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Critical Thinking – Adam

By

[Adam Simpson](#)

– April 15, 2013 **Posted in:** [Critical Thinking](#)



The Role of Questions in Teaching Thinking and Learning

by Adam Simpson

The thing I hate most about my job is the word ‘coverage’. Assessors are obsessed with coverage. If material has been covered, it can be tested. If it can be tested, it will be tested and assessors rest easy in the knowledge that they have done their job well. This naturally leads to an over emphasis on coverage at the expense of engaged thinking, based on the assumption that ‘answers’ can be taught separately from ‘questions’.

Assessors are not entirely to blame for this state of affairs. Indeed, the position that formal assessment has been allowed to take in language instruction is merely a symptom of what we are presented with in published course materials. Consider this: every declarative statement in the course books we use is an answer to a question. The teaching world in which we live frequently sees this relationship between the statement and its accompanying question. One seemingly cannot exist without the other. This is a crying shame, as it does nothing to promote thinking of any kind, never mind critical thinking.

Questions are the driving force behind critical thought

Thinking of any kind isn’t driven by answers, but rather by questions. When we learn, it is because we ask questions that stimulate thought. The trap that published course books fall into – and the trap which we follow into – is that we ask questions only to get thought-stopping answers and not to generate further questions. So, how exactly are we going wrong?

The ‘Endless Content’ monster

We feed learners with endless content and this is a big problem. Content tends to lead to questions with one answer, which in turn leads to a dead end in terms of critical thinking. One analogy I like for this phenomenon is that we are getting learners to step on the brakes of a car that is already parked. Rather than more and more content being the

driving force in the classroom, what learners really need are questions that ignite their intellectual engines: they need to create questions from the questions we ask. Thinking need to go somewhere, so the questions we ask learners determine where their thinking goes. There are many types of question that stimulate critical thought:

1. Questions of purpose

These force us to define our task. Why are reading this text?

2. Questions of information

These require that we look at our sources of information as well as at the quality of our information. Who wrote this text, and why?

3. Deep questions

These drive thought underneath the surface of things; they force people to deal with complexity. What is the philosophical nature of the material we are reading or listening to?

4. Questions of interpretation

These make us examine how we are organizing or giving meaning to information. Why was the text presented in this way? What points did we place most importance on while reading?

5. Questions of assumption

These require that examine what we are taking for granted. Did the material give us new insight or challenge our accepted perceptions?

6. Questions of implication

Such questions make us follow where our thinking is going. What thoughts did this listening stimulate?

7. Questions of relevance

These force us to discriminate what does and what does not have bearing on a question. Does this reading add anything to what we know/need to know?

8. Questions of point of view

These require that we examine our perspective and to consider others' points of view. Does this text contradict my thoughts? Does it offer new insight into the subject?

9. Questions of accuracy

These force us to evaluate and test for truth and correctness. Can/Should I take what is said in this listening at face value?

10. Questions of consistency

Such questions force us to examine our thinking for contradictions. Does everything here add up? Have I even considered the consistency of the information presented?

11. Questions of logic

These make us consider how we are putting our thoughts together, to make sure that everything adds up and makes sense within our logic system.

Dead minds come from dead questions

The superficial questions we constantly see in published teaching materials result in superficial understanding. Most students typically have no questions: their minds are silent. Any questions they do have are often superficial to say the least. Don't blame them for this; it is a natural symptom of how they have been taught to learn. Lack of questioning shows us that they are not thinking through the content they are apparently 'learning'. Indeed, they are not really even learning the content we think they are learning.

Fortunately, we can fix this: thinking begins when questions are formed by both teachers and students. My advice would be to approach coursebook material with your learners and see what questions from the eleven types mentioned above you – together – come up with.

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About Adam Simpson

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Scott Thornbury

Posted April 15, 2013 at 9:15 PM

“Rather than more and more content being the driving force in the classroom, what learners really need are questions that ignite their intellectual engines: they need to create questions from the questions we ask.”

This is so well expressed I think it applies – not just to language education – but to ALL education.

○

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adamfromteachthemenglish

Posted May 3, 2013 at 4:29 PM

Thanks, Scott.

My teaching has improved so much since I stopped viewing the covering of materials as being what controlled my teaching. Let's use less and get more from it. I'd agree that this applies to teaching and learning beyond the language classroom.

2. [Reply](#)



catherine shaw

Posted April 16, 2013 at 11:32 AM

I like your comment "dead minds come from dead questions", it's so true. We as educators need to ask questions that promote creativity, critical thinking and evaluation. Not just the remember and recall kind.

o [Reply](#)



adamfromteachthemenglish

Posted May 3, 2013 at 5:08 PM

Thanks, Catherine. I can't even bring myself to think about the number of inane YES/NO questions I've asked in response to a coursebook text over the years. If readers can take anything away from my post, I'd hope that it would be the fact that it is perfectly OK – indeed, desirable – to ignore the set questions in a course book and replace them with your own.

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