material (Wangru, 2016,pp .8-24).

Instructors ask questions for several reasons (Morgan and Saxton, 1991 as cited in Brualdi, 1998 ,p.9): (1) questioning keeps students engaged; (2) provides an opportunity for students to express their ideas; (3) allows peers to hear different perspectives; (4) helps pace lessons and manage classroom behaviour;(5) enables instructor to assess student learning and adjust lessons accordingly.

  Effective questioning is widely regarded as a hallmark of good teaching, as it fosters meaningful interaction between instructors and students. Rosenshine (1971) found that increased student-teacher interaction leads to improved student achievement, further supporting the importance of good questioning techniques. However, not all questions are equally effective in promoting understanding. Instructors often rely heavily on low-level cognitive questions, which focus on factual information that can be memorized (Wilen,1991 ,p.13). It is widely believed that this type of questions can limit students by not helping them to acquire a deep, elaborate understanding of the subject (Brualdi,1998,p .9). Therefore, the instructor questioning technique, correlating with enhanced achievement, should contain a balance of convergent and divergent questions, redirecting student responses to other students, distributing questions equitably, and allowing sufficient time for students to respond, promoting and repeating questions. Convergent questions serve the purpose of getting low level cognitive information from students; divergent or open-ended questions are more likely to stimulate a discussion and foster an interactive and democratic classroom atmosphere (Wood & Carol, 2010).

Level of Questions

In educational contexts, questions serve as critical instructional cues or stimuli designed to convey the essential content elements to be learned, as well as directions for students regarding their tasks and methodologies (Wilen, 1991,p.66). It was also stated by the same author that questions take both interrogatives (What do you like about festivals?) and declaratives form (Tell me what you like about festivals).

Bloom and Guilford (1956,p.150) developed an interesting system for classifying questions into different cognitive domains. This classification was entitled 'Taxonomy of Education Objectives'. This taxonomy is a widely recognized classification system that aids in the design of questions across a spectrum of cognitive complexity. The taxonomy identified six cognitive levels, ranging from lower order thinking skills comprising Knowledge, Comprehension, and Application to higher order thinking skills including Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation.

Thus, questions can be broadly classified into two distinct categories. The first category encompasses all types of questions whose main goal is to confirm or corroborate information or to check for understanding. These are typically low-level questions, to which instructors already know the answers, and include what are known as recalling questions (Gall, 1970,pp.707-721), display questions (Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi, 2017,pp.85-108), or classroom management questions (Tamas & Wang, 2017, pp.10-18). (Such questions often fail to foster meaningful interaction and therefore do not contribute significantly to the enhancement of students' critical thinking skills. On the other hand, the second category includes questions designed to foster interaction and stimulate higher-order thinking among students (Wangru, 2016,pp.380-401).Unlike the first group, these high-level questions—termed referential questions (Wangru, 2016; Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi, 2017) or divergent questions (Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi, 2017)—are characterized by their open-ended nature, allowing for a diverse range of responses that promote critical, imaginative, and creative thinking.

Tamas and Wang (2017,pp.125-135) asserted that the way in which instructors ask questions and the type of questions they ask in the classroom may have an effect on learning. They confirmed that, when instructors use low-level or memory-recall questions, they do not elicit students´ higher-order thinking skills, so there is not a co-construction of knowledge because students simply depend on the information provided by the instructor. In contrast, high-cognitive level questions are open, divergent, and dialectical and they allow a wide range of responses that promote learners to think critically, imaginatively, and creatively. Certainly, researchers stated that both types of questions are required in the classroom; however, they advised instructors to emphasize the ones that promote interaction and the development of students´ thinking and communicative skills. Thus, the questions that will be posed in the teaching and learning activity should be diversified by the levels of questioning.

The Three Lower Cognitive Questions (LCQ): Knowledge, Comprehension and Application Questions

As delineated within the cognitive domain framework established by Bloom et al.,(1956,pp.18-25) and further discussed in subsequent literature (Brualdi, 1998; Bernadowski, 2006; McNeil, 2010). These questions are designed to promote foundational cognitive engagement by requiring students to recall factual information and demonstrate understanding of the material. Brief descriptions for each level are provided below (Wilen, 1991,pp.45-48).

The first level, knowledge (KNQ) primarily targets the ability to retrieve information from memory. Students are required to activate their recall mechanisms to access previously learned content. An example of a Knowledge Question is, 'What is a metaphor?' This category often employs question verbs

and prompts, such as 'describe', 'choose', 'omit', 'match', 'where', 'when', and 'which one'.

The second level comprises comprehension questions **(COQs)**, which assess students' understanding of facts and concepts. At this level, students are expected to   articulate their comprehension using their own language, thereby demonstrating their ability to interpret and convey information. An illustrative example of a comprehension question is, "In your own words, explain the information contained in the instruction'. Verbs and phrases associated with COQs include: 'in your own words', 'what does this mean to you', "give examples', 'summarize' and 'translate'.

The third level is characterized by **Application Questions (APQs)**, which challenge students to utilize their acquired knowledge, principles, and generalizations to address specific problems or scenarios. For instance, an instructor might present a hypothetical situation and ask students to determine an appropriate course of action. Common verbs and prompts in this category include: apply, demonstrate, complete, illustrate, predict, and solve.

  In summary, these three levels of cognitive questioning provide a structured approach for educators to assess and enhance students' mastery of content through recall, understanding, and practical application

The Three Higher Cognitive Questions (HCQ): Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation Questions

According to Kennedy et al. (1991,pp.11- 40), three advanced levels of cognitive skill, namely analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, are frequently indicative of critical thinking. These higher-order inquiries facilitate a greater comprehension and engagement with the subject matter. Below is an explanation of the highest-level question:

The fourth level is the Analysis Questions (ANQ s). This type of inquiry is a more complex inquiry that requires students to ascertain the fundamental motives and comprehend the fundamental components of a procedure, communication, or sequence of events. Students will be presented with an analytical inquiry to respond to. What is the most interesting aspect of the news? Common verbs and phrases associated with ANQ include: 'What are the assumptions', 'Identify', 'What is the function of', 'What does the author believe', and 'State the author's point of view'.

Synthesis Questions (SYQs) is the fifth type which demand students to employ original and creative thinking, allowing them to generate new ideas based on the information initially presented. An illustrative example could involve students being tasked with altering a character from a narrative to create a contrasting storyline. Verbs and phrases indicative of SYQ encompass: "How would you

test...?", 'Propose an alternative solution to the following...', 'Arrange...', 'Combine...', 'Develop...', 'Create...', and 'Formulate...'.

The fifth type of questions is the **Synthesis Questions (SYQs)**, which requires students to employ original and creative thinking in order to generate new ideas based on the information initially presented. An example could involve students being tasked with altering a character in a narrative in order to create a contrasting storyline. Verbs and phrases that are indicative of SYQ include: 'How would you test...', 'Propose an alternative solution to the following...', 'Arrange...', "Combine...', 'Develop...', 'Create...', and 'Formulate...'.

The final category pertains to **Evaluation Questions (EVQs)**, which requires students to assess the degree of alignment between a concept or an idea and a standard or a value. This evaluation procedure necessitates that students articulate and substantiate their justifications. For example, an instructor might ask students to compare two distinct issues, examine criticisms regarding the use of the internet among primary school students, and subsequently classify several proposed solutions, ultimately selecting the most effective one along with a rationale for their choice. Key verbs and phrases characteristic of EVQ include 'Judge …', 'Critique …', 'Which is more important?', 'Appraise …', 'What solution is optimal?', and 'Evaluate ...'.

Questioning Techniques:

In order to encourage students to think critically, instructors must apply the appropriate techniques and skills to question students. The instructor ought to be cognizant of any modifications that may occur within the classroom, and it is imperative that these modifications are in accordance with the objectives they aim to accomplish in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, instructors should carefully consider the following factors:

Waiting time:

Waiting time is a period of silence, both before and after a student's answer. When instructors allow adequate time, the level of students´ anxiety decreases. Students tend to provide more detailed, accurate, and reflective answers, and voluntary participation increases (Eggen & Kauchak, 2006, pp.134-139). Research by Wangru (2016,pp.134-135) supported the importance of wait-time, noting that students prefer a few seconds to organize their thoughts. He also suggested that if no student answers within 15 seconds, the instructor should revisit the question in the next class. Thus, effective use of wait-time technique is significance for encouraging higher-order thinking.

Equitable distribution

In order to encourage the participation of all students, it is recommended that instructors distribute inquiries equitably throughout the class (Atan Long,

1980,pp.40-42). This implies abstaining from directing inquiries solely to individuals situated at the front of the classroom or those who frequently participate in volunteer activities. Instead, instructors should engage all areas of the room. Wangru (2016,pp.386-388) highlighted the importance of encouraging volunteers and ensuring that all students are given opportunities to respond. This approach helps to create a fair and inclusive classroom environment, where students feel prepared to contribute.

Promoting
When a student remains silent or provides an incomplete answer, the instructor should give some hints to help the student reach a fuller response. Strategies such as paraphrasing, offering examples, simplifying the question, extending wait-time, or giving additional descriptions can encourage student participation (Eggen & Kauchak, 2006,p.135).

Repeating
Repeating questions can be a useful technique to ensure that all students have heard and understood the question. It can also serve to break periods of silence, activate student participation, and give students more time to think (Eggen & Kauchak, 2006,p.15).

Redirecting
 Redirecting involves asking the same question to multiple students, especially when the answers are incomplete or incorrect. According to Eggen and Kauchak (2006,pp.390-401), this approach can be employed when the instructor desires an additional student to demonstrate or provide additional examples.

Text Content and Students` level
Instructors should tailor their questions to match the students' level of understanding and the content being covered. Questions should progress from simpler to more complex, ensuring that students can follow the logical flow of the material and deepen their comprehension (Wangru, 2016,pp.380-401; Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi, 2017,pp.95-108). By starting with basic questions and gradually increasing complexity, instructors can ensure that students grasp the material and are prepared to engage with more challenging concepts.

Thus, by implementing these questioning techniques, instructors can create a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment, facilitating deeper thinking and active student engagement.

Conclusion
Questioning is a common pedagogical strategy in educational settings. It is considered an indispensable tool for educators, since it facilitates students' comprehension and encourages them to engage with and reflect on the structured material. Consequently, it is imperative for educators to employ this strategy judiciously in order to foster classroom interaction, enhance students' communicative competence, and improve the overall efficiency of the learning

process. Instructors should avoid treating questioning as a daily routine, instead focusing on the relevance and purpose of their inquiries. It is essential for instructors to develop their critical thinking skills and become adept at formulating questions across various cognitive levels, in order to create meaningful and effective inquiries.

The productivity of students is closely related to the quality of the questions posed. In order to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, it is imperative for instructors to exercise deliberateness in both the content and manner of their inquiries. The continuous self-assessment of in-class questioning practices is vital to their professional growth and effectiveness in fostering meaningful dialogue and deeper understanding within the classroom.

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