

QUESTION LEVELS AND QUESTIONING SKILLS IN ELT

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Abstract

Asking questions in English language teaching has a very important role to play. Questioning skills are the components of CTL, basic skill of teaching and one of the components of scientific approach that a teacher uses in teaching learning process. It is also believed that the quantity and quality of questions used by teachers will determine the quantity and quality responses given by students in ELT. In addition, English teachers should take into consideration question levels to ask to their students. One important consideration in asking questions is English proficiency level of students. Therefore, English teachers should be able to use various levels of questions beginning from lower to higher question levels. Bloom categorizes questions into six levels namely knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels. While Anderson, Bloom's former student, categorizes questions into remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Questions used by teachers can be in the forms of yes/no questions, information questions and alternative questions. These forms of questions can be classified into display and referential questions. Other terms used to classify questions are convergent and divergent questions.

By having enough knowledge, teachers are expected to be able to use various question levels and questioning skill in the classroom so that the participation of students can be improved and teaching learning process can run smoothly and successfully.

Key words: question, questioning, display question, referential question, convergent and divergent questions.

INTRODUCTION

Asking questions in English language teaching (ELT) has a very important role to play. It is important because teacher and students can interact in the classroom. Teacher can ask questions to his students about the previous lesson before he begins his new lesson. In addition, by asking his students questions he can check his students' comprehension on the lesson that he has already taught. On the other hand, his students can also raise questions to his teacher because they do not understand the lesson or they still get confused about the lesson. The quality of questions used by a teacher will determine the quality of interaction between a teacher and his students. In other words, questions used by teacher will determine the participations of students in English language learning in the classroom. In implementing teaching learning process in the classroom, teacher is suggested to use appropriate approaches such as contextual teaching and learning (CTL)

approach, and scientific approach. Both CTL approach and scientific approach include questioning as their important component. Furthermore, questioning is one of the basic skills of teaching that a teacher should apply in ELT. Therefore, this paper limits its discussion on question levels and questioning skills in English language teaching (ELT).

The purposes of writing this topic are presented as follows:

1. To define question, and questioning skill
2. To discuss question levels or categories
3. To discuss questioning skill and types of questions

DISCUSSION

1. Definition of Question and Questioning skill Question

It is believed that sentences can be used in statement, negative and interrogative forms or known as question forms. These three sentence forms are known as positive (+), negative (-) and interrogative (?) sentences. 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.

Questioning skill and Types of Questions

Questioning skill is one of the components of CTL approach, one of the basic skills of teaching, and one of the components of scientific approach that a teacher uses in teaching learning process. It is also believed that the quantity and quality of questions used by teachers will determine the quantity and quality responses given by students in ELT. In addition, English teachers should take into consideration question levels to ask to their students. One important consideration in asking questions is the English proficiency level of students. Therefore, English teachers should be able to use various

levels of questions beginning from lower to higher question levels. Bloom categorizes questions into six levels namely knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels. While Anderson, Bloom's former student, categorizes questions into remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Questions used by teachers can be in the forms of yes/no questions, information questions and alternative questions. These forms of questions can be classified into display and referential questions. Other terms used to classify questions are convergent and divergent questions.

Yes/no questions are questions that can be answered by Yes or No. for example, "Do you understand?" Information questions are questions with question words such as What, Who, When, Where, Which, Whose, Why, How, etcetera. The answer of information question depends on what kind of information is needed such as information about place, choice, reason, way, etcetera. Then, alternative questions are questions that are used to choose one of two choices provided, for example, "*Is this sentence right or wrong?*" or "*Which is the right sentence, **sentence number one** or **sentence number two**?*"

Other form of questions, 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. Referential questions, on the other hand, as defined by Lightbown & Spada (1999), are genuine questions for which the asker does not know the answer. The terms of convergent questions and divergent questions seem important to describe in this section. Convergent question restricts responses to predetermined answers, for example, "*According to the author, what are the possible reason that...*" Divergent question, on the one hand, allows a multitude of correct responses, for example, "*What are the possible responses to her complaint?*"

Teachers 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 and 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 and 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.

Usman (1999) states that a good question has at least five positive impacts to students namely to improve students' participation in teaching learning activities, to encourage interest and eagerness of students, to develop learning pattern and student active learning, to guide student thinking process to determine good answer, and to attract students' attention toward the materials being taught.

Kemendikbud (2013) points out that when teachers ask their students questions, their questions should be short and clear, inspire the answer, have focus, probe students' critical thinking, have an opportunity for students to think before they answer the question, stimulate and develop students' thinking ability, and improve interaction process in teaching learning process in the classroom.

2. Questions Levels/Categories

There are many terms and classification for describing the different kinds of questions. Most of these classification systems are useful because they provide a conceptual framework, a way of looking at questions. Bloom's Taxonomy is probably the best known system for classifying classroom questions. He classifies questions into six levels. Question at each level requires the person responding to use a different kind of thought process. Teachers should be able to formulate on each of these levels to encourage their students to engage in a variety of cognitive processes. Before formulating questions on each of these levels, teachers must first understand the definitions of the six categories and be able to recognize questions used in the classroom. The six levels or categories of questions are knowledge, comprehension, application, synthesis or creation, and evaluation. Then, these six levels of question are often divided into two categories: lower-level and higher-level questions.

Lower level questions or lower cognitive questions are those asked at the knowledge, comprehension, while higher level questions or higher cognitive questions are those asked at application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Lower cognitive questions are also more effective when the goal is to impart factual knowledge and commit it to memory. In higher level questions, students also give responses at higher levels. Based on Bloom's taxonomy, Nasir and Abdul Majid Khan, (2006) classified questions into five levels or categories namely: factual, empirical, productive and evaluative as can be seen on Table 1 below.

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	Identification and recall previous learned
	Comprehension	information, organization and selection of facts and ideas
Empirical	Application	Use of facts, rules and principles
	Analysis	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

A. Factual Questions

In knowledge or comprehension questions, students are asked to simply recall information. Here are the examples that can be used: Define...., What did the text say? Who was ...?

Factual questions are believed to be the mostly used type of questions by the teacher. Examples of these questions are 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 these examples: Compare ... with, Explain in your words....

A few numbers of these questions can be used by the teacher. Other examples of these questions are "What is a financial problem?" "Can you use this word in a sentence?"

C. Productive Questions

In productive questions, learners think creatively and imaginatively and produce something unique as can be seen in these examples: What will life be ...? What's good name for ...? Why do you use proverbs?

The following are some examples of the productive questions that can be used by the teacher in the classroom: What do proverbs tell us? What rules are there in a library? What about an art museum?

D. Evaluative Questions

In evaluative questions, students make judgments or express value as shown in these examples: Which method is the most suitable in teaching speaking skill? What do you favor ...? Who is the best ...?

In some cases, teacher can provide the learners with a hypothetical situation and ask them about what they will 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?

A person who was cheating got a higher mark than you. What would you do?

You have found a diamond ring. What would you do?

The Six Levels of Questions according to Bloom's Taxonomy**Knowledge**

This is the first level of the *Taxonomy*, and the lowest level of questions and requires students to recognize or recall information. Knowledge questions usually require students to identify information in basically the same form it was presented. To answer a question on the knowledge level, student must remember facts, observations and definitions that have learned before. Some examples of knowledge questions are as follows:

- "What is the capital city of Riau province?"
- "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

Question on the second level, comprehension, requires the student to demonstrate sufficient understanding to organize and arrange material mentally. The student must select those facts that are pertinent to answering the question. To answer a comprehension level question, the student must go beyond recall of information. The student must demonstrate a personal grasp of the material by being able to rephrase it, give a description in his or in own words, and use it in making comparison. Besides, comprehension questions ask student to interpret and translate material that is presented in charts, graphs, tables, and cartoons. Some examples of comprehension questions are as follows:

- “How would you illustrate the water cycle?”
- “What is the main idea of this story?”
- “Describe in your own words the moral value of the text?”
- “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

Question on this level, application, requires 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’s the speaker’s points support affirmative action?”
- “How did role-play promote cultural understanding?”
- “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 or Creation

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

- “Write an e-mail to a local newspaper editor on a social issue of concern to you!”
- “How would your life be different if you could breathe under water?”
- “Put these words together to form a complete sentence.”
- “How can you improve your speaking ability?”
- “How can we successfully raise money to fund our homeless shelter project?”

Words often used in synthesis questions include *compose*, *construct*, *design*, *revise*, *create*, *formulate*, *produce*, and *plan*.

Evaluation

Like synthesis and analysis, evaluation is a higher question level that 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:

- “How do you assess your performance at school?”
- “Why should young children not be allowed to watch any movie they want?”
- “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*.

The following table probably helps teachers to make questions because they can look at question levels (competence), skills demonstrated and key words (question cues).

Table 2: Question Categories according to Bloom’s Taxonomy

Competence	Skills Demonstrated	Question Cues
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • observation and recall of information • knowledge of dates, events, places • knowledge of major ideas • mastery of subject matter 	arrange, count, collect, define, describe, duplicate, examine, identify, know, label, list, locate, match, memorize, name, order, quote, recite, recognize, recount, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce, show, state, tabulate, tell, underline, who, when, where, etc.
Comprehension (understanding)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding information • grasp meaning • translate knowledge • interpret facts, compare, contrast • order, group, infer causes • predict consequences 	associate, classify, contrast, describe, differentiate, discuss, distinguish, estimate, explain, express, extend, identify, indicate, locate, predict, recognize, report, restate, review, select, summarize, translate
Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use information • use methods, concepts, theories in new situation • solve problems using required skills or 	apply, calculate, change, choose, classify, complete, compute, demonstrate, develop, discover, dramatize, employ, examine,

	knowledge	experiment, implement, illustrate, interpret, modify, operate, practice, relate, schedule, show, sketch, solve, use, utilize, write
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeing patterns • organization of parts • recognition of hidden meanings • identification of components 	arrange, analyze, appraise, calculate, categorize, classify, compare, connect, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, divide, distinguish, examine, experiment, explain, infer, investigate, order, point out, question, select, separate, test
Synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use old ideas to create new ones • generalize from given facts • relate knowledge from several areas • predict, draw conclusions 	arrange, assemble, collect, combine, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, generalize, hypothesize, integrate, invent, manage, modify, organize, plan, prepare, propose, rearrange, research, rewrite, set up, substitute, what if?, write,
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compare and discriminate between ideas • assess value of theories, presentations • make choices based on reason argument • verify value of evidence • recognize subjectivity 	appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose, compare, conclude, convince, core, defend, decide, discriminate, estimate, evaluate, explain, grade, judge, measure, originate, predict, produce, rate, rank, rank, recommend, select, summarize, support, test, value

Adapted from: Bloom, B.S. (Ed.) (1956) Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals: Handbook I cognitive domain. New York; Toronto: Longmans, Green.

Furthermore, Anderson, a former student of Bloom, revisited the cognitive domain in the learning taxonomy in the mid-nineties and made some changes, with perhaps the two most prominent one being, 1). By changing the names in the six categories from noun to verb forms, and 2). By slightly rearranging them. This Bloom's Taxonomy was firstly created in the 1959s, then revised in 1990's in an attempt to make it more relevant for 21st century students and teachers, and this new taxonomy reflects a more active form of thinking and is perhaps more accurate as shown below:

Old Version (Nouns)		Revised Version (Verbs)
Evaluation	→	Creating
Synthesis	→	Evaluating
Analysis	→	Analyzing
Application	→	Applying
Comprehension	→	Understanding
Knowledge	→	Remembering

Based on Anderson's revised version, the brief definitions of the term can be described as follows:

1. **Remembering** refers to recall previous learned information,

2. **Understanding** means comprehending the meaning, translation, interpolation, and interpretation of instructions and problems. State a problem in one's own words.
3. **Applying** can be described as using a concept in a new situation or unprompted use of an abstraction. Applies what was learned in the classroom into novel situations in the work place.
4. **Analyzing** means separating materials or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Distinguishing between facts and inferences.
5. **Evaluating** refers to making judgments about the value of ideas or materials.
6. **Creating** is defined as building a structure or pattern from diverse elements. Putting parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure
3. **Questioning skill**

Questioning, according Ragawanti (2009) is the technique of asking questions, then known as questioning technique. Richard, Platt and Platt (1992:303), furthermore, describe questioning techniques as different procedure that teachers use in asking questions and different kinds of questions they ask. To effectively engage students in learning, teacher must become highly skilled in designing questions.

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 Riau province located?*”

To apply different levels of questions in the classroom, the teachers should need to know and understand the definition of each level, and the key words that can be used. For example, *knowledge* (know, name, etc), *comprehension* (comprehend, translate, etc), *application* (apply, change, etc), *analysis* (analyze, differentiate, etc), *synthesis* (combine, rearrange, etc), and *evaluation* (evaluate, summarize, etc).

Another important point to note in asking questions is that the teachers also take into consideration the amount of time to answer the questions posed by the teachers.

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