

Critiquing Questions

by LYNN W. ZIMMERMAN



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

beginners could discuss that question. For upper-level learners, a question to stimulate discussion might be, “Some cities offer refunds to people when they recycle and impose fines when people do not. What kind of incentive program do you think your city should adopt to encourage recycling?” This question gives a framework and ideas with the introductory statement and then asks the respondent to present his or her own ideas. Within a lesson that provides background information, intermediate students should also be able to discuss that question.

WHY FOCUS ON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS?

I realized that we do not focus on teaching English students how to develop discussion questions when I was teaching a graduate-level course in intercultural communication in Poland; the students were at B2 and C1 proficiency levels, and the course included opportunities for the students to lead small-group discussions. While most of the questions students asked were technically correct, few of their questions were effective discussion questions. For example, I overheard one student ask, “Do women in our country have equal rights?” Because these were upper-level students, this question did provoke some discussion despite not being an open-ended question. However, in most English classrooms, it would not have. I thought it would have been better to ask, “What evidence have you seen that women have equal rights in our country?” or “How has the status of women changed in our country over the past 20 years?”

To address the issue of how to develop effective discussion questions, I planned an interactive activity that required students to write questions about a topic we had just focused on; in this case, the topic was sociocultural influences on intercultural communication. After writing discussion questions, students then critiqued one another’s questions. Although I used this activity with a class of 30 students, this would also be an effective activity in larger classes because it involves small-group work.

Q/A ACTIVITY

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.

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.

Then have a full-class discussion about the activity. Ask students to identify the question they thought was the best and to explain why. Ask for suggestions to improve the questions that promoted less discussion in their groups. Elicit from the students the differences

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.

CONCLUSION

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 analyze, discuss, and write about the quality of the questions, they have to use appropriate language to explain the strengths and weaknesses 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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Q/A Activity Worksheet

Group 1: Write three open-ended questions that could be used in a discussion group. Give the list of questions to Group 2.

Group 2: Discuss the questions. **Do not write** your answers to the questions.

Write a critique of each question. Did the question stimulate much discussion? Why? Why not? How could the question be improved to make it a better discussion question?

Question 1	
<i>Question 1 Critique</i>	
Question 2	
<i>Question 2 Critique</i>	
Question 3	
<i>Question 3 Critique</i>	