

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:

Ask questions to find out what the learners already know about a subject
–and to remind them about what they know.

Ask questions to help the learners focus on new things, leading the learner
forward one step at a time, with each new question building on what the
previous answer revealed.

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?

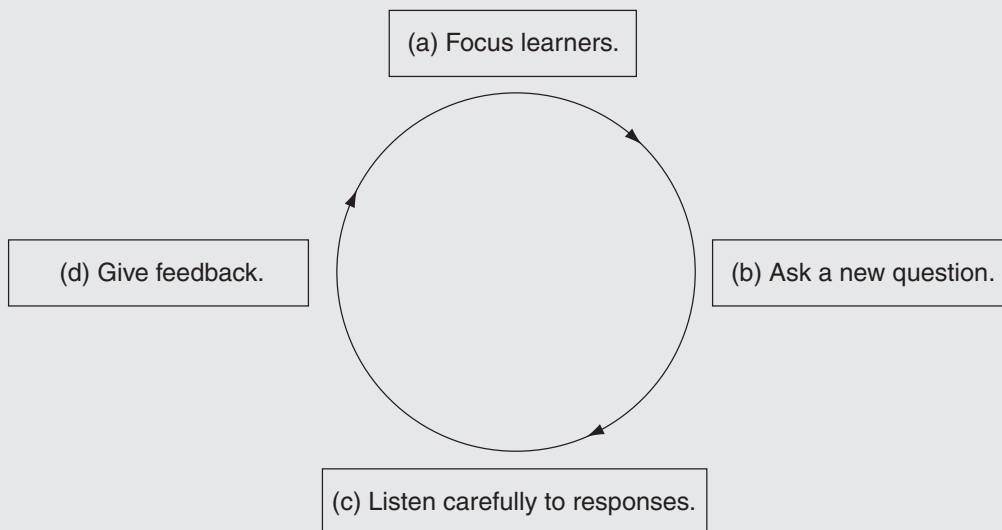
6 The question

- 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.

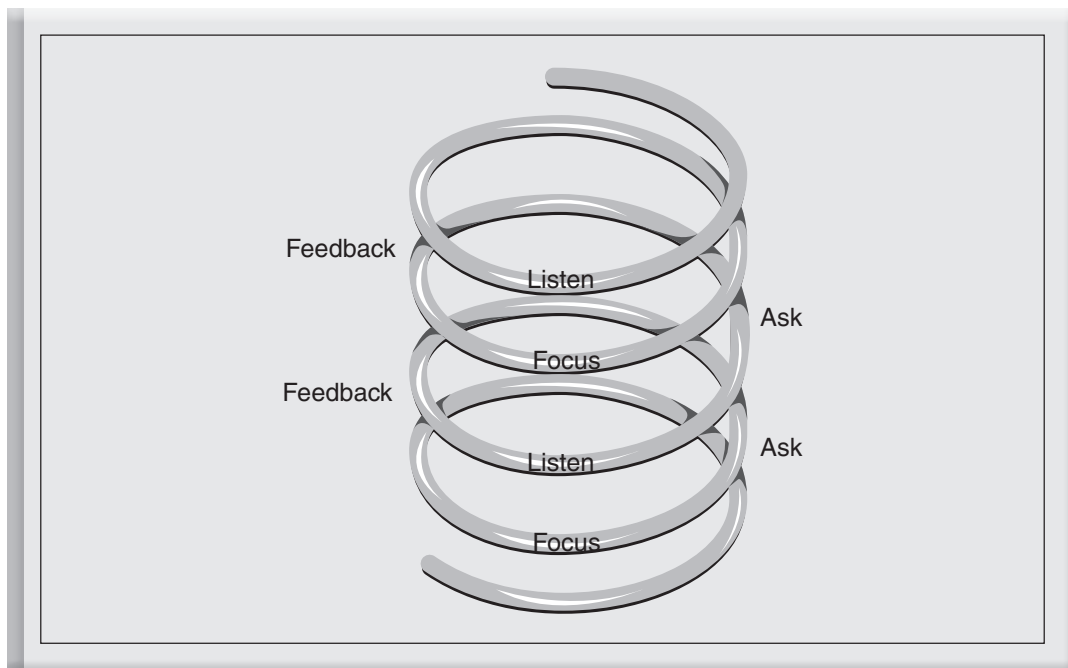
Each question and answer can lead to a further question and answer, taking the exploration of a subject deeper and deeper. Sequences of questions like this are central to the teaching approach known as *guided discovery*.



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)?