

CLTopic: The Art of Conversation

Asking Questions

Gathering information is a basic human activity. We use information to learn, to help us solve problems, make decisions and to understand each other more clearly.

Questioning is fundamental to successful communication - we all ask and are asked questions when engaged in conversation.

Most people would agree, that when we look at successful individuals around us, whether they are politicians, journalists, actors, doctors, entrepreneurs – often these people are great at communicating: they listen well, and they have excellent questioning skills. They know how to ask the right questions at the right time and also how to answer (or not) appropriately.

Whether we are speaking in our native language, or in a second language, questions are at the heart of communication. Questions help us maintain control of conversation, express interest, clarify points, explore problems and encourage further thought.

A second language is skill, so training students to be able to gather information, and ask questions appropriately in a new language, is essential for effective learning.

However, in the language classroom, too often questions come from the teacher, and answers come from the student. While it is important for teachers to model how questions are formed, this one-way line of communication doesn't support what in fact is a very natural phenomenon: When we are communicating in a second language, particularly in the earlier stages of our learning, being able to ask questions and clarifying information is the most important thing we need to be able to do.

It may seem obvious, but imagine if you are visiting a country for the first time and need to use your language skills. You'll need an armoury of different questions and question forms. No one local is going to ask *you* where the closest bank is, or how to get to the market!

The challenge of course, is training yourself as a teacher to ensure that activities are set up appropriately to give control over to the students so that they too can ask questions. First, in a controlled, supported way, and later in a more authentic, spontaneous way.

In most classroom situations the amount of contact time with the language is relatively limited. So it's important to maximise that time by getting students to do more of the talking.

Classroom Language

The best place to start is with 'Classroom Language.' Often at the beginning of a course teachers will focus on questions like 'Could you repeat that?' or 'What does ____ mean?' Students may be asked to repeat these and may use them initially, but more often than not, students are allowed to slip back into their native language to clarify points and confirm understanding.

You can avoid this by having a good textbook that covers useful classroom expressions, and coming back to them regularly. *Discover China*, published by Macmillan Education and FLTRP, has an excellent reference at the start of each book, and at every level. It has expressions and questions that would be used by a teacher, as well as those students would naturally use in a classroom setting. If you're able, having these expressions posted around the room or on a white board as an easy reference is a good idea. This will help students continue the flow of conversation in pairs or groups, or back to the teacher, when they don't need understand or need to clarify meaning. As students gain confidence in using them regularly, they become more independent language learners.

Setting up Activities

Although some teachers may feel that repetition and drilling are boring, it's necessary to provide students with an appropriate amount of controlled practice so they can fix certain structures and patterns in their heads. With beginners and post-beginners it is worth doing frequent group repetition, rapid question and answer, and simple oral drills. Learning a language is to some degree like learning a musical instrument. Drills, like scales in music, are often effective starters to lessons when you want to get the class quickly paying attention. We can however, make these more interesting – for example by doing 'open pair drills' e.g. the teacher asks a question, student A answers, then student A asks the same question (or slight alternative with a word change) to another student, and so on to the next student. Or we can create a sense of competition by doing the same sort of drill in small groups to see who finishes first.

In a communicative language classroom, we commonly use pair and group work based on information gap activities, but such activities should normally come after controlled practice of a

more traditional type. Again, a good textbook will introduce semi-controlled pair work activities (e.g. Student A and B need to have a short dialogue to find missing information) after students have had sufficient time with drills and repetition. These basic pair activities give students the opportunity to regularly ask and answer questions.

We cannot pretend that our classrooms are places where language can always be used authentically, but we can make sure that we engage students in extended communicative tasks in small groups that will provide a more authentic 'setting' for language use. Activities in which students are assigned roles, plan and gather information, and present work back the class provide both more spontaneous use of target language, as well as a natural setting to ask questions to members of the group, and to listen carefully.

Questioning in group situations like this is very useful: Students need to be able include all members of the group, encourage more discussion of a point, and to keep on task.

Finally, how much target language is used in the classroom is a personal choice, and can sometimes depend on the level of the students. Whatever percentage we choose to use – whether it's in small controlled bursts, or throughout our lessons, it is essential that we give students sufficient time and support to practice asking questions in the target language so they can learn to clarify what they don't understand, keep conversations moving, and probe for more information.

For more support with questions and question formation in Chinese, download our new resource: Teaching **Question Words** in Chinese.