

Asking questions to facilitate communication

To encourage student participation, elicit information – find out what students know, rather than telling them what you know.

Motivate students to speak by initiating a real exchange – real questions invite unpredictable answers. There needs to be a reason for sharing the information - an information gap.

Whenever possible, avoid asking questions to which you know the answer.

For example, if you want to talk about “groceries”, try not to ask “Laura, what does the word groceries mean?” Laura will be trying to guess the “right” answer in your head.

Instead ask “Laura, what groceries do you buy every week?” Laura can then think about the groceries she buys and answer anything she wants. If she says tortillas, tofu and rice... you’ve got the start of a conversation!

Have the flexibility to take the answers you get and use them to move the conversation forward.

You don’t need to be the sole source of knowledge and information. Ask questions that encourage students to think and share what they know. This has the effect of creating greater interest in the material, and also of increasing students’ communicative abilities.

When you ask a closed-ended question, you get a limited predictable response. Consider the response to “Can you name the days of the week?” compared to “What’s your favourite day of the week? Why?”

Things to be aware of when eliciting include:

Clarity of questions - Do I make myself clear? Do I re-word if necessary?

Paraphrasing - Do I act as an “interpreter” to keep the lines of communication open among students? Do I do this tactfully?

Wait time - Do I allow 3-4 seconds for a response? Do I “jump in” too soon? Do I switch to another participant too soon? Do I answer my own questions?

Deciding who to elicit from - Do I use a mix of whole group and individual questions? Do I call on people by name? Do I favour the responsive participant over the less responsive ones?

Selecting responses - How do I choose which responses I’m going to use? What do I do with the rest?

Asking appropriate questions - Do my questions lead the participants in the right direction? Do I set them up for success or confusion?

Facilitator’s response - Do I act with equal respect and enthusiasm to each response? Do I encourage risk-taking? Do I get frustrated when participants don’t give me the answers I want? Do I blame the participants for not “getting it”?

Adapted from: “What Is Elicitation and How Does It Work?”

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