Asking questions about language to generate language

As teachers we would do well to consider what exactly it is that classrooms can offer the language learner that other modes of learning can't. One of the primary things that can happen in classrooms that can't happen outside is that students can ask questions about language. One of the reasons why students pay for the privilege of having teachers is so that they have someone with more knowledge of the language than themselves to whom they can ask questions about language. Obviously, as teachers, we should welcome these questions and answer them to the best of our abilities. However, on occasion we may all sometimes be guilty of expecting our students to come to class not just being ready to learn, but also somehow miraculously *knowing* what it is that they don't know yet, AND knowing what to ask us about this.

Like many teachers, I started my own teaching career believing that one of my roles was to be a walking dictionary. I spent a lot of my time simply trying to explain the meanings of new words that students encountered, or, in monolingual classes, translating them. This is all well and good, but only gives learners part of what they need to know about new words. Well-guided Teacher Talking Time (TTT) can help model for students the kinds of questions they need to ask when learning language and can also, at the same time, use the class to get at knowledge about usage that's beneficial for all. This involves what I call the Triple Ex skill - Explaining, Exemplifying and getting the class to Expand.

To give you an idea of what I mean here, the word **instructor** came up recently as an answer to a question about a text my students had been reading. Rather than just telling my class 'an instructor is a person who teaches practical skills for a living' or something like that, or - even worse in my opinion, but supposedly more Student Talking Time-focused - asking my class: 'What does instructor mean?', I instead pointed out that this was **a sailing instructor** and said that this is someone who teaches other people to sail. I then wrote a little substitution table on the board, like this:

	sailing	
a	d.......	instructor
	s.......	
	d.......	

and elicited the missing words - **driving**, **skiing** and **diving**. I then said that all of these people teach other people to sail, drive, ski or dive, and that an instructor is basically like a teacher, but that it collocates with these four words mostly. Next, I asked the class what they thought the difference was between **an instructor** and **a coach**. From this, we established that they're very similar, but that usually you say **a tennis coach, a football coach** or **a swimming coach**. I then wrote these three up on the board.

Similarly, one of my students recently asked me what 'guilty' means. I started saying it was what juries often decide people are in court cases, but was stopped short by the student who said: "No, no. I mean, FEEL guilty". I then said: "Oh, right. Well, usually you **feel guilty** because you didn't do something you know you should've done, like buy your mum a birthday present" and I then wrote up on the board 'I feel really guilty about . . . forgetting my mum's birthday. I wish I hadn't done it!' and asked the class **what else** you could feel guilty about. From this, and with some reformulation involved, I added to the above '. . . what I said to my boss / losing my temper with her / eating that chocolate

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cake this morning.' I also dealt with some contributions from students which didn't sound like things you'd feel guilty about, but were rather things you might regret, and ended up with another example table on the board:

I really regret	losing his phone number. Now I'll never see him again! missing the game. I wish I'd seen it. It sounded great.

Asking students for examples of their own not only helps give them the words they want to say the things they want to say, but also serves as a kind of concept check - perhaps the best kind. Furthermore, the examples that end up on the board are the kinds of things students themselves might really want to say.

Basically, there's a small, limited set of questions that teachers can ask their classes when going though answers to exercises, checking homework and dealing with vocabulary that's come up in texts that get consistent results. These questions also model for learners the kinds of things they themselves need to learn how to ask YOU. Here's a checklist for you:

Verbs:
- What does x-ing involve?
- Is it good or bad to x? Why?
- What kind of things can you x?
- What happens if you x?
- Where would you x?
- What's the opposite of x in this situation?
- Why do you x?
- Has anyone here ever x-ed?

Adjectives:
- Is x positive or negative or can it be both depending on the context?
- Which nouns can be x?
- What's the opposite of x in this situation?
- Have you ever been x? When?

Nouns:
- What can you do with x?
- What things can you do to x?
- Is x a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
- Which adjectives can describe x?
- Have you got an x? / Have you ever used an x? Have you ever been to an x?

Whilst there's no great mystery to these kinds of questions, there is something interesting about many of them. In the vast majority of literature about the kinds of questions that teachers ask students, a dichotomy has been set up between ***display questions*** - usually closed *Yes / No* questions and definitely questions which the teacher already knows the answers to and is asking simply to get students to 'display' their knowledge . . . and ***open questions*** - questions the teacher asks out of genuine interest and which aren't usually intended to have any linguistic end point. This stark dichotomy is misleading as there is a third kind of question we need to think about asking far more frequently and it's one that lies somewhere between display and open questions. It's what I call 'questions about language which generate language.'

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We all know that if students are going to learn to actually USE the language we teach them, they need to do more than simply understand the meaning. They need to know something about collocation, typical usage, contexts of use and so on. Here's one key way we can ensure they get closer to this. Again, perhaps an example will illustrate what I mean here.

Usually, when I'm going through vocabulary exercises and checking answers, I ask the kinds of questions we've looked at above. Obviously, there's no point asking all of them all the time for each item and some proffer more fruit than others. Let's consider this exercise below.

PHRASAL VERBS WITH OUT
In this unit, we met *sell out of* and *turn out to be*. Use the following verbs in the gaps.

kicked	fell	sold	stands
make	tired	turned	worn

1. I'm sorry. There's none left. We've completely . . . . out of the small ones.
2. I didn't like Molly at first, but she . . . . . . out to be one of the nicest people you could ever hope to meet.
3. These boots are . . . . out. I'll need to get a new pair before we go on holiday.
4. Joe and I used to be really good friends, but we . . . . out a few years ago after he never paid me back the £250 I lent him to buy a car!
5. I need a rest! All this walking has really . . . . me out.
6. Could you speak up a bit, please? I can't quite . . . . out what you're saying.
7. Alan was . . . . out of the team. He was always late for training.
8. Bergkamp . . . . out as the best player in the team. He's head and shoulders above everyone else.

Let's just consider one of these lexical items - number 7. As I check the answers, I ask the following questions:

Anything else you can be kicked out of?
Who by?
Why?

I think I know the answers to the first two questions - class, a bar or club, a political party / a teacher, a bouncer, the party leader - but the last one, I only ***suspect*** I know the answers to - for instance, it might be because you're rude to your teacher or because you're not good enough for the team. However, the thing with questions like these is that you can never be 100 per cent sure of how students will answer.

Hugh Dellar – September 2006

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