

# A QUESTION OF FUNCTION

## Teacher questions in the EFL classroom<sup>\*</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Are we asking *effective* questions?  
Are we aware of the *type* of questions we are asking?  
Are we clear about the *function* of our questions?

This paper will investigate different types of questions and their pedagogical implications for the teaching/learning of EFL. Asking questions is one of the most essential teaching tools (if not the most essential one), and teachers use questions quite frequently during lessons. Nevertheless, the utility of teacher questions needs to be measured against three inter-dependent restricting factors:

- *the need to minimise teacher talking time, so that teachers do not dominate the lesson*
- *the importance of involving learners and eliciting/generating as much learner talk as possible*
- *the need for time-effectiveness (as a common complaint of teachers is that there never seems to be enough time to deal with the set syllabus).*

These factors point to the need for using questions in an *effective* way. It is argued that effectiveness can be improved by a combination of the following interrelated factors:

- awareness of the *types* of questions teachers are asking
- awareness of the *function* of their questions.
- development and conscious use of appropriate *questioning techniques*.

In this paper I will try to address these issues and provide guidelines to help teachers use questions effectively in order to facilitate the learning and teaching process. Firstly, I will elicit/demonstrate the different functions that can be performed by a question-form in real life. Particular emphasis will be given to question-forms which do not require the giving of information as a response (e.g. 'asking for permission' or rhetorical questions). Secondly, I will elicit/present examples of frequent types of questions used by EFL teachers. Thirdly, I will propose a categorisation of the questions frequently used by teachers. More precisely, I will distinguish between the following types:

- GENUINE questions (i.e. questions which actually seek information) as opposed to question-forms performing other functions (e.g. expressing surprise)
- AUTHENTIC questions, that is genuine questions teachers ask in order to obtain information they really need (as they would in their every-day life), as opposed to PEDAGOGICAL questions, that is questions they ask as part of the teaching/learning process (e.g. *When do we use X?*)

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<sup>\*</sup> Abstract, slides and handout from my paper given at the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual TESOL Greece Convention, National Bank of Greece Training Centre, Glyfada, Greece, 12-13 April 1997.

PEDAGOGICAL questions will be further distinguished in the following types:

- CONVERGENT: questions to which there is one correct answer
- DIVERGENT: questions inviting learners to express views, opinions or alternatives - the focus here is not on correct/wrong responses
- YES/NO: questions which can be answered only by a 'yes' or 'no' (e.g. *Do you like sports?*)
- OPEN-ENDED: questions which will elicit more language (e.g. *What kinds of sports do you like? Why?*)

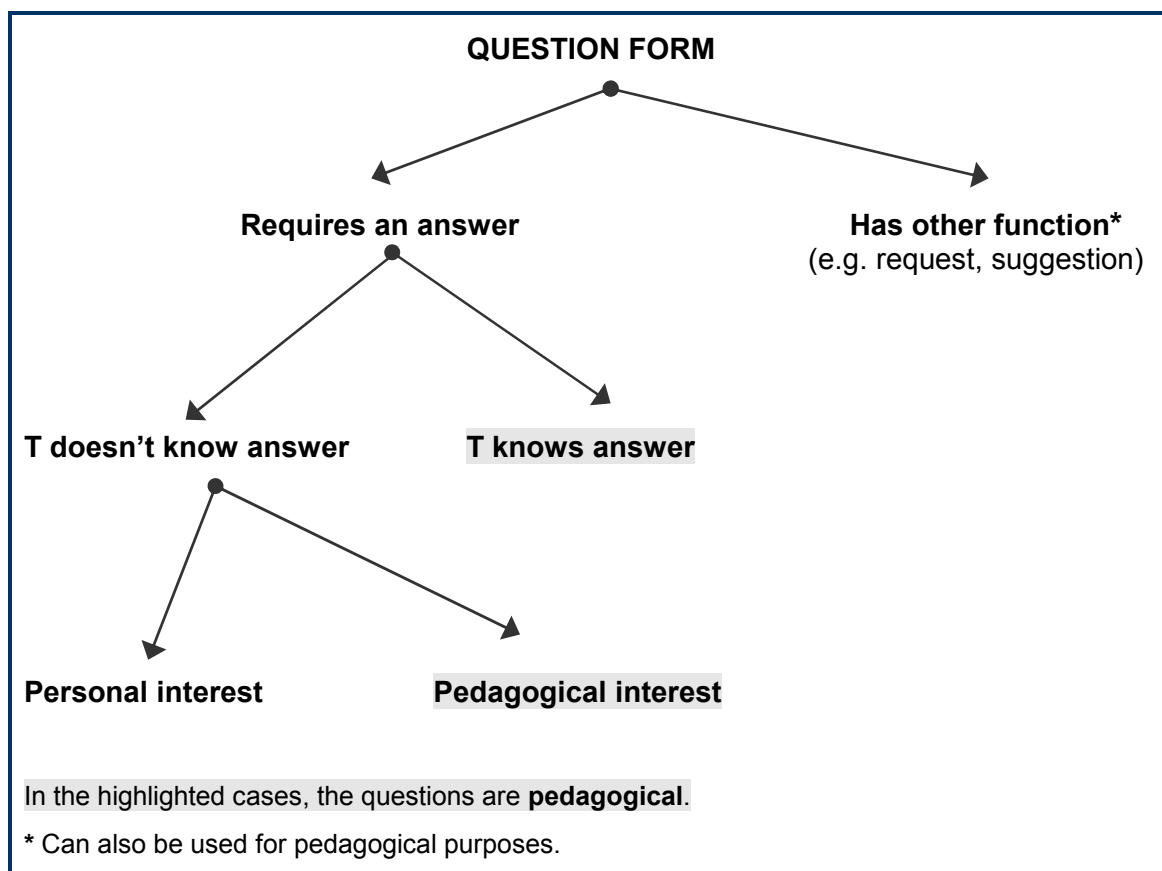
Fourthly, I will suggest that there is a group of QUESTIONS TO AVOID. These are questions which teachers are advised not to use for the following reasons:

- They express irony / sarcasm (e.g. *Are you awake X?*)
- They are not likely to elicit a 'true' or helpful response (e.g. *Do you understand?*)
- They may embarrass the learners (e.g. *Why have your parents divorced?*)

Finally, I will focus on the use of certain types of questions for the purpose of grammar awareness, reading skills development and class management.

The paper focuses on genuine questions, that is question forms which require an answer, but also gives examples of questions which perform other functions.

### A TYPOLOGY OF TEACHER QUESTIONS IN ELT



## TYPES OF PEDAGOGICAL QUESTIONS

### ACCORDING TO THE RESPONSE REQUIRED

#### Yes / No

Questions which can be answered only by a 'yes' or 'no'  
(e.g. *Do you like sports?*)

#### Open-ended

Questions which will elicit more language  
(e.g. *What kinds of sports do you like? Why?*)

#### Convergent

Questions to which there is one correct answer  
(e.g. *How old is X?*)

#### Divergent

Questions inviting learners to express views, opinions or alternatives.  
The focus here is not on correct responses  
(e.g. *What do you think about the views expressed in the text?*)

### ACCORDING TO THE AIM OF THE TEACHER

#### Checking understanding

##### Form

- *Where do I place the 's'? [when teaching the possessive 's']*
- *Do I need an '-ing'?*

##### Concept / Function / Context

Helen: 'If I'd seen Peter, I'd have told him'

- *Does this sentence talk about the past or the present?*
- *Did Helen see Peter?*
- *Did she tell him?*
- *Can she do anything about it now?*
- *Who do you think is she saying this to?*
- *Why?*

## Elicitation

### Language

- *What's this?*
- *What does X mean?*
- *What are they doing (in the picture)?*
- *What do you need to take on the beach?*
- *What do you mean (by ...)?*
- *What are your views on ...?*

### Strategies (reading/listening)

- *How did you guess the meaning of this word?*
- *What helped you understand the writer's view?*
- *Where in the text did you find the information?*
- *Did you find the answer in one place?*

### Problems & Needs

- *What did you find difficult in this question/activity?*
- *Which word(s) do you think you need to understand? Why?*

## Guidance and Awareness-raising

### Focus on form

- *How does she express her promises?*
- *What language does he use to express his predictions?*

### Focus on concept and function

- *What is more important for the writer/speaker, when the accident happened or its consequences?*
- *Does the speaker really mean this or is she being sarcastic?*

### Focus on strategies (reading/listening)

- *Did you need to understand all the words to answer?*
- *Did you have to read everything to get the information?*

### Limiting choice

- *Do you think this word has a positive or negative meaning?*
- *Do you need Simple Past or Present Perfect here?*

### **Guidance questions can help learners ...**

- Activate and use relevant *knowledge* and *experience* regarding the topic and the type of a text.
- Use clues given in the rubrics, questions, options and texts to form principled *predictions* about content.
- Use clues to anticipate *when* the information they need will be mentioned.
- Read/listen *selectively* and focus on helpful words/phrases.
- Make use of *style* of language.
- Make use of their knowledge of *grammar* and *vocabulary*.
- Make use of their knowledge of *text organisation* .
- *Recognise* words in the stream of speech.
- Make use of *stress* and *intonation*.
- Use textual and contextual clues to *notice* new grammatical/lexical items and infer aspects of their meaning and use.
- *Limit* the range of possibilities.

### **Note**

*Guidance questions should not be treated as comprehension questions. That is, learners are not supposed to provide correct answers. The overall aim of such questions is to gradually help learners develop strategies that will enable them to approach language in a focused way.*

### **CLASS MANAGEMENT**

#### **General**

- *Can you all hear me?*
- *Have you all brought your books?*

#### **Checking instructions**

- *Who is in group A?*
- *What do you have to do?*

#### **Progression of activities**

- *Have you finished?*
- *Are you ready?*

## PROBLEMATIC QUESTIONS

### Questions which are not likely to elicit a 'true' or helpful response

- *Do you understand?*
- *Is it clear now?*

### Questions which can embarrass the learners

- *Whose parents are divorced?*
  - *Are you awake X?*
  - *Are you with us Y?*

## AFTER THE QUESTION

### WAIT TIME

"Increasing wait time both before calling on a student and after a student's initial response (i.e. before the teacher comments on the response) often increases the length of the students' responses, increases the number of questions asked by students, and increases student involvement in learning."

Source

Richards, J.C., Platt, J. & Platt, H. 1992. *Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*. Longman.

## RESPONDING TO FORM vs. RESPONDING TO CONTENT

T: *Why are you so late?*

L: *I'm sorry, my mother is take to hospital.*

T: *No, not "is take", she "has been taken" to hospital*

or

T: *Why are you so late?*

L: *I'm sorry, my mother has been taken to hospital.*

T: *Correct. Bravo!*

as opposed to

T: *Why are you so late?*

L: *I'm sorry, my mother is take to hospital.*

T: *Oh I'm sorry to hear that!*

Adapted from: Edge, J. 1989. *Mistakes and Correction*. Longman.

## **SUMMARY**

### **Pedagogical questions can be used to ...**

#### **Elicit**

level of difficulty / interest  
needs and problems  
sources of problems  
learning strategies  
strategies used when using/understanding language  
suggestions / views / ideas  
relevant knowledge and experience  
natural language use

#### **Guide and help**

by limiting the range of choices  
towards discovering aspects of language structure and use  
towards awareness of strategies  
towards development of strategies

#### **Check**

what/ how much learners have understood  
what learners can do

#### **Manage the lesson**

checking instructions  
sequencing activities