5 Eliciting

'I think I probably tell my students lots of things that they could tell me … if I ever gave them the chance.'

Aim

To draw language, information and ideas from the students, rather than telling them everything.

Introduction

When there is some factual information that students need to know, simply telling them those facts may be the fastest and most efficient way of working. However, if this technique is used at length, repeatedly or exclusively, the amount of information may quickly become overwhelming for students. More worryingly, although the students have been present in a room where someone is telling them things, there is no guarantee that these things will have been heard, understood or learnt. As a learning strategy, just listening to someone else talking at you is not particularly involving or motivating.

Eliciting is the technique of drawing things from students, mainly by asking questions, rather than using teacher explanation. It leads to greater involvement, encourages thinking and nudges the learners towards making discoveries for themselves.

Technique: Learners tell you about a picture

One of the simplest, but most important ways of eliciting is when you invite students to look at a picture (perhaps in the coursebook, on the interactive whiteboard or on a flashcard – as part of a lead-in to studying a text or topic).

It would obviously be possible to say:

> Look at this picture. You can see a café in a busy city street. Three people are sitting at a table on the pavement having coffee, but inside, if you look carefully, you can see that something is happening. The manager is handing a lot of money over to the man with long hair. Maybe he is holding a gun. We can't see very clearly.

However, this approach is not very interesting or involving and crucially, it requires no thinking of any kind on the learners' part. They can just sit and nod.

To elicit instead of tell, we simply need to turn our statements into questions, leaving it up to the students to look, think, decide and say the answers. In this example, student responses are given in brackets:

Look at this picture. What can you see? (A café.) Where is it? (On a street.) Where's the street? (In a city.) Is it busy or empty? (Very busy.) What are these people doing? (Having coffee.) Are there any more people in the picture? (No.) Look carefully. Look inside. (Some people are inside the café.) What's happening inside? (Someone is giving money to someone.) A little money – change maybe? (No. A big pile of notes.) Why is he doing that? (Maybe the other man has a gun. Maybe he's a robber.)

By introducing the picture in this way, students are actively involved, looking carefully, noticing things, making hypotheses, drawing conclusions – and they will probably be much more interested in reading any follow-on text to find out if their interpretations and guesses were correct.

Techniques: Effective eliciting

1 Make sure the class can hear

When you elicit, it's important that everyone can hear answers given by other students. Make sure that students speak loud enough. Use techniques like Walking away (see Chapter 5 Unit 5). Summarise or echo if necessary.

2 Use a natural-sounding 'slightly puzzled' intonation

Questions sound more inviting if it sounds like you really don't know the answer (rather than sounding like a bored teacher checking answers to an exercise he or she already knows the answers to).

3 Elicit, then give feedback

If learners are speculating about a picture, it doesn't matter very much if there are a number of different ideas from different people, as none of them is 'correct'. However, if you elicit about something factual (for example, helping students to work out a grammar rule), then there is definitely a correct answer, and it is crucial that, at some point, you tie up the speculative discussion and give feedback. Often this will mean confirming what is correct. When not done, this can be a major cause of learner confusion and 'mislearning'. The following classroom excerpts show teachers confirming or giving feedback:

- 'So, three of you thought that the Past Tense is *drived*. Two students said *drove*. Well, the correct answer is *drove.'*
- 'The picture does look like a supermarket, doesn't it? In fact, it is a church!'
- 'Your answers are very close, but not quite correct. Think again about *why* he caught the bus.'

4 Wait a bit

After you ask a question, allow thinking time. Don't hurry them too much. Don't answer your own questions!

5 You can't elicit things they don't know and can't guess

Many things can be elicited, but not everything. I could elicit what students think I had for breakfast this morning (because there are some obvious likely answers they could try first, and because my students know me and might be able to make an informed guess), but it might be a waste of time to elicit my brother-in-law's name (as this would just involve a lot of random guesses) or a grammatical correction to a sentence when students have had no guidance or previous knowledge.

6 Be careful of asking too many hypothetical questions

'What happened?' is much easier to understand and to answer than 'What might have happened?'

7 Ask questions that move learners forward

If the learner already knows the answer to a question in full and learns or notices nothing new, the question simply leads to a display of knowledge, but not to further learning.

8 Remember that you have options in who you ask

Questions can be nominated (i.e. to a named individual) or open (i.e. to anyone). If nominated, the name can come before the question (e.g. 'Juan, What's the past of go?') or after it (e.g. 'What's the past of go? Juan?').

9 Avoid over-eliciting

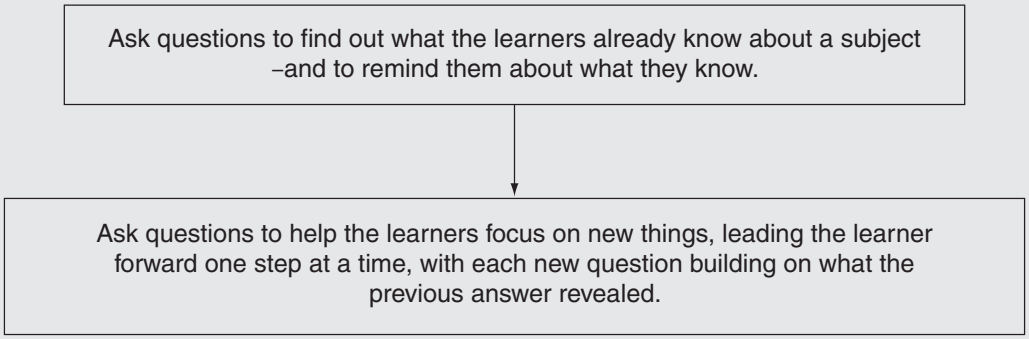
Being asked questions all the time could become dull and counterproductive. Use eliciting as long as it is productive and enjoyable, but remain open to the possibility of varying your techniques as needed. Some things may be best told as information. You may also decide that students would benefit from other input methods, for example, to follow a lecture presentation and take notes.

Technique: Socratic questions

You can elicit in many ways (for example, by using pictures, gestures, gapped sentences on the board), but the most important way is with Socratic questions.

A Socratic question is one that has the intention of leading the learners to realise or discover something for themselves, possibly something that they already half know or are capable of working out for themselves, given appropriate help. The question may reveal a contradiction, inconsistency or false assumption in a student's understanding, which they can then be helped to clarify.

A common sequence of Socratic questions in language teaching might be:



The teacher will often need to introduce small pieces of new information into this sequence as it is revealed that the learner does not know something they need to know. For example:

Teacher: So what do you think the past form is for the verb *blow*? (Writes *blow* on the board.)
Student 1: Blowed.
Teacher: Do we use *-ed* with all verbs?
Student 2: No. Some are irregular verbs.
Teacher: So … is *blow* regular or irregular?
Student 1: Blowed … yes.
Teacher: (Smiles and shakes head 'no'.) It's irregular. Can you guess what the irregular form is?
Student 2: Blowed … um …
Teacher: (Writes up *know* on the board.) What about this?
Student 3: Knew.
Teacher: (Nods and adds *knew* to board.)
Student 2: Ah … maybe … blow … blew?

It's not the formulation of the words that makes a question Socratic, but *why* it is asked. For example, the question, 'What endings can be added to this word?' could be used to elicit displays of knowledge or to assess or mark what the students know. However, if the teacher's intention is to encourage thinking, guide discovery, challenge assumptions or uncover new learning, then it is Socratic.

In asking a Socratic question, a teacher often needs to adopt the role of an enquiring person who does not know the answer. There is an element of fibbing in this: the teacher obviously *does* know the answers (in most cases).

Richard Paul suggested a taxonomy of Socratic questions. There are six types:

1 Questions to clarify underlying concepts.
2 Questions that probe assumptions.
3 Questions about reasons and evidence.
4 Questions about implications and consequences.
5 Questions about positions, viewpoints or perspectives.
6 Questions about the question.

Technique: Using Socratic questions to focus on grammar

The following are some sample questions that could all be used Socratically. They are classified according to Paul's taxonomy (see section above).

1 Clarifying underlying concepts

- What's the name of this piece of grammar?
- What words should be written here?
- What time are we talking about?
- Is this sentence correct?

2 Probing assumptions

- Are there any other words that you could use?
- Are any different endings possible?
- If I changed this word, would the sentence still be correct?
- Do you think this could be said in a different way?

3 Reasons and evidence

- Why does the word have this ending?
- Why do you think that?
- Why is the verb in this form?
- Have you ever heard anyone using this?

4 Implications and consequences

- How does this connect to what we learnt yesterday?
- Do you think you would use this language more in writing or in speaking?
- Why is this important?

5 Position, viewpoints and perspective

- What makes this difficult for you?
- Which part of this do you think you might make a mistake with?
- Will you use this grammar yourself?

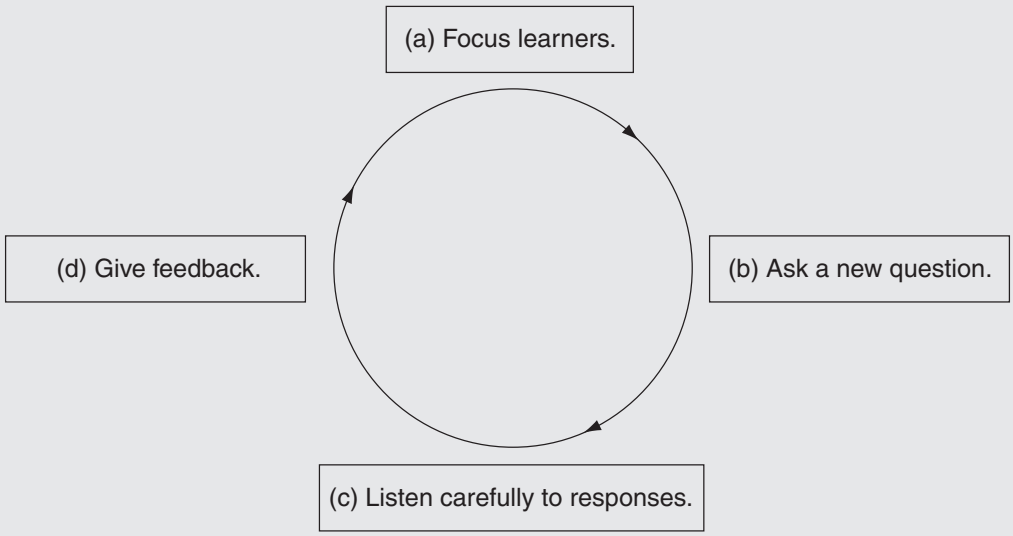
6 The question

- Why do you think I asked you if it was in the past?

Techniques: Using sequences of questions – Guided discovery

The most effective questions will be ones that are just above and beyond the learners' current level of understanding, but for which they will already have the necessary understanding to be able to work out or make an informed guess about the answer.

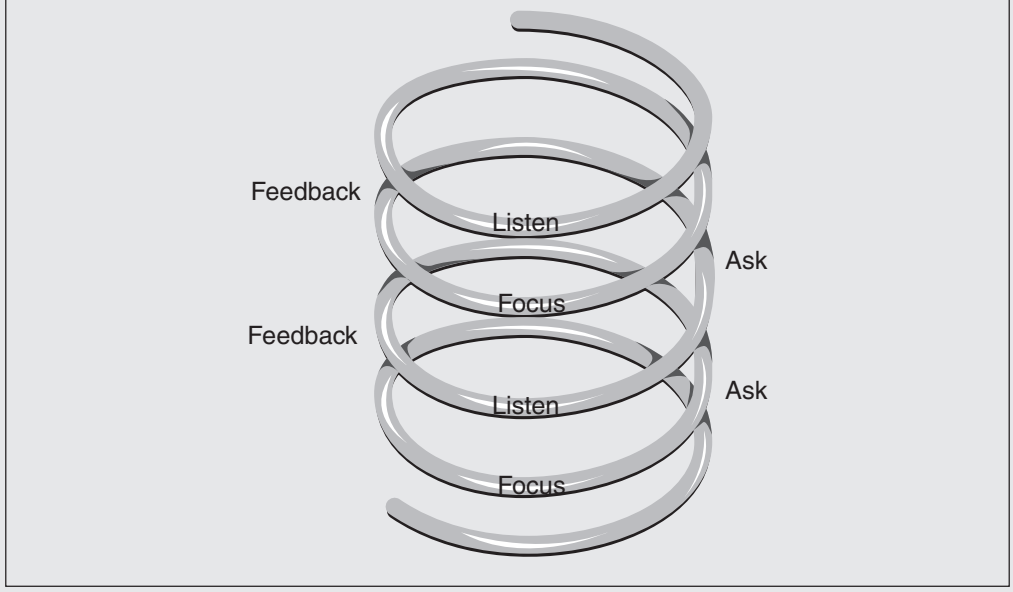
Each question and answer can lead to a further question and answer, taking the exploration of a subject deeper and deeper. Sequences of questions like this are central to the teaching approach known as *guided discovery.*



So, for example, if you are working on teaching a new grammar item, the cycle might look something like this:

1 **Focus learners** by writing up an example sentence or eliciting one from students. Ask learners to look at the sentence.
2 **Ask a question** that makes learners notice some aspect of the language or usage and forces them to think about it. Questions may also require them to remember other language they have previously studied and learnt.
3 **Listen carefully to responses**, remembering that you are not on a chase for correct answers, but are hoping to guide learners towards a better understanding.
4 **Give feedback on what they say**, for example, you could clarify, echo, write up, correct or summarise as necessary.

Finishing one circle leads you on to the next, so that the learner is taken forward, question by question, in a systematic and structured way towards new learning. To make the sequence useful, the teacher will need to have a clear sense of where the intended goal of the questioning is.



Technique: Hinting, nudging, suggesting

You don't always need to make your eliciting cues bold, direct and transparent. Sometimes a cryptic hint may give a gentle push that is more powerful than a piece of more direct guidance. Students don't always need to be led by the hand.

For example, try dropping in a single 'charged' key word or surprising idea – one that has the power to wake up a student's mind and make them think of lots of new possibilities, for example:

Student: I can't think of any interesting ideas to write in the essay about global warming. It's all, 'This is going to happen. That is going to happen'. Boring.
Teacher: Past Tense?
Student: What? Past Tense? How can I do that? It's in the future. Oh, do you mean that I imagine that I'm in the future and it all happened already? Hmm … I can tell what the story was. Yes … maybe that is interesting …

Questions for reflection

- A colleague in the staffroom says, 'Eliciting takes too long. It's much faster just to tell students what they need to know, rather than wasting time guessing things they have no idea about.' Does she have a point? Would you argue back, and if so, how?
- Are there some things that you would typically never elicit (e.g. grammar rules)?

6 Questioning

My questions are pretty dull actually. I find out if students know things – or don't – but not much more. But the questions never seem to get us very far.

Aim

To use a variety of question types effectively in class.

Introduction

→ *Socratic questions* are discussed in Chapter 4 Unit 5. *Catalytic questions* are in Chapter 4 Unit 8. This unit considers other kinds of classroom questions.

Questions are central to classroom life. Used well, they are one of the main engines of moving forward. Used poorly, they puzzle and demotivate.

By becoming more aware of the range of question types and the different ways that they can be exploited, we can select and use them more powerfully in the classroom.

Technique: Distinguishing degrees of openness in questions

Questions can be classified by how much scope they leave for the learner to answer in different ways. If there is only one possible answer, the question is significantly more closed than a question that allows an individual opinion to be expressed.

1 Polar closed questions

These are questions that are likely to lead to one of just two possible one-word answers, typically 'yes' or 'no'. For example, 'Did Juma buy the car?' 'Is my spelling of this word correct?' They don't have to be yes / no questions; they could offer choices between options (e.g. 'Is this correct or incorrect?' 'Is the sentence true or false?' 'Was the car new or second-hand?').

2 Closed questions

These are questions about fixed facts. They are often asked using a *Wh*-word (e.g. *who, whom, when, why, where, what, how, whose, which*). They are closed because there is typically one correct answer or a very limited number of possible answers, for example, 'When did Amina leave the office?' 'What is Sasha going to buy in Moscow?'

3 Open questions

These are questions that do not have a single fixed answer but leave scope for the person replying to answer in a number of different ways, e.g. 'Why do you think people visit the UAE?' 'How can we be healthier?'

Both kinds of closed questions demand very limited language output from the student. All the same, they can be very useful to help check whether learners have understood things. Open questions tend to encourage longer answers; closed questions, shorter answers.

Technique: Distinguishing different purposes in questions

We can also classify questions by looking from a different angle: by looking at what we want to achieve with them.

1 Real questions

In everyday life, when we ask a question (e.g. 'Has she bought it?' 'Did you tell him?' 'What happened?'), we are likely to be interested in the message contained in the answer. What is being said is usually new for us and adds to our understanding. We do not ask primarily to find out whether the person knows the answer or not.

2 Check questions

Teachers in classrooms tend to ask a lot of questions that they already know the answers to (e.g. 'Is this a noun or a verb?' 'Why did the ship sink?' 'What homework do you have to do?'). When listening to the response, the teacher is not mainly hoping to learn a new answer, but to find out if the speaker knows the answer the teacher already knows, in order perhaps to discover if something has been well understood or if it needs further teaching. Questions like these are known as 'check questions', or 'display questions' or 'test questions'.

Teachers tend to use more check questions than real questions in class. From the student perspective, there is sometimes confusion as to what type of question was intended. Many classroom communication breakdowns arise from learners answering what they think is a genuine question only to find out it was really a test question, for example:

Teacher: Where did you go on holiday?
Student: (Gives a long answer describing his holidays.)
Teacher: OK. Listen. I went to Spain. Repeat.
Student: Oh. OK. I went to Spain.

(The teacher wanted to practise past verbs; the student wanted to tell everyone about his holiday.)

If this happens too often, it can lead to students trying to predict what the teacher wants them to say rather than answering a question honestly.

3 Concept questions

These are a specific kind of check question used to find out if students understand the meaning and use of a piece of grammar or vocabulary. They break down the complex meaning of the language item into simpler component concepts that can be checked one by one, using closed questions in simple language. For example, if a teacher wants to check understanding of the grammatical structure *too … to* in the sentence 'It's too

wet to play football', she can distinguish the separate components: 'It's very wet. We can't play football … because it's very wet.' This leads to the concept questions (with answers in brackets): 'Is it wet?' ('Yes.') 'Is it very wet?' ('Yes.') 'Can we play football?' ('No.') 'Why not?' ('It's very wet.')

Techniques: Pitfalls in question making

Sometimes students look at you completely blankly when you ask a question, perhaps because your language is too complex, because they don't know the answer or because they have misread the intention behind your question, thinking that a check or concept question is a real one (e.g. Teacher: 'In the sentence, "Spain has won the World Cup", do we know when?' Student: 'Yes!' Teacher: 'Is it important information?' Student: 'Yes!')

Here are two common causes for misunderstood questions:

1 **Embedded questions** (i.e. questions packed inside other questions) can be very hard for students to unpack, e.g. 'Have you got any idea what *horizon* means?' (= 'What does *horizon* mean?') 'Did you decide what the correct ending is?' (= 'What is the correct ending?').
2 **Rewording questions if not understood** When a student looks puzzled after you have asked a question, it might seem helpful to reword that question to give them a new chance to understand it. In fact, rewording can often cause new problems, especially if the new sentence is as complex as the first version. It may offer an additional comprehension problem to the student, doubling the difficulty rather than reducing it, e.g. 'What solutions did you think about?' 'What sort of ideas have you come up with?' Remember that the student is already trying to understand the original question, so it may be most helpful to simply repeat that – maybe slower – in order to give them a new chance to unpack it. Alternatively, make sure that the rewording is at a significantly lower level of complexity than the original sentence, e.g. 'What are your ideas?'

Techniques: Who can I ask?

You can ask questions to:

1 **The class as a whole, expecting a choral answer,** i.e. lots of people speaking simultaneously.
2 **The class as a whole, expecting volunteers to offer answers,** e.g. by hands up.
3 **Specific nominated individuals,** e.g. indicated by name or by gesture.
4 **Location-restricted students,** perhaps those in a small section of the room that you indicate or call on, e.g. 'I'd like someone in this part of the room to answer'.
5 **Category-restricted students,** e.g. 'Boys only' or 'Only those who haven't answered a question so far' or 'Only students whose name begins with "s" can answer'.
6 **Random students,** e.g. you pick names one by one out of a bag for each question.
7 **Sequences of students,** e.g. each question is answered by the next person sitting round the room.

Technique: Nominate *after* the question, not before

If you say a name first and then a question (e.g. 'Marcel , What is the correct ending?'), all the other students can switch off because you have said someone else's name, and they know that they won't have to answer it.

If you say a question first, and then leave a longish thinking space, and then say a name, e.g. 'What is the correct ending?' … (pause) … 'Marcel?', you make the whole class think about the question in case you are going to ask them.

Techniques: Look for learning, not for correct answers

Read the short lesson sequence below. The teacher is checking understanding of a coursebook text that the class has just read. Decide if you think that the teacher felt happy at the end of it.

Teacher:	So, why did the sales team go to Delhi? Tom?
Student 1 (Tom):	They wanted to find new designs they could sell in England.
Teacher:	Very good. And what happened when they got there? Shari?
Student 2 (Shari):	Their hotel was booked up and they had nowhere to stay.
Teacher:	Excellent. So what did they do? Anyone? Yolanda?
Student 3 (Yolanda):	They slept in the street!
Teacher:	Brilliant. Well done, everyone.

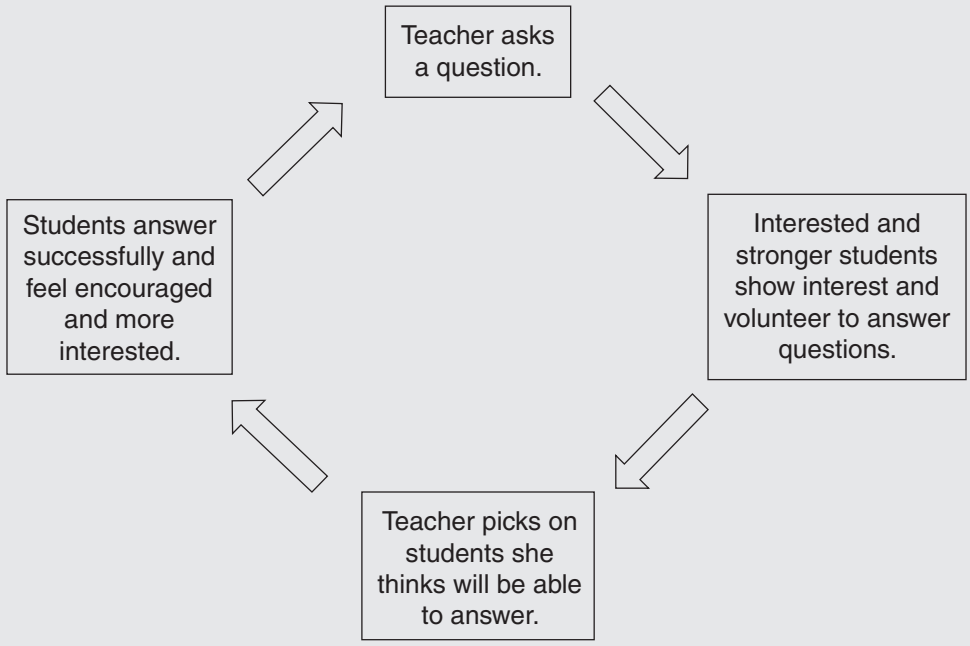
The teacher asks questions. Students answer. The teacher might feel happy that she has found out that some students can give the correct answers. This helps her to feel that she is a good teacher and that her students are making progress.

And certainly, there is much that is recognisably good here, even in a short printed extract:

- The questions are clearly worded.
- Nominations are made rather than just 'first to call out' or 'hands up'.
- The nominations come after the questions, allowing all the class a little thinking time.
- A range of different students are asked.
- There's some evidence that at least some of the students have understood some of the text.

This sequence of exchanges is very typical of a lot of classroom work. But the fact that it is typical does not mean that it is as useful as it could be. There are some significant problems here, and they are ones that even very experienced teachers don't always notice.

The teacher is on a chase for right answers. He or she is collecting right answer after right answer. Teachers tend to ask more questions to those students who seem interested and active, and this makes those students seem more interested and active, which means that they get asked more questions. Teachers like to ask them because they get answers, and getting answers seems to move the lesson forward faster, and it feels like things are being achieved and their teaching has been successful.



However, the fact that someone gives a right answer means that they have already found the right answer. That is where the learning has already happened, but not where the learning is still going on. The student who 'got it' is already OK, and the right answer is the surface evidence of that. But at this point of the lesson, the learning is now going on elsewhere. It is happening with the students who didn't get the answers. It's these ones that need our attention.

Collecting right answers is not enough. Our real job is to help those who don't have the right answer to feel their way towards it. In the case of the lesson sample above, this may mean that we need to send the students back into the text again, get them to reread, guide them to focus on specific words, to think out sections of meaning and so on.

Of course, it's much quicker to chase the right answers. Stopping to find out if others can answer, and working with them if they can't, will take longer, possibly much longer. In our new syllabus-obsessed schools with goals of so many units to cover in a month, teachers feel that they are often more comfortable with the illusion of learning (hearing some students giving correct answers in the room) than in the dirtier reality of finding out that quite a number of students haven't understood something.

Without discouraging the keen students, it's important to find ways of breaking out of this circle:

1 Nominate individual students to answer questions, making sure that you vary who you ask, and include all levels of students.
2 Find out if more than one student has an answer, e.g. ask students to compare answers in pairs before they say them to the whole class.

3 Use techniques that help you not to go at the pace of the fastest, strongest students, such as not hearing the stronger students (see Chapter 5 Unit 5).
4 Make sure that the stronger students remain engaged during slower moments when working with weaker students, for example, get them involved in giving help or explanations or preparing something for the next stage of the lesson. (See Chapter 3 Unit 3.)

Questions for reflection

- How can you improve your own use of questions in class? Is it more to do with the questions you ask, who you ask them to or how you deal with responses?

7 Checking learning and understanding

I keep asking 'Do you understand?' but I'm never sure if the answers they give me mean anything at all.

Aim

To find out if learners have really understood and learnt something or not.

Introduction

An explanation or input of any kind that someone has not understood is patently useless. After any explanation, you need feedback of some kind to assure you that the message has been adequately conveyed and taken in. This feedback could be achieved in a number of ways, some more approximate, some more intuitive, some more precise.

Unfortunately, the classic teacher question, 'Do you understand?' is not hugely revealing, for the simple reason that students can say 'yes' when they don't understand, perhaps because of wanting to avoid looking stupid, because they *think* they understand, or for many other reasons.

We need more useful and more revealing ways of checking learning.

Techniques: Finding out if they 'got it'

1 **Notice reactions** e.g. facial expressions that look positive or faces looking down at desks avoiding eye contact.
2 **Monitor close up** If you ask students to take notes, wander round and have a look at what they write. If you ask students to do a task (e.g. 'Tick off each subject as I mention it'), look at what they are doing while the task is still going on (instead of waiting for the end).
3 **Ask check questions and concept questions** See Chapter 4 Unit 6.
4 **Set listening tasks before each chunk of explanation** It's very hard to judge understanding if students are 'just' listening. If you set a specific task, this not only helps to focus their listening, but also gives you a chance to see how well they are coping with understanding. For example, say, 'I'm going to tell you some different ideas for negotiating in business. Listen and note down three ideas that can help you to succeed in negotiation and one mistake you mustn't make.' At the end, you could let pairs compare their answers and then check in the whole class.
5 **Get students to summarise what has just been said** e.g. 'So … how is the causative formed?' or 'So what are the most important things you need to think about when writing a formal letter?'

10 Giving encouragement, feedback and praise

My trainer encouraged me to praise students all the time, and I still do. At first, I loved their excitement when I praised them, and I thought it really helped them to feel good, but recently I've started having a few doubts about whether it is really helping or not.

Aim

To encourage students in appropriate ways and to avoid praising when it may be unhelpful.

Introduction

Language teachers often need to give feedback to students in class. Much of this is information about language and errors. (See Chapter 4 Unit 4.)

But teachers also need to give feedback on more personal things, such as achievement, behaviour, motivation, participation, attitude, engagement and so on. One key area is how we help our learners to feel encouraged and motivated, and at the heart of this issue is the surprisingly tricky question of praise.

In education, the term *praise* refers to the ways that a teacher approves, acclaims and extols a student for what they have done, typically for completing tasks successfully and to a high standard. It conveys to a student that you are pleased with them and their work.

But is praise a good thing or not? It is a much-argued topic in education, and there are strong arguments on both sides:

1 The argument for praise

For many teachers, it seems obvious and natural that praise must be beneficial. Praise is seen as encouraging and motivating. They believe that praised students will blossom and grow in the praise: When students feel noticed and encouraged, they try harder and earn more praise, so their achievement increases. Some children may have received very little praise or encouragement at home, so receiving it at school can have a substantial positive impact on them. In a classroom that is adopting a 100% positive approach to learners (see Chapter 6 Unit 1), there is a great deal of praise flying around, and this can have a very powerful role in creating the overall positive environment of a class.

2 The argument against praise

It could be argued that praising a student takes away their own ability to reflect on and evaluate their own achievements:

- It trains them to rely on other people's judgements and to devalue their own self-assessment.
- Students start to do things not because they see the purpose or are motivated to do them, but purely to receive the teacher's praise at the end. You risk creating a classroom of praise junkies who depend on the teacher to acknowledge and glorify what they do.
- Praising may be part of what prevents students becoming more autonomous. If at some point you start to praise less because you want to encourage them to become more independent, there is a definite risk that the learners will lose motivation completely and become disengaged – because all the earlier reasons for doing work have evaporated.
- Another problem may be that praise is often reserved for those who get correct answers or complete and achieve specific tasks, which means that some stronger students are likely to get a much higher dose of praise than others. Resentment might grow amongst others in class, and unhealthy rivalries grow. Competitive jockeying for the teacher's praise is possible, with stronger students trying to outdo each other in order to get the positive boost from the teacher.
- And if the teacher tries to balance praise to everyone, does that undermine the whole point of it? If students in the class hear the teacher saying, 'Well done! You wrote a fantastic paragraph' to everyone, do they believe her? Is the praise devalued? Is it possible that they will learn to distrust teacher assessments? Might excessive praise give the impression that you expect learning a language to be very difficult or impossible?

The decision on whether to praise or not must be up to you. It may be affected by a number of factors, such as the age of your students, their level, their current self-image and the experience they get in other classrooms. If you teach five-year olds, for example, the case for praise may be very different than that for a teacher working with young adults.

Technique: Giving supportive feedback

One alternative strategy to praising is to give supportive feedback on work. That may initially sound like the same thing, but we can draw a few distinctions.

Praise	Supportive feedback
Evaluates the person and the work.	Evaluates the work.
Tends to be generalised. Doesn't exemplify.	Tends to be specific. Uses concrete examples.
Comments are stated as if they are some objective, universal truth, e.g. 'That is really good.'	Comments are often owned by the comment maker using 'I', e.g. 'I really like the way you ended the story.'
Notices tasks completed well. Doesn't typically notice engagement and effort.	Notices work at all stages of a task. Acknowledges engagement and effort.
Compares a student's work with others in the class. Draws attention to achievement of the best class members.	Compares a student's work with their own previous work. Draws attention to achievement and progress for that individual student.
Doesn't give information about how to improve.	Gives useful information about how to improve.
Encourages trust in the teacher's assessment.	Encourages self-assessment.

Praise	Supportive feedback
Mostly reserved for the best, fastest, cleverest, etc.	Available for all students of all abilities.
Becomes a bit meaningless over time, as there is nowhere else to go after 'fantastic'.	Keeps its value over time as it addresses new issues.
Always good news.	Can be bad news given in a supportive way, as well as good news.
May come across as a habitual or token comment.	Sounds as if it springs from a genuine positive reaction.
May present a simplification or glossier version of the truth.	Tells the truth.

These are not cast-iron divisions. Any intervention may have a number of elements from both columns, but here are some examples that might help clarify the differences:

Praise:

- You're brilliant.
- You're great.
- You're so clever. The answers are fantastic.
- What a good girl!

Supportive feedback:

- I really enjoyed reading this story; the part about swimming made me laugh out loud.
- This exercise has 10 correct answers out of 10; how do you feel about that?
- You answered all the questions with well-written sentences. There were only three small grammar mistakes.
- I saw you working really hard to find the answers, but I'm afraid these four are wrong. What help can I give you to make the task clearer?

This is not to suggest that there is no place for 'good' or 'excellent' or 'amazing' or 'fantastic' in a teacher's feedback: simply that it's worth weighing up whether a diet that is mainly praise, rather than feedback, is as beneficial and useful in the long run as it might appear in the short term.

Techniques: Training students to notice what they have done well

An effective way to start weaning students off dependency on teacher praise is to help them become more able to look at, reflect on and assess their own work. This is a useful life skill, quite apart from any immediate benefits in your classroom.

You can introduce this gradually. Initially, start restraining your own praise a little. Before you give it, ask students questions that get them thinking about how they feel about their work: 'Are you pleased with that result?' 'Did you expect to get so many correct answers?' 'Is that an improvement over what you did last time?' 'How do you feel about your mark?'

Later, you can start using some more sophisticated ways to push them a little deeper into self-evaluation.

1 Reflective questionnaires

Devise a form that students can fill in after some lessons. It can direct students to thinking about what they have learnt and achieved. Word questions to help them notice the positive achievements and progress, as well as setting goals for future weeks. Sample questions: 'What are the most useful new things you have learnt this fortnight?' 'What have you got better at doing?' 'What was your greatest English achievement in the last two weeks?'

2 Learning diaries

Set aside a little time for students to write a learning diary or blog entry at the end of each day or week, summarising what they have achieved.

3 Can-do statements

It's a feature of many education systems (exam focussed, as they are) that they tend to draw attention to what students can't do rather than what they can do. As a result, it's not surprising that students tend to focus on what they got wrong or did poorly, rather than what they got right or did well. Try using can-do statements for students to self-assess against. These are simple descriptions of actions (real-world or language-study related) that require the use of English (e.g. 'I can give directions from the school to the station' 'I can name 10 different fruits' 'I can use the phone to invite a friend to my house' 'I can ask *Have you ever …* questions about people's experiences').

Questions for reflection

- How much do you use praise? Can you answer with certainty, or is it one of those automatic-pilot areas where you are unsure of exactly how much you do it?
- How could you research your use of praise and supportive feedback in class?
- How did you respond to praise when you were a school child? How much did you learn to evaluate yourself?