

Things Worth Attention in Designing the Questions of College English Reading Classes

Shuchun Dong*

College of Foreign Languages, Shenyang Aerospace University, Shenyang, China

Abstract. Reading teaching is an important part of college English teaching. Questions are commonly raised in daily teaching of English reading. Effective questions can help language teachers and students to improve the effect of teaching and learning English respectively. Faced with the existing problems of classroom questions in college reading classes, the paper is to explore the deep reasons for the problems. Factors concerning good question designing are listed. In order to design effective classroom questions, improve the teaching effect of college English reading and develop students' reading ability, some suggestions are made about what college English teachers need to do.

1. Introduction

Reading texts contain a wide range of topics and are rich in contents and thoughts, so college English teaching emphasizes reading teaching. Reading itself is a process from which both teachers and students will gain a lot. "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation." [1] To get a better teaching result, college English teachers often adopt one of the traditional teaching methods — asking questions.

In foreign language learning classrooms, where student learners often are not quite active and do not have a great number of methods to maintain language communication, teachers' timely questions provide them with opportunities to engage in the communication. College English reading is one of the core curricula in teaching college English. It burdens the task of teaching students language knowledge and developing students' reading ability. To finish the teaching task successfully, classroom questions seem particularly important. Teachers need to spend much time in designing questions.

2. Existing problems of classroom questions in college reading classes

Much classroom interaction occurs through the interaction of teachers' questioning and students' answering. "Teacher questions and questioning are and should be considered as pedagogical tools for promoting learners in their learning and personal development." [2] Classroom questioning is an effective teaching method, by which

teachers try to arouse students' interests. On the basis of teaching aim and teaching material, teachers design classroom questions. Questions designed should focus on the difficult points rather than the easy ones, which can help students better understand the text and most important of all, arouse students' thinking.

2.1 Questions that should have gone deeper

For many reasons, classroom questions seem to be superficial, students can easily find answers in the text. These questions should have been designed to motivate students to improve their thinking ability by analyzing and summarizing the original text. In traditional foreign language teaching, reading is regarded as a process in which readers receive the information conveyed by writers. Because of the new and difficult words and phrases, some teachers focus on their meanings. Sometimes the reading time is limited, deeper questions will not be finished by students, so the easy questions take the place. If things go on like this, students only focus on the facts and information that can be easily found, and students' reading ability as well as their thinking ability stays at such a low level.

Good question designing should consist of a number of questions, which will stimulate thinking and become progressively more difficult rather than abruptly difficult or extremely easy. The proportion of difficult questions and easy questions lies in what the teacher needs to emphasize based on the teaching aim and teaching content.

2.2 Inflexible questions

When a teacher asks a question, a student can't answer it. Teachers often encounter that situation. In many cases, the

*Corresponding author: dsc69@163.com

teacher will ask another student to take his or her place. To make matters worse, even the second or the third student can't answer it, so the teaching effect is affected. The big question is too difficult or too complicated to answer. Teachers should not repeat the same question. Instead change it into smaller specific questions.

Classroom questions should be flexible rather than inflexible, which can't be used blindly without regard for beginning level learners or advanced level learners. It is important that teachers pay attention to the time students spend in answering questions. Teachers need to prepare many more classroom questions as alternatives that will turn out to be useful.

2.3 Lack of short questions

Good classroom questions also include short questions. Teachers will stop at some points while teaching the text, ask short questions that need only short answers most of the time. Some teachers do not attach great importance to the use of short questions. Sometimes short questions interrupt their train of thought, so they just don't think short questions are necessary. The use of short questions is to ensure that students are following their teachers and they are not distracted. For example, while reading a new text, teachers can ask students to predict what's the story about judging by the topic, how the paragraph develops according to the topic sentence, and what's the ending of the story.

2.4 Exam-orientedness

A number of teachers and students have adapted to exam-oriented education for many years. The teachers are used to designing the questions of reading comprehension tests and the students are good test takers of reading comprehension. People often say interest is the best teacher, and students can be committed to reading only if they have an interest in it. One of the guiding principles in designing questions is practical, which means being close to life. The questions need to be based on real life, so the students can feel the language used in class is applicable in their daily life, which will arouse their learning interest.

Another guiding principle is cooperation. A foreign language is used for communication, and the process of communicating needs cooperative efforts. A good classroom question makes students work together to find the answer, and a lively classroom atmosphere can be created.

3. Designing good questions

In a number of universities and colleges, the teaching hours of college English reading are reduced, so it is more difficult to guarantee the teaching effect, and designing good classroom questions is of especial importance. "Scientific and reasonable classroom questioning can not only regulate the classroom atmosphere, promote students' thinking, stimulate their thirst for knowledge, cultivate their oral expression ability, make the classroom lively and interesting, but also promote the relationship between

teachers and students, form effective classroom interaction, and greatly improve classroom efficiency." [3]

There are many kinds of questions that teachers can design, such as lead-in questions, contextual questions, inductive questions, argumentative questions, and the questions can be used for reviewing what students have learned, predicting the ending of a story, inferring the meaning of a new word and many other aspects. For skimming, scanning or reading in depth, different kinds of questions will be asked. Teachers' questions are the stimuli that can arouse students' reaction in emotion, thought and action.

3.1 Trying to suit all the students

In many cases, college English teachers teach large multilevel classes of thirty or even more students. These students differ in their individual characters, language acquisition ability, learning styles, intelligence, attitude, and many other aspects. Some students are too shy to speak English, some students feel the questions are too difficult to answer, so the classroom is quiet, and such a situation is not unusual.

By designing good questions suiting most students or all the students, the reading class can be an active class where active interaction occurs between teachers and students or among students. The extremely difficult questions or the extremely easy questions will not meet all the students' needs, which will reduce students' participation, because students are not given an equal chance. For below-average students, easier questions might be designed in order to build their confidence and keep their learning interest. In analyzing and evaluating students' learning effect, teachers shouldn't compare all the students collectively, instead individually, each student should be compared with himself or herself based on his or her present and past performance.

3.2 Paying attention to emotion

When we read or write something we like, we get a feeling inside. Emotion can encourage students to think and participate. In language learning, positive emotion is helpful for language input. Learning with positive emotion not only can help to grasp the knowledge, but also can make learners committed to it. "In the presence of overly negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, stress, anger or depression, our optimal learning potential may be compromised." [4] To find out the deeper positive emotion between the lines, teachers need to read the text repeatedly.

3.3 Developing cultural awareness

As everyone knows, language and culture are inseparable. When people learn a foreign language, they are learning its culture. There are many differences between two cultures. Cultural differences can be found in the reading text, and if teachers point them out timely by asking questions, students will compare their culture with other cultures. In the course of comparison, cultural awareness is developed and learner autonomy is promoted. In

designing questions, cultural factors such as customs, tradition, ways of thinking, values and other factors must be taken into account, and students' cultural awareness can be developed.

3.4 Emphasizing thinking ability

"As language teachers, our motive in questioning is usually to get our students to engage actively with the language material and its content. So an effective questioning technique is one that elicits immediate, motivated, relevant and full responses." [5] Language learning is closely related to thinking. Language learning needs thinking, and thinking is strengthened by language learning. Reading is a process that involves both language learning and thinking, so better reading teaching will be of importance.

While preparing the lessons, college English teachers try to find the things worth thinking about. Concerning these things, design some classroom questions, which will help students think more. Gradually, it will develop students' critical thinking. To a certain extent, good classroom questions can indicate in what way and from what angle students can answer the questions. "After several educational reforms, people have made it clear that what we want to learn from education is not only the growth of knowledge but also the improvement of thinking capacity. Therefore, whether students' thinking capacity can be cultivated has become one of the most important norms to measure the success of classroom teaching." [6]

4. What teachers need to do

Well-designed questions can provide students with opportunities to engage in their learning activities, in which students understand language and practise it, so many important factors need to be considered when teachers plan lessons for a reading class. Reading teaching focuses on developing students' reading competence as well as grasping language points, which requires teachers to put effort into preparing the lessons. "More time should be allocated for the students to think, to formulate their ideas, to argue, to defend themselves." [7] When teachers design good classroom questions, they need to get fully prepared.

4.1 Being fully prepared before class

The degree teachers understand the reading texts determines whether the reading class is successful or not. Reading class teachers should take everything such as reading time, reading activities, etc. into full consideration. Based on teachers' teaching experience and students' actual ability, teachers need to find out the questions that will be raised in class, especially when the texts students are going to learn have little to do with their daily life or they are not interested in. The questions can be divided into three types: pre-reading questions, while-reading questions and post-reading questions.

The aim of pre-reading questions is to arouse students' reading interests. The questions can be things concerning background information, interpretation of the title, etc. As we all know, if students are familiar with the subject matter of the reading text, they will better understand it, so the questions concerning background information should be presented firstly. Background information can include many proper names that appear in the reading text such as a famous person's life story, a place, a book, an award, a new scientific term, a company, a song, a university, a law, etc.

Take the text "A Love Affair with Books" for example (New Theme College English Integrated Course, Book 1, Unit 1, Section A), some classroom questions concerning background information can be raised as follows:

- (1) What do you know about the city Rio de Janeiro?
- (2) Who is Ernest Hemingway?
- (3) What works does Ernest Hemingway have?
- (4) Which is Ernest Hemingway's masterpiece?
- (5) Do you like *The Old Man and the Sea*?

Without the background knowledge, students are not able to fully understand the text. The questions based on background information can create an interesting and active learning atmosphere. The pre-reading questions serve as a lead-in to the actual learning of the text or a warm-up for further reading the material, and they can get students ready to do the following learning activities.

Compared with pre-reading, while-reading is the core of the reading class. The questions in this part can be things concerning the general idea and structure of the text, the understanding of the difficult sentences, language points, etc. Language points are very crucial for students to complete reading the text. In the traditional way of teaching, English teachers focus on the explanation of language points by themselves rather by students, mainly because language points are difficult and sometimes to explain them is beyond students' ability. Design some questions based on difficult language points and try to ask students to answer them, you'll find a different approach from quite a different direction.

The aim of post-reading questions is to review important points, test whether students have grasped them and inspire their further thinking about the theme, for example, Question: Can you guess how the story of the hero's life will go on? "Teachers should generate questions that are clearly written, appropriate for the students' ability, and sequenced in a logical way." [8] The classroom questions can be answered in various ways, for example, in pair or by group discussion instead of individually, so that the nervous students will feel free to answer.

4.2 Being good at designing questions

"When teachers are aware of common student misunderstandings, they can construct questions ahead of time that reveal where students are confused." [9] As a teaching technique, questioning runs through the whole process of teaching reading. Questions designed by teachers influence the teaching quality, so teachers prepare as many classroom questions as possible, and choose some

from them. Take a paragraph from Book 3, Unit 3, Section A of New Theme College English Integrated Course as an example.

“Experts are increasingly coming to view happiness as a talent, not an inborn trait. Exceptionally happy people seem to have a set of skills — ones that you can learn too.”

Although the paragraph is very short, we can design many questions, from which teachers can choose, such as:

- (1) What did we learn in the last paragraph?
- (2) What is happiness?
- (3) What is your understanding of the statement “view happiness as a talent, not an inborn trait”?
- (4) What does the word “trait” mean?
- (5) Can you guess what the author is going to write about in the next paragraph?
- (6) In your opinion, what skills do happy people have in common?
- (7) Are you a happy person?
- (8) Can you summarize the main idea of the paragraph by skimming?

Many more questions can be designed from this paragraph. While reading, teachers can choose one or two questions to ask according to their needs. Students need to learn knowledge step by step, so the degree of difficulty must be considered in designing questions. The easier questions can come before the difficult ones.

4.3 Reflecting on gain and loss after class

Successful reading classes endow students with sense of achievement rather than disappointment. Teachers need to assess the teaching effect of the reading class and see whether the teaching goals are achieved. “Goals are a way of putting into words the main purposes and intended outcomes of your course.” [10]

Many factors influence the success of reading in foreign language teaching. If students cannot understand the passage, college English teachers need to think over what makes it difficult? Which one of these (background knowledge, vocabulary or syntax) hinders them from comprehending the passage? With these difficulties, is it true that the questions we have designed are helpful for the students of different reading proficiency levels?

We can evaluate our reading teaching from many perspectives, by asking questions such as:

- (1) Is there anything that should have been taught?
- (2) Do we need to make changes and improvements?
- (3) Is there any gap between our colleagues’ teaching and ours?
- (4) Have we achieved the teaching aim?

To evaluate our reading teaching, we can also get student feedback. Students have a lot of advice and ideas about the teaching. If there are some problems in our teaching, we shouldn’t avoid them, instead face the problems and take active actions.

5. Summary

In college English reading classes, one important concern for teachers is how to make their reading classes interesting. In many cases, the textbook is chosen by the

school, not by teachers, designing effective and excellent questions is more difficult, and teachers need to guide reading so that students can better understand the text. One of the effective ways is designing good questions to be answered, which requires that teachers should possess a more comprehensive knowledge reserve and have a clear understanding of their teaching aim besides the teaching content.

While designing classroom questions, English teachers need to take many factors into account such as the size of the class, the difficulty of the reading material, students’ learning methods, teaching facilities, time available, students’ need, different levels of English proficiency, and so on.

Good questions are innovative questions that are not the simple questions concerning the known facts of the text. Good questions are good for improving students’ learning abilities. Good questions can create both the interaction among students and the interaction between teachers and students. Good questions can arouse students’ interest and inspire students to think more. By good questions, students’ reading ability and thinking ability can be greatly improved. In the future, college English teachers need further research into the area of designing questions to promote students’ study on the basis of teaching creativity and innovation.

References

1. Anthony H. M., P. D. Pearson and T. E. Raphael. Reading comprehension: A selected review. In L. M. Cleary & M. D. Linn (Eds.), *Linguistics for teachers*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993: 284.
2. Liu W. *Teacher-initiated Text-based Questions & Questioning in EFL Classrooms: Theory & Practice* [M]. Beijing: World Publishing Corporation, 2011: 25.
3. Li E. (2023) On the Ways to Improve the Effectiveness of Classroom Questioning. *Journal of Educational Research and Policies*, 5: 68-72.
4. Arnold J. and H. D. Brown. A Map of the Terrain. In Arnold Jane (Ed.), *Affect in Language Learning*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000: 2.
5. Ur P. *A Course in English Language Teaching (Second Edition)* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2023: 230.
6. Huang F. and X. Zhu. (2022) The Cultivation of Students' Thinking Capacity through English Classroom Questioning. *International Journal of New Developments in Education*, 4: 5-11.
7. Tan Z. (2007) Questioning in Chinese University EL Classrooms: What Lies beyond It?. *RELC Journal*, 38: 87-103.
8. Bond N. (2008) Questioning Strategies That Minimize Behavior Problems. *The Education Digest*, 73: 41-45.
9. Wiliam D. (2014) The Right Questions, the Right Way. *Educational Leadership*, 71: 16-19.

10. Graves K. *Designing Language Courses: A Guide for Teachers* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005: 75.