

## Teacher Questions in an EFL College Context at Aden University: An Investigation

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**Abstract:** *Asking effective questions in the class improves students' critical thinking skills. The following research used class observations and audio recording of five college instructors who teach at an undergraduate level at the college of Education (Aden) at the University of Aden to find out the types of questions most dominant in this context. It was found that the majority of the questions asked by teachers were of the knowledge and comprehension check types (lower-order thinking questions). A few teachers asked analytical questions; however, questions that required students to synthesize and evaluate information seemed to be absent in this context (higher-order thinking questions). In light of these findings, the following research recommends that for teachers to fully and appropriately utilize effective questioning in their teaching contexts, a workshop on effective questioning strategies needs to be conducted at the English department so as to raise instructors' awareness of using effective questioning.*

**Key Term:** *critical thinking, questioning, Aden University*

### Introduction

Research studies have indicated that the questions teachers ask in the classroom can play an important role in developing students' critical thinking skill and can help them make insightful judgements (see Richards and Lockhard, 2007). Therefore, in the present time, critical thinking continues to be emphasized in education, particularly in language teaching (Hughes, 2014). Through critical thinking, it is claimed, students engage more actively with materials and in the target language. Critical thinking also encourages deeper processing of the language and shows respect for students as independent thinkers (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

However, studies, such as that conducted by Shen and Yodkhumlue (2012) in a college EFL reading class, have shown that teachers asked more lower-cognitive questions (79.2%) than higher ones (20.8%). One of the reasons, according to Elder and Paul (1998), perhaps is that teachers tend not to appreciate the role of questions in teaching content. The authors emphasizing the importance of question asking in the classroom state that "Thinking is driven not by answers but by questions. Had no questions been asked by those who laid the foundation for a field—for example, physics or biology—the field would never have been developed in the first place" (p. 297). In light of this, it is not surprising that fostering students' critical thinking has become an essential 21 century goal in many educational contexts; nevertheless, in the EFL context critical thinking is still a new area.

Considering the role that teachers play in promoting this skill in their classrooms, hence, it becomes significant that prospective student-teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs are exposed to effective questioning strategies for two reasons: first, they can develop

their own critical thinking; second, they can later utilize effective questioning techniques, themselves, in their own classrooms to develop their students' critical thinking.

Therefore, the following research attempts to highlight the types of questions asked by five instructors in the teacher preparation program at the College of Education, Department of English (Aden). Findings from this investigation will benefit the instructors and students as well as the teacher preparation program at the English department.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Cotton (n.d) states, "Research indicates that questioning is second only to lecturing in popularity as a teaching method and that classroom teachers spend anywhere from thirty-five to fifty percent of their instructional time conducting questioning sessions" (para. 2). In this sense, questioning is one of the important techniques used by teachers and the common reasons for asking questions as Richards and Lockhard (2007) point out are:

- They stimulate and maintain students' interest.
- They encourage students to think and focus on the content of the lesson.
- They enable a teacher to clarify what a student has said.
- They enable a teacher to elicit particular structures or vocabulary items.
- They enable teachers to check students' understanding.
- They encourage student participation in a lesson. (p. 185)

By posing questions, teachers depend less on giving long explanations which may be difficult for students to comprehend. However, just asking question is not sufficient. Teachers need to think about the types of questions they will ask and how they will ask them beforehand. In addition, students need to be given some thinking time and not be expected to answer the questions immediately (ESOL).

Richards and Lockhard (2007) classified the types of questions into three categories: (a) procedural questions that focus on classroom procedures and routines; (b) convergent questions that mostly focus on recalling information and elicit short answers from students; such questions do not engage students in any kind of high-level of thinking, and (c) divergent questions which unlike convergent questions, require students to provide their own answers and engage them in high-level of thinking. Findings from research conducted on teachers' questioning, according to Richards and Lockhard, has shown that teachers ask more convergent than divergent questions.

Furthermore, Spada and Lightwood (2013) make a distinction between two types of questions: display and referential questions. The former types of questions are those to which the teachers already know the answer and the latter types are those to which teachers may not know the answer. A study conducted by Shomossi (2004) in which the researcher observed five reading comprehension classes over a two-month period in Tehran universities showed that display questions were asked more frequently than referential questions. Similarly, David (2007) observing 20 teachers and 400 students from six randomly selected secondary schools in Oyo

and Osun State (Nigeria) for a period of six weeks (one week per school) found that teachers used more display questions (85%) than referential questions (15%). Along the same lines, Yang's (2010) investigation of three nonnative preservice English teachers also indicated that the teachers used more yes/no questions, and closed and display questions whereas open and referential questions were seldom or never asked. Similar results were found in the study conducted by Farahian and Rezaee (2012).

Furthermore, questions asked by teachers have been classified as those that foster low-level thinking and those that foster high-level of thinking. This distinction was proposed by Benjamin Bloom's (1956, cited in Himmele&Himmele, 2009) taxonomy of educational objectives, which was created more than 50 years ago, and explains in a simple way the contrast between low-level and high-level thinking. The lower-level of thinking include:

- Knowledge which is the lowest order of thinking, requires students to remember or recall specific information.
- Comprehension that occurs when students demonstrate their limited understanding of what was taught. This does not involve their ability to show their understanding of new concepts and other concepts learned.
- Application is when students apply what they have been instructed by their teacher. For example, the teacher may give students a grammar rule and ask them to apply it in a sentence.

Lower-order thinking simply put, requires students to recall (basic) information such as when teachers ask students: what is the past tense of the verb take? (Ur, 2012).

On the other hand, at the higher order of thinking students move from shallow understanding to deeper understanding—at this level students “connect new learning to prior learning, previous experiences, and the world beyond the classroom” (Himmele&Himmele, 2009, p. 83) and this level includes:

- Analysis which requires students to examine different components of what's being asked and move beyond the definition of the concept.
- Synthesis which requires students to take what they have learned and create something that is new to them.
- Evaluation is not simply providing an opinion but basing that opinion on learned information.

Higher-order thinking requires students some deeper processing of information. For example, an instructor may ask “What are some differences between the opinions expressed in the two texts we have read?” Higher-order thinking questions promote critical and creative thinking and “arguable lead to more challenging, interesting and richer language-learning procedures (Ur, 2012, p. 230).

However, a qualitative study conducted by Diaz, Whitacre, Esquierdo, Ruiz-Escalante (2013) that explored the types of questions asked by pre-service instructors and their reflections in South Texas during a math and a language arts lesson revealed that whether in the language arts or the

math lessons, the types of questions that teachers frequently asked were lower order thinking questions. In the language arts class, it was found that 18% of the total questions were of the higher-order (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation); while 82% of the total questions were of the lower level types (knowledge, comprehension, and application). As for the math lesson, only 4% of the total questions were higher order thinking questions and 96% of the total questions were of the lower order types.

Research findings in different contexts have shown that teachers tend to ask more lower-level questions than higher-level questions. The following research is an attempt in this direction in a Yemeni/Adeni higher education teacher preparation program and it attempts to highlight the types of questions that five college instructors utilize in their classrooms in the English language teacher preparation program.

### Research Question

Which types of questions (lower-level thinking) or (high-level thinking) were the ones that were most frequently asked by EFL instructors teaching in the college context at the College of Education - Aden?

## METHOD

### Context of the Study and Participants

The participants in this study were five instructors who teach the following specialization courses in the third and fourth years at the College of Education-Aden, University of Aden:

- General Linguistics
- English Language Teaching Methodology
- Small Scale Research Project
- Second Language Learning
- Materials Production

The table below provides background information of the instructors who took part in this study. For the data reported in this article pseudonyms have been given to all participants.

Table 1: Instructors Information

Instructor	Course	Highest Degree Received
KO	General Linguistics	MA (thesis stage)
RA	English Language Teaching Methodology	MA (thesis stage)
MA	Small-Scale Research	MA
SH	Second Language Learning	MA (thesis stage)
EM	Material Production	MA

### Significance of the Study

The best place to foster effective pedagogical practices is in teacher preparation programs. So, when future teachers of English are exposed to higher levels of questioning strategies, they may be more likely to use them in their own teaching. The opposite is also true. When student teachers are not exposed to challenging and thought provoking questioning, they may be less likely to implement them in their own teaching. Hence, there is a need to examine this particular context and find out to what extent instructors teaching in this context foster higher level thinking in their student teachers.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Both classroom observation as well as audio taping of the first hour of the class were used as the main instruments to collect data related to the instructors questioning strategies. About 300 minutes (5 hours) data was collected from the 5 courses.

In order to avoid influencing the instructors, prior to the observations, the instructors were told that the observation was merely for learning about the mode of instruction they followed during the courses rather than evaluating specific aspects of their teaching: that is types of questions they used in their teaching. During the observation, notes were taken as well as the questions were written down and later the audio-recorded lessons were transcribed to fill in any missing data. The observations were divided between the two researchers; however, to ensure reliability of question categorization, both researchers read through the transcripts and categorized the questions independently and later compared their results. As for those questions which they did not achieve agreement on, both researchers discussed and then modified decisions.

The questions were classified using the six categories of Bloom's taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as this distinction still seems to be an influential reference in classrooms.

Lower-level questions include:

- Knowledge which is the lowest order of thinking, requires students to remember or recall specific information.
- Comprehension that occurs when students demonstrate their limited understanding of what was taught. This does not involve their ability to show their understanding of new concepts and other concepts learned.
- Application is when students apply what they have been instructed by their teacher. For example, the teacher may give students a grammar rule and ask them to apply it in a sentence.

High-level questions include:

- Analysis which requires students to examine different components of what's being asked and move beyond the definition of the concept.
- Synthesis which requires students to take what they have learned and create something that is new to them.
- Evaluation is not simply providing an opinion but basing that opinion on learned information.

## Results and Discussion

### Instructor KO

The total number of questions asked during the first hour were 28. A few of the questions asked were of the analytical type, that is they were meant to encourage students to move beyond the obvious definition of the concepts. For example,

- *What if we want to give it another term?*
- *What if we have a term like reopen?*

On the other hand, most of the questions asked by the instructor fall into the knowledge and comprehensive types of question based on their reading for the class. Some sample questions asked by the instructor were:

- *What is morphology?*
- *Morpheme can express what? Morpheme talk about what?*
- *This unit is called something?*
- *Which is the minimum unit?*
- *What are the types of morphemes?*
- *What do I mean 'adds grammatical aspect'?*

### Instructor RA

The total number of questions asked by the instructor was 48 of which the following three may be considered as analytical questions. When asking the analytical types of questions, the instructor move beyond the definition of the concepts being discussed and encouraged the students to compare and contrast and analyze the information. The following were examples of such questions:

- *Do you think that error correction is important? Why or why not?*
- *Do you agree with Ahmed? Should they avoid mistakes they studied or didn't study?*
- *If the student makes the mistake again and again what happens to his mind?*

The rest of the questions asked during the class can be categorized as knowledge and comprehension check questions based on their reading. The following are a few examples:

- *How have teachers corrected you?*
- *Why some teachers did not interrupt some teachers while doing presentations?*
- *What are other reasons?*
- *When should teachers correct students?*
- *What do we mean by big mistake?*
- *What kinds of mistakes can be ignored?*

### Instructor MA

The total number of questions asked by instructor MA was 41. Two of the questions asked by the instructor can be considered as analytical:

- *Why is this similar to the paraphrase?*
- *Why do you say it is the best?*

However, the majority of the questions asked during the 60 minutes, were either knowledge or comprehension check. For instance:

- *What is the meaning of paraphrasing?*
- *What is the meaning of restating?*
- *How can you change the word silent?*
- *How can you change the word quiet?*
- *How can you change the word little?*
- *What are the basic steps of summarizing?*

#### Instructor SH

The number of questions asked by instructor SH was 51. A small number of questions may be considered as analytical. For example,

- *What do you say this is the best example?*
- *Can you give me an example?*

The rest of the questions were targeted toward checking students' knowledge or comprehension of the topic discussed. Here are a few examples:

- *When do children start to distinguish?*
- *How does a child get the grammar?*
- *What is the meaning of telegraphic?*
- *Why is interaction important?*
- *Can a baby get the language from the TV?*
- *What is the developmental sequence?*

#### Instructor EM

The number of questions asked by instructor EM during the 60 minutes was 55. A few of the questions asked aimed at helping analyze the information. For example, the instructor asked students to provide some examples to support their answers. Also, the instructor asked for more details when a student answered and asked students to evaluate the weakness of a particular method or compare it with another method of teaching.

Nevertheless, like the other instructors, most of the questions were either comprehension or knowledge questions. The following are some examples of the questions asked:

- *What is the structure of the sentence?*
- *How does grammar work?*
- *How does grammar work at the sentence level?*
- *How to apply this rule?*
- *What do we call this activity?*
- *Usage means what?*

Results obtained from this study are in agreement with other similar studies, that is, teachers tend to ask more lower-level thinking questions than higher-level questions. Given the benefits that asking effective higher-level thinking questions in the classrooms provides and their importance in developing future generation of teachers' critical thinking skills, however, it becomes significant that educators should aim toward promoting learners' thinking. In other words, it is



not adequate to just teach students mainstream subject-matter; students need to be encouraged to think (David 2007).

### Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper investigated the type of questions a group of EFL teachers at the College of Education (University of Aden) asked during a 60 minutes period when teaching their course. Findings of this research showed that, although teachers did ask higher-level type of questions, most of the questions, however, that they asked fall under the category of lower-level thinking questions, mainly of the knowledge and comprehension types. Hence, given the importance of asking high-level questions for the benefits they offer in building future generations of student-teachers' critical thinking skills, there is a need to enhance college instructors' question asking strategies. Therefore, during the in-service training workshops, an input session that raises instructors' awareness of asking effective questions can produce beneficial outcomes in the long term.

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