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Author(s)	Madden, J. F.
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QUESTIONING IN THE CLASSROOM

Jim F Madden

The most common activity in a language classroom is for the teacher to ask questions to test the pupils' comprehension.

In this sort of questioning, the first thing that the teacher thinks of should be *the answer he wants from the pupils.* Then he should formulate a question to produce that answer. He should also check that the pupil's answer gives evidence of real comprehension.

Consider this example.

Textbook:	*He saw some slithy toves.*
Teacher:	*What did he see?*
Pupil:	*Some slithy toves.*

What evidence of comprehension do we have? Has the pupil shown that he understands what 'slithy toves' are? No, he has shown that he understands the structure of the sentence in the book and of the teacher's question. He *may* know what 'slithy toves' are, but the question and answer do not provide us with any evidence of this. To challenge pupils to search for meaning and not to match words from question to textbook, the teacher needs to develop the skill of using different words and structures from those the student can see before him. Not only will this force the pupil to give evidence that he understands the meaning of both question and text, but it will increase his own flexibility with the language by exposing him to other ways of expressing the same idea.

For the purpose of studying effective questioning, we can use the simple table below which sets out 12 categories of comprehension question.

	Answer stated in text	Answer not stated directly in text	Answer based on pupil's own experience
Yes/no answer	A1	B1	C1
Alternatives	A2	B2	C2
Information required (short answer)	A3	B3	C3
Information required (full sentence answer)	A4	B4	C4

The first vertical column is for answers that use words found in the text, although they may need some modification. (The questions, of course, should avoid using such words.) The second column is for answers that require the pupil to select words from his own stock of vocabulary, often to make simple inferences or predictions. The third column is for answers that use the text as an opportunity for the pupil to apply that language to his local environment or personal experience.

The horizontal levels are in descending order of difficulty. Requiring the answer 'yes' or 'no' is of little value and should be avoided. However, the teacher may ask a question for which the answer is 'no', hoping that the pupil will justify his answer. If he does not, the teacher should ask the same pupil for an explanation of his answer, eg.

Why?
How do you know?
What did he do?

All yes/no questions can be converted to alternative questions. It is more valuable for a pupil to practise selecting an alternative than it is to practise saying 'yes' or 'no'. Alternative questions are a good way to start a questioning session since the pupils are likely to get away to a brisk and successful start. Alternatives are a useful way to pick up the pace of a questioning session if the class has 'bogged down' over some difficulty. Alternatives are also the easiest method for helping the slower members of the class to answer successfully.

Most questions belong to the third and fourth level where information is required. At the third level, there are those that require a short answer, such as a word or phrase. (Who? Where? How?) At the fourth level, questions involve the pupil in producing a sentence. (Why? How do you know? What did she do? What happened?)

If the teacher asks a question about a passage and the pupil cannot answer, does that mean that the pupil does not understand either the question or the text or both? Not necessarily. The pupil may understand both perfectly but be unable to formulate the answer. If we wish to measure the extent of the pupil's comprehension, we must make sure that the difficulties are located in understanding the question and the text and not in composing the answer. Our questions, then, would be mainly of the types A2, A3, B2, B3 in the table above, with the level 3 questions requiring mostly short answers.

What are some things to remember about asking questions when you are in the classroom itself? First of all, while you are learning the skills of fluent questioning, it pays to look over the passage beforehand and mentally rehearse the questions you might ask. Do not write them down, since you will not be able to refer to a written list in class (it will slow you down), and besides, your questioning should not be on the basis of rote memory but on the logic and sense in the sequence you have chosen. Remember that it is not practice that makes perfect, but correct practice.

Many of the comprehension questions you ask will be relatively easy to answer. Much of the challenge, then, for the pupils will come from the pace of your questioning, your ability to require them to think quickly in the target language. Obviously, the main prerequisite for fluent questioning is a clear idea of what sort of answers you want and why. But another simple technique involves what you take up with your eyes from the text and put into your head. Do not look at a sentence in the book, devise a question, then look at the class to ask it, for then you will have to look down at the book again to devise your next question. Instead, take into your head a sentence or two from the book. This will provide you with enough "ammunition" for several questions and allow you to keep your eyes on the class. Then, while you are waiting for the pupils to work out the answer for the last question in this group, you can look down and read the next sentence. The most important skill for fluent questioning is always to have the *next* question ready in your head. This skill can only be mastered with constant practice.

If you are asking questions about a picture, you can assist pupils' comprehension by the logic of your questioning thread. It is usually helpful to ask questions in this order:

a the general setting,

b descriptions of characters or objects,

c what is happening in the picture,

d why it is happening,

e predictions, guesses at feelings, and

f reasons for predictions.

In steps (b) to (e) you may follow a horizontal pattern, and, for instance, ask questions about what all the characters and objects are like before you go on to asking about what they are doing. If you follow a vertical pattern, you would ask for a description of one character, what he is doing and why, and what he will do next, before you return to step (b) with a second character. If you use a horizontal pattern to introduce the picture, then you would use a vertical pattern to test that your introduction was successful, and vice-versa.

In order to learn to speak a language the pupil must practise speaking it. In classrooms, it is often the bright pupils, who need the least practice, who answer the most questions. The teacher should ensure that his questions are evenly distributed around the class. He should ask mainly pupils who are sitting in an arc furthest from him. In this way, he will draw the pupils' answers across the class to him and thus ensure that most of the class will hear the answer. He must therefore change his position in the classroom from time to time, so that the position of the arc changes to encompass different pupils. The 'front of the class' is where the teacher stands, so that by moving to the back or the side of the room, the teacher ceases to be a remote figure for those pupils, and by his questioning can involve pupils in other parts of the room.

But not all questions are to test comprehension. Some questions are for 'language practice'; that is, they are to challenge the pupils to compose a sentence of their own. The pupil will thus produce a sentence, but a complete sentence only if a native speaker would say one naturally. There is little point in requiring pupils to say a whole sentence when such a sentence would not be normal outside of the classroom. Consider this sequence.

Textbook:	*Bobalan arrived at the station by bus at 2 o'clock.*
Teacher:	*How did Bobalan arrive at the station?*
Pupil:	*Bobalan arrived at the station by bus at 2 o'clock.*

Has the pupil showed that he understood the question? No, because that same answer could also be a response for "Who arrived at the station?" "What did he do?" "Where did he arrive?" "When did he arrive?" The teacher's word-matching question allows the pupil to locate the sentence where the answer must lie and merely read it out. If the pupil had volunteered, quite naturally, "By bus", then the teacher has evidence that the pupil understood the question. If the teacher wants a full sentence answer, then he should ask a question that *requires* a full-sentence answer.

Note the differences in the answers sought and the questions devised in the following sequences. The questions avoid word matching, and in the first sequence a series of short answers builds towards a longer one.

Textbook (Conversation in a cafeteria)

John: *Coca-cola? I thought you ordered lemonade?*
Eric: *I did, but the waiter brought me the wrong one.*

Comprehension questions

Teacher: *What are the boys doing?*
Pupil A: *Having a drink.*

Teacher: *What did Eric order?*
Pupil B: *Lemonade.*

Teacher: *What did he get?*
Pupil C: *Coca-cola*

Teacher: *Who made a mistake?*
Pupil D: *The waiter.*

Teacher: *How?*
Pupil E: *He brought Eric coca-cola instead of lemonade.*

Language – practice questions

Teacher: *Why was John surprised?*
Pupil A: *Because he thought that Eric had ordered lemonade, but he saw him drinking coca-cola.*

Teacher: *What had happened?*
Pupil B: *Eric had ordered lemonade but the waiter brought him coca-cola instead.*

In the classroom, the quality of your questioning is more important than the quantity. Decide beforehand approximately how many minutes of questioning about a passage would be most valuable, considering the importance of the topic and vocabulary used, and the concentration span of the pupils. Then try to ask the best questions possible to achieve the purpose of the activity within the amount of time you have estimated. Do not hesitate, however, to follow the interest of the pupils if some stimulating line of thought develops.

No matter how skilful our questions, there will still be occasions when a pupil cannot respond, or makes a mistake in his reply. Let us examine the reasons for this non-response or wrong response, how to recognise them, and what sort of help to offer the pupil in each

case. For it is important for the pupils to have the security of knowing that if they try to answer, the teacher will always help them to be right. A pupil who is left a failure will be inhibited from trying a second time. There are four main reasons for pupil difficulties.

1 **The pupil does not understand the question.** Often the pupil will remain staring at the teacher, or look down aimlessly at the book as he thinks over the question. It is usually little help merely to repeat the question, although this may be appropriate if you think the pupil was not listening. (That may be why you asked him the question!) To help the pupil, you should guess at why the pupil does not understand. You may repeat the question, adding in a synonymous phrase, rephrase the question completely, or break it down into several shorter and easier questions, building back to the original.

2 **The pupil understands the question but not the text.** If the pupil cannot answer, he will usually stare in frustration at the passage. Usually, he will attempt an answer which will often point to what he does not understand. In this case, you should supply a synonym to go with the difficult word in the text, ask another question about the text which will help to clarify the meaning of the difficult sentence before returning to the original, rephrase the question so that it helps indicate the meaning of the text, ask someone else to explain the text before returning to the first pupil.

3 **The pupil understands the question and the text but cannot locate the answer.** This may happen if the teacher jumps haphazardly around the text, or it can happen even in a well-ordered sequence with lower-ability pupils who have difficulty in organising their comprehension of a large number of words. The pupil will often show this by sweeping his finger or eyes backwards and forwards across the page, or he may begin his answer confidently but stop at the supplying of some detail. The easiest solution here is to quote a line-number or refer to the relevant sentence.

4 **The pupil understands the question and the text but cannot formulate the answer.** The pupil will either make several hesitant attempts to begin an answer, or he will produce a reply which contains the desired information but which contains language errors. In the first case, it is best to prompt the pupil as soon as you can, either by starting the response for him, or by identifying the word or phrase within the answer that you guess is causing the problem. You may also ask another question which embodies the probable difficulty, before returning to the pupil in difficulty. If that fails, you can offer him alternatives to choose from so that at least he performs the response. If a pupil makes an error, he will often be able to correct himself if the error is located for him. You may do this by repeating the wrong phrase with a questioning intonation (indicating, "Are you sure that's right?").

Finally, a word of warning. We have discussed techniques for asking effective questions. The pupils will have demonstrated an ability to *respond.* But outside of the classroom, the pupils will be called upon to *initiate* language more often than they will to respond to questions. Although answering questions is a vital and essential classroom activity, it will not teach the pupils to generate their own comments and questions. Make sure that a high proportion of classroom time is devoted to *initiating* language that makes sense.

Pupils do best what they do most.