

ASKING QUESTIONS IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Asking questions in teaching learning process in the classroom or outside classroom is one of the basic skills of teaching that teachers should use. The questions used vary from one teacher to others depending on their objectives and competence, question levels, and types of questions used in asking learners. This paper describes the definition of question, types of questions, teachers' objectives in asking questions, and question levels used by the teachers. This study used library research in which various references such as books, journals and dictionary were used to discuss this topic. It is expected that this paper is useful for teachers especially English teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Background

In general, a sentence can be divided into the forms of statement, negative, and interrogative known as question. In addition, one of the contextual teaching and learning (CTL) components that should be applied in teaching learning process is also question. Besides, one of the basic skills of teaching that teachers should possess is the skill of asking questions known as questioning skill, and in teaching learning process, asking questions plays a very important role to play. Through questions, the learners can be encouraged to learn more seriously in order to comprehend the lesson materials. Furthermore, the teachers can ask their learners by one of the three types of questions which include yes/no-questions, information questions and alternative questions. These three types of questions can be divided into two big categories namely display and referential questions. In addition to the types of questions, Bloom categorized into six levels which include knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

As one of the basic skills of teaching, English teachers will always ask questions in teaching learning process. They ask questions for several reasons namely to motivate students to study, to give chance for their students to practice using English language, to know whether their students understand or not, and to know how their students express their opinions or ideas. What type of questions they use depends on students' proficiency levels, objectives of the teaching and learning, and the content of the materials. **Kerry** (2002) states that types of questions teachers formulate and use in a classroom lead to students' learning achievement. As **Brown & Wragg** (1993) highlight, teachers usually ask questions to check learners' knowledge rather than because they are seeking new information. This contrasts with the use of questions in real-life. Teachers also ask questions to activate learners' schematic knowledge about the topic being discussed and to provoke them to use their thinking skills (**Peacock** 1990).

Teachers can also use information, yes/no, and alternative questions in the forms or types of display or referential questions. **Long and Sato** (1983) stated that display questions are used more frequently than referential questions. In addition to this finding **Brock** (1986) suggested that teachers should be trained to increase the number of referential questions they ask when teaching learning process takes place.

In contextual and teaching and learning (CTL) approach, teachers are suggested to ask question to promote the participation of the students to be active in teaching learning process in the classroom. Because of the vital roles of asking questions in the process of teaching and learning, the discussions and descriptions of this topic need to be presented for promoting teachers' knowledge, experience and skill or competence.

Formulation of the Problem

Several problems in asking questions used by English teachers can be formulated as follows:

1. What is actually a question?
2. What types of questions can English teachers ask their students?
3. Why do English teachers ask questions to their students?
4. What levels of questions do English teachers use when asking their students?
5. How long do English teachers give time to their students to answer the questions?



Reasons for Choosing the Topic

There are at least four main reasons why this topic is chosen to be discussed as stated in the following:

1. As one of basic skills of teaching, teachers especially English teachers need to be given knowledge, skill or competence of how they ask their students questions effectively.
2. As one of contextual teaching learning (CTL) components, teachers are suggested to ask questions for a certain reasons such as to motivate students to learn, to promote the participation of the students in class, and so forth.
3. Teachers need to know what levels of questions should be used in asking their students questions.
4. Teachers also need to recognize that questions can be categorized into several types from the experts' viewpoints.

DISCUSSIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

The following are described, the definition of question, types of questions, the objectives or reasons for asking questions, levels of questions, and wait time. Library research using various references such as books, journals and dictionaries was used in order to support the discussions and descriptions of the present topic.

Definitions of the Terms

In general, question can be defined as the form of the sentence which is used to gain information needed. However, definition of question will vary from one person to another as described in this section. **Mills et al** (1998:1161), for example, describe question as a sentence or phrase used to find out information. According to **Aik** and **Hui** (1999: 235), a question refers to an utterance which asks for an answer. Furthermore, **Hanks** (1983:197) states a question as a form of words addressed to a person in order to elicit information or evoke a response. Then, **Sinclair** (1994:785) defines a question as something which a person says or writes in order to ask another person about something. **Hornby** (1995:952) describes a question that asks for information. A more complete definition is given by **Richard, Platt** and **Platt** (1992). They define a question as a sentence which is addressed to a listener/reader and asks for an expression of fact, opinion, belief, etc. In English, questions may be formed by the use of a question word or by the use of an auxiliary in the first position in a sentence, or through the use of intonation.

From the definition of a question described earlier, it can be inferred that in asking questions, there must be at least two persons: a person who asks (speaker/writer), and a person who answers the question (listener/reader). In the context of teaching learning process, a question refers to an utterance, a sentence or a phrase expressed or addressed by a person (usually a teacher) to another person (a student or a learner) in order to get information, to know his opinion, belief, etc. It is true that questions can be addressed by a teacher or a student. However, this paper limits to the questions used by teachers, particularly English teachers.

In addition to question, **Ragawanti** (2009) makes a distinction between question and questioning. She defines questioning is the technique of asking questions, then known as questioning technique. **Richard, Platt** and **Platt** (1992:303), furthermore, describe questioning techniques as different procedure teachers use in asking questions and different kinds of questions they ask.

Types of Questions

There are several ways of classifying questions. An important distinction is that between display and referential questions (e.g. **Tsui** 1995). Display questions as defined by **Thornbury** (1996) are those for which the teacher knows the answer in advance, and they are used to check learners' knowledge. **Ellis** (1994: 700) defines the display question as "one designed to test whether the addressee has knowledge of a particular fact or can use a particular linguistic item correctly". **Lightbown & Spada** (1999) note that teachers ask display questions not because they are interested in the answer, but because they want to get their learners to display their knowledge of the language. Referential questions, on the other hand, as defined by **Lightbown & Spada** (1999), are genuine questions for which the asker does not know the answer. Research on classroom discourse has constantly found that the majority of teachers' questions are display questions (see, for example, **Seedhouse** 1996). **Nunan & Lamb** (1996: 88) define referential questions as "those to which the asker does not know the answer". **Ellis** (1994: 721) also explains that these are questions which are "genuinely information-seeking". **Lynch** (1996) argues that teachers should ask referential

questions more often than they do to display questions and (b) learners should answer referential questions more often than they do to display questions. **Chaudron** (1990), on the other hand, argues that the main purpose of referential questions is always to test knowledge.



the hand, states that display questions which tend to be closed can increase student productivity while, referential questions which tend to be open and general questions can increase meaningful communication between teacher and learner,

Another common way of classifying questions is into open and closed questions. According to **Peacock** (1990) open questions are those where a variety of responses are acceptable, and the questioner does not expect a particular answer. **Nunan & Lamb** (1996: 84) describe open questions as "those that encourage extended student responses". **Ellis** (1994: 695) suggests that in open questions the teacher does not have a particular answer in mind and different responses are possible. He also mentions that some questions seem to be open, but in fact they are closed (these can be called 'pseudo-questions'). Closed questions, on the other hand, are those which require a single word or a brief response for which there is a single correct answer. Questions can also be classified in terms of their form. There are *yes/no* questions, *wh*-questions, and *either/ or* questions, and each can have an effect on the type of response learners are able to produce. Gap-filling questions are those where the teacher provides the first part of the answer and the learners.

Furthermore, **Eldredge** (2000) divides questions into three main types, they are prediction questions, intervention questions, and exploration questions. The first type of questions seek to predict an outcome under specific predefined circumstances. Intervention questions seek to address foreground questions by comparing two or more actions in terms of how "successful" they are in attaining intended goals or outcomes. Exploration questions as the last type of questions seek to answer question "why".

Purposes of Teachers' Questions

Teachers know that they ask their students questions for several purposes. **Levin and Nolan** (2004), for instance, state that teachers ask their students questions "to assess readiness for new learning, to create interest and motivation in learning, to make concept more precise, to check students understanding of the material, to redirect off-task students to more positive behavior, and to create the moderate amount of tension that enhances learning."

As **Brown & Wragg** (1993) highlight, teachers usually ask questions to check learners' knowledge rather than because they are seeking new information. In addition, **Peacock** (1990) states that teachers ask questions to activate learners' schematic knowledge about the topic being discussed and to provoke them to use their thinking skills. Then, **Brown & Wragg** (1993: 4) list several purposes of questions, such as "to arouse interest and curiosity concerning a topic, to focus attention on a particular issue or concept, to develop an active approach to learning, to stimulate pupils to ask questions of themselves and others." However, with reference to language teaching, **Nunan & Lamb** (1996) state that teachers ask questions mainly to check learners' understanding, to elicit information and to control their classrooms. **Peacock** (1990: 128) says that "more often than not teachers appear to ask questions either to find out what pupils do or do not know and understand, or to remind them about work completed in a previous lesson, or perhaps to challenge, stimulate and develop their thinking". **Brualdi** (1998) add that teachers ask questions for several purposes. They ask questions to keep their learners involved during lessons, to express their ideas and thoughts, to enable learners to hear different explanations of the material, and to help teachers to evaluate their learners' learning and revise their lessons when necessary. Furthermore, questions are asked to students for several purposes such as to see if students have acquired the imparted knowledge; to stimulate logical, reflective or imaginative thinking into issues being discussed; to direct attention to and to keep students involved in the lesson; to give space for self-expression; and to increase motivation and participation (See **Tsui**, 1995, **Ur**, 1996, **Richards & Lockhart**, 1996 and **Ralph**, 1999).

Levels of Questions

Questions are often divided into two categories: lower-level and higher-level questions. Lower-level questions are those asked at the knowledge, comprehension, and simple application levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956).



Table 1. Question based on Category, Bloom's Taxonomy and Type of Thinking

<i>Category</i>	<i>Bloom's Taxonomy</i>	<i>Type of Thinking</i>
Factual	Knowledge Comprehension	Identification and recall previous learned information, organization and selection of facts and ideas
Empirical	Application Analysis	Use of facts, rules and principles Separation of a whole into its component parts
Productive	Synthesis	Combination of ideas to form a new whole
Evaluative	Evaluation	Development of opinions judgments, decisions

As shown in Table 1, there are four types of questions in the classification provided by **Nasir & Abdul Majid Khan**, (2006), based on Bloom's taxonomy, namely; factual, empirical, productive and evaluative.

A. Factual Questions

In these types of questions which refer to knowledge or comprehension questions, students are asked to simply recall information. The following are the examples that can be used:

- Define....
- What did the text say?
- Who was ...?

Factual questions were seemed to be the mostly used type of questions by the teacher. Examples of these questions were as follows:

- What is the meaning of article?
- What's going on in that listening?
- You know 'parking lot'?

B. Empirical Questions

In these types of questions which refer to application or analysis questions, students integrate or analyze given or recalled information as shown in the following examples:

- Compare ... with
- Explain in your words....

A few numbers of these questions were used by the teacher. Examples of these questions were as follows:

- What is a financial problem?
- Can you use this word in a sentence?

C. Productive Questions

In these types of questions learners think creatively and imaginatively and produce something unique as can be seen the following examples:

- What will life be ...?
- What's good name for ...?
- Why do you use proverbs?

Following are some examples of the productive questions used by the teacher:

- What do proverbs tell us?
- What rules are there in a library?
- What about an art museum?

D. Evaluative Questions

In these types of questions students make judgments or express value as shown in the following examples:

- Which method is most suitable?
- What do you favor ...?
- Who is the best ...?

In some cases the teacher provided the learners with a hypothetical situation and asked them about what they would do in that particular situation. Examples are as follows:

- You forget your best friend's birthday. What would you do?
- If someone gives some ugly present to you, what would you do?
- (Are there) any other suggestions?
- What else can you do?

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As can be seen in Table 1, knowledge and comprehension questions can be categorized into lower question levels or lower cognitive questions, while application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation can be grouped into higher question levels or higher cognitive questions. Lower cognitive questions are also more effective when the goal is to impart factual knowledge and commit it to memory. In higher question levels, students also give responses at higher levels. The description or definition of each level of questions, and its examples including the key words used in each type or level is presented as follows.

Knowledge

This is the lowest level of questions and requires students to recall information. Knowledge questions usually require students to identify information in basically the same form it was presented. Some examples of knowledge questions are as follows:

- "What is the biggest city in Sumatera?"
- "Who wrote *Understanding English Grammar*?"
- "How many players are there in one team of football?"

Words often used in knowledge questions include *know, who, define, what, name, where, list, and when*.

Comprehension

Simply stated, comprehension is the way in which ideas are organized into categories. Comprehension questions are those that ask students to take several bits of information and put them into a single category or grouping. These questions go beyond simple recall and require students to combine data together. Some examples of comprehension questions are as follows:

- "How would you illustrate the water cycle?"
- "What is the main idea of this story?"
- "If I put these three blocks together, what shape do they form?"

Words often used in comprehension questions include *describe, use your own words, outline, explain, discuss, and compare*.

Application

At this level, teachers ask students to take information they already know and apply it to a new situation. In other words, they must use their knowledge to determine a correct response. Some examples of application questions are presented in the following:

- "How would you use your knowledge of latitude and longitude to locate Greenland?"
- "What happens when you multiply each of these numbers by nine?"
- "If you had eight inches of water in your basement and a hose, how would you use the hose to get the water out?"

Words often used in application questions include *apply, manipulate, put to use, employ, dramatize, demonstrate, interpret, and choose*.

Analysis

An analysis question is one that asks a student to break down something into its component parts. To analyze requires students to identify reasons, causes, or motives and reach conclusions or generalizations. Some examples of analysis questions are presented as the following:

- "What are some of the factors that cause students unsuccessful in learning?"
- "Why did Indonesian women not go to school during Dutch colonialism?"
- "Why do we call this text is anecdote?"

Words often used in analysis questions include *analyze, why, take apart, diagram, draw conclusions, simplify, distinguish, and survey*.

Synthesis

Synthesis questions challenge students to engage in creative and original thinking. These questions invite students to produce original ideas and solve problems. There's always a variety of potential responses to synthesis questions. The following are some examples of synthesis questions:

- "How would your life be different if you could breathe under water?"
- "Put these words together to form a complete sentence."

pose, construct, design, revise, create, formulate,



Evaluation

Evaluation requires an individual to make a judgment about something. Students are asked to judge the value of an idea, a candidate, a work of art, or a solution to a problem. When students are engaged in decision-making and problem-solving, they should be thinking at this level. Evaluation questions do not have single right answers. Some examples of evaluation questions are presented as in the following:

- "What do you think about your work so far?"
- "What subject did you like the best?"
- "Why do you think Soekarno is so famous?"

Words often used in evaluation questions include *judge, rate, assess, evaluate, What is the best ..., value, criticize, and compare.*

Wait-Time

When teachers ask their students questions, they should give enough time to answer the questions. In other words, wait time is important in questioning skill. Wait time refers to the amount of time the teachers allow to elapse after they have posed questions.

In the classrooms studied, the average wait-time after a question was posed was one second or less. Students perceived as slow or poor learners were afforded less wait-time than students viewed as more capable. This amount of wait-time is not sufficient for students, particularly for those that experience difficulty.

Studies show that for lower cognitive questions, a wait-time of three seconds is most effective in terms of achievement. Shorter or longer times were less positively correlated with student success. For higher cognitive questions, no wait-time threshold was observed. Researchers noted that students seemed to become more engaged and successful the longer the teacher waited (within reason, of course). Increased wait-time is related to a number of student outcomes, including improved achievement and retention, greater numbers of higher cognitive responses, longer responses, decreases in interruptions, and increased student-student interactions. These outcomes are quite similar to those observed with an increased frequency of higher cognitive questions. In fact, researchers believe that a causal relationship may exist between the two: higher cognitive questions require more wait-time, and more wait-time allows for the implementation of higher cognitive discussions.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Teachers ask questions for a variety of purposes which include to check students' knowledge or comprehension as well their preparation, to increase students' motivation and interest, to actively involve students in the lesson, and in learning English, questions are raised not only to develop their thinking skills but also to practice using the language.

Questions can be addressed to students at lower cognitive levels or higher cognitive levels. Knowledge and comprehension questions which are under factual category are the lower cognitive levels. While application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation are grouped into higher cognitive levels. Of the four higher cognitive levels, evaluation is the highest cognitive level. In this level students are able to make a judgment about the value of ideas or materials.

The questions that the teachers raised in teaching learning process can be classified into display questions and referential questions. Display questions mean that the teachers ask questions, and they have already known the answers, on the other hand, referential questions mean that the teachers ask students questions, and they do not know the answers.

The questions that the teachers ask can be in the forms of Yes/No-Questions, Alternative (Choice) Questions, or Information questions (Questions with question words). In addition, the teachers can ask their students factual questions, empirical questions, productive questions and evaluative questions. Furthermore, open and closed ended questions can be used by the teachers. If the teachers want a number of acceptable answers, they can ask open ended questions, for example, "**can you give an example of language skill?**" While a closed ended question has only one acceptable answer, for instance, "**In what island is Bengkulu province located?**"

To apply different types of questions and levels of questions in the classroom, the teachers should need to know and understand the definition of each category, and the key words that can be used. For example, *knowledge* (know, name, etc), *comprehension* (comprehend, translate, etc), *application* (apply, show, etc), *analysis* (analyze, differentiate, etc), *synthesis* (combine, rearrange, etc), and *evaluation* (judge, rate, assess, evaluate, etc). One note in asking questions is that the teachers also take into account the amount of wait-time between questions posed by the teachers.

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