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Puzzle stories and other ways of asking questions.
(from the seventh grade on)

Notes for the teacher

Objectives

For students to get practice in asking questions.

The topic

1. Puzzle stories

Puzzle stories are "thinking games" that get students to think about what they have just listened to or read. Teachers present a puzzling situation or a story-ending and instruct their students to ask a series of yes/no questions in order to find the solution, i.e. the events that led up to the situation. The usual question & answer exchange, initiated by the teacher, is reversed.

Suggested treatment

Tell the story (textsheets) or describe the situation, explaining any vocabulary items that are new to the students as you go. Tell the story once more (without any explanations) before getting them to ask their yes/no questions. At various points the teacher will recapitulate what the students have found out so far, or he will ask a student to do this. Thus, he can prevent students from asking questions that have already been answered either explicitly or implicitly, and can accelerate the discovery process. If necessary, the teacher can also give cues from time to time to get the class on the right track.

Variant:

Mario Rinvolucri makes the following suggestions (in the April 1991 issue of the *English Language Teaching Forum*) to enhance the potential for cooperative learning within the context of the puzzle story:

1. Allow each student to ask only one question. If a student wants to ask more questions, that student can write the question on a piece of paper and hand it to another student who has not asked a question yet to ask on his behalf.
2. Allow the questions to develop naturally. If the solution is not found and the students are running out of questions, give them a useful clue and ask them to write down additional questions individually. Writing something down takes time, and this is valuable thinking time. The students have 2 minutes to do this while the teacher monitors their work. At this point, students who have not asked any questions are called on to ask one of the questions which has been written down.

2. Ask your teacher

Instead of presenting students with unusual, puzzling or abstract situations we can use “normal” everyday situations and make our students curious about them. We learned that such situations can generate as many questions as real puzzle stories.

Here are three situations that we tried out, with lots of questions being asked by the students: “She was sitting at her desk. ‘This is a really annoying,’ she said to herself.”

(She is a teacher and was marking 34 English tests from her grade seven. The tests were on the use of gerunds. After marking the fifteenth test the teacher felt really tired. Test No. 16 was from a boy whom she expected to do well on the test. But it was a really poor test. Obviously the boy had not worked hard at all. So she was annoyed.)

“‘You were great,’ he said. ‘But next time you must be even better.’”

(A football coach is talking to his team after they won a match in the world championship, let’s say the semi-finals. That means, there is another match ahead of them. In order to win that match, they must be even better, because the opposing team is a really good side.)

“They all stood up and one of them said: ‘That was really great.’”

(A couple of kids had been invited to a good meal at a friend’s home. At the end of the meal, when they all stood up, one of them praised the meal as a way of saying thank you.)

Here are another three situations:

“Suddenly he remembered. He was worried / frightened. He was feeling terrible. ‘What’ll I do?’” he thought to himself.”

(Peter has just come home from a long day at school. He wants to open the door, but he realises, he’s forgotten his key. He suddenly remembers that he left the key on the kitchen table. His mother is away, visiting his grandmother and won’t be back before 10 pm. His father often works overtime so he won’t be home for hours either. He knows that there is no-one else in the house. This has never happened before and he doesn’t quite know what to do. He might have to go to his neighbour and ask if he can call his mother or a friend who he can spend the afternoon with.)

“I want a word with you (‘I want to talk to you’),” she said. Peter wasn’t happy at all.

(A teacher is talking to one of her students, Peter. Peter is generally a very good student who always does his work and receives good marks. But he has failed to do the last three assignments that were given to him. The teacher is understandably concerned and is trying to find out if there is a reason behind Peter’s recent lack of performance.)

Note: When this situation was tested out in a class of sixth graders, the pupils needed a long time and a lot of questions before they guessed the right solution. They asked if Peter misbehaved or shouted in class, if he got a bad mark in a test, etc.. It proved to be a very good test of their question-asking ability.

“I wonder what’s going to happen. It’s going to be more difficult this time”, Peter said, and they all walked into the next room. Only Sally wasn’t interested.

(The room they walk into is the living room where the TV is. A family have watched the first two matches of a football championship and are getting ready to watch the third. It’s a knock-out championship so games get harder as teams progress. Everyone in the family are big football fans, except Sally, the daughter, who couldn’t care less.)

3. Interview your teacher

Each student is allowed to ask the teacher two questions about his life. Everyone must listen carefully to avoid repetition or to be able to continue a line of questioning begun by others. At the same time, each student must take notes. Active participation is thereby maintained throughout. After the questions have been taken and answered by the teacher, students work in pairs to supply each other with missing information. One or two students will then come to the front of the class and give a report on their teacher, speaking from their notes.

4. Questions competition.

The teacher writes a sentence up on the board and gets the students to ask as many questions as they can think of that relate to the situation presented in that sentence. No answers are given.

This could be turned into a competition. How many meaningful questions can you think of for this sentence in 3, 4 or 5 minutes? Use an egg-timer, and the whole class can compete against their own previous record. The teacher assigns a pupil to keep score on the blackboard. He may reject questions that are not related to the sentence or ask a pupil to rephrase a question so that it makes sense. Also, if a student comes up with a question which was asked before, this question will not count towards their score. "For every good question you make a mark / stroke on the blackboard. Make four vertical strokes and strike them through with a fifth stroke. Then we can add them up quickly at the end of the game." Grammatically incorrect questions should not be rejected but corrected by the teacher immediately, who can then make the student repeat the corrected version. The teacher should also make sure that students speak up, and that other students listen. He may ask a student to repeat a question that is barely audible which costs them time. Also, if other students are asked to repeat a question and they can't because they weren't listening, this again costs time. Once the students are familiar with this activity, the teacher can award two points or more to a new type of question or a particularly interesting one. He could also encourage students to invent imaginative questions and accept them as long as they are still related to the original sentence.

This is an interesting warm-up activity or a pause-filler. Finally, the tables can be turned: The class can decide on a sentence and write it on the board, and the teacher has to come up with one question after the other, competing against the class record.

Example: "Sarah wanted to film the park."

Questions:

Who is Sarah? Is she English? Is she German?... How old is she? Is she a typical teenager? Is she a mother of two? Is she married? Is she a tourist?

Why did she want to film the park? Did she want to film the park or the children playing in the park? What is she especially interested in? Does she want to film the beautiful old trees? What's the name of the park? Are there animals in the park? How old is the park? Is it a park in London? Does she prefer to film the park in springtime? When did she film it? What time of the day did she film it? Did she actually film it? Did something or somebody prevent her from filming the park?

What kind of camera has she got? Does she own the camera, is it her own camera? Is it a modern digital camera? Did she buy the camera herself? Where did she buy it? Was it a present? If it was a present, who gave it to her?

Questions relating to the language or grammatical structure of the sentence are also acceptable:

Is “Sarah” a Biblical name? Are there other ways to spell the name correctly? Is “wanted” the past tense of “to want”? Is “to want” a regular verb?

Five puzzle stories with solutions

1. The book

A woman handed a book to a man behind a counter. He saw the book and said: “Three pounds, please.” The woman paid for the book and left without taking the book with her. The man saw her leave, but he didn’t call her back. Why?

The solution:

The woman was returning an overdue book back to the library.

2. The healer

Once upon a time there was a lonely woman who loved her fish a lot, perhaps more than anything else in the world. It was just an ordinary gold fish. One day she noticed that he was swimming around in his bowl and he looked very weak and exhausted. She was worried and quickly took him to a veterinarian who knew the old lady and had treated the fish before. But this time he only looked at the fish briefly and told the woman to come back in the afternoon. When she returned she found the fish swimming around in his bowl looking healthy and full of energy. How did the vet perform this miracle?

The solution:

The vet could see that the fish was very old and about to die. He bought a new fish that looked just like the old one and put it in the bowl. Then he flushed the old fish down the toilet.

3. A letter from Grandma

A little boy in boarding school ran out of pocket money one day, so he wrote to his Grandma, asking her for a little money. She sent him back an envelope with a long letter on why he shouldn’t spend so much money, but no money. Still, the little boy wasn’t disappointed at all. Why?

The solution:

This is a true story. The boy’s grandmother was Queen Victoria and he could sell her letter for quite a lot of money.

4. The plane crash

Susan waited until her husband boarded the 8 pm plane from Toronto to Chicago, then she left the airport and drove home where she spent the rest of the evening in front of the television, watching a movie. After about an hour the film was interrupted by some urgent news: The 8

pm plane from Toronto to Chicago had crashed and there were no survivors. Susan was not alarmed at all. She settled back comfortably and watched the rest of her movie. Why?

The solution:

The film was from the week before. Susan had recorded it on her video-recorder so that she could watch it that night.

5. Sleeping difficulties

A man was lying in his hotel bed and could not sleep. Finally he got up, opened the curtains, went back to bed and fell asleep right away. How come?

The solution:

The man was deaf. He had to get up very early the next day to go to an important meeting. He was so worried he might oversleep that he couldn't go to sleep. After he had opened the curtains he knew the sunlight would wake him up, so he could finally go to sleep.