SCAFFOLDING PART ONE: QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Because of their limited vocabulary and language skills, beginner-level students may have trouble showing their understanding and responding to questions when compared to more advanced peers. Teachers should provide scaffolds for learning questions: starting with very basic language structures and then building up to more complex structures. Scaffolding helps beginners to show what they are learning from an early stage, even if the students are still acquiring the language that they need to express ideas on their own.

This week in the Teacher's Corner, we will discuss how to scaffold questions to help beginning learners become more comfortable with responding to questions. We will also explore several simple response strategies for beginners that help to engage students and to check their understanding.

CREATING OR ADAPTING BEGINNER-FRIENDLY QUESTIONS

A teacher who asks an open-ended question to a class of beginner students will likely be met with blank stares, confusion, or silence (See examples of open-ended questions below.). Learners at this level usually do not have the language skills they need to comprehend an open-ended question, much less respond to it. Even if students understand what is being asked, they may be shy to speak or worried about making errors. To avoid this situation, we can ask or adapt questions in several different ways to make them more accessible to our beginners.

Yes/No Questions: Posing questions to which students can simply respond "yes" or "no" allows students to express opinions or show what they have learned without having to depend on vocabulary or language forms they may not have. For instance, compare the following questions:

Open-Ended Response	Yes/No Response
What characteristics tell you that an animal is a mammal?	Is this animal (in the picture) a mammal?
How do you know a shape is a rectangle?	Does a rectangle have four sides?
What is the weather like today?	Is the weather sunny today?
What foods do you like to eat?	Do you like to eat eggs? Rice? Fish?

As shown in the table above, yes/no questions can be used to review content or for students to share information about themselves.

Either/Or Questions: Posing an either/or question allows beginner-level students to choose the correct answer from only two options. Consider the table below, which shows how the same open-ended questions can be posed in the either-or format:

Open-Ended Response	Either/Or Response
What characteristics tell you that an animal is a mammal?	• Is this animal (pictured) a mammal or a reptile? • Which one is a mammal: a fish or a horse?
How do you know a shape is a rectangle?	• Is this shape (pictured) a rectangle or a square? • Which shape has four sides of equal length: a rectangle or a square?
What is the weather like today?	• Is the weather today sunny or cloudy?
What foods do you like to eat?	• Do you like to eat chicken or fish? • Do you eat eggs for breakfast or dinner?

Limiting Answer Choices: Often students take tests or complete work with multiple-choice questions. For beginners, the standard multiple-choice question with four answer choices can be overwhelming or confusing. To make these questions more accessible, we can limit the number of options. To do this, we can simply cross out two of the incorrect options, or create activities with only two options for each question. As beginners become more proficient, we can add in a third choice and eventually work up to four.

INCREASING WAIT TIME

After asking a question, some teachers can become uncomfortable if students do not respond quickly. However, students who are just starting to learn a language need more time to think about what they are hearing and to articulate a response. For this reason, teachers who have beginner-level students are encouraged to give students more time to think about and answer questions.

Pose, Then Pause: A good strategy with beginner-level students is to include some "think time" after asking a question. This works especially well for questions that require a more open-ended response that requires students to produce more language. For instance, a teacher might say "What will you do after

school today?" and then indicate to students that they have time to think about their response. The amount of "think time" may vary based on learners' ages and proficiency, but 10-30 seconds is usually sufficient. Here are some other options: use a timer; give students a verbal cue by saying something like "Think about this. Then I will ask you to answer"; or give students a visual cue (such as a signal or gesture) to indicate "think time." Once students have had time to think about their responses, they can raise their hands to respond. For more information on decreasing teacher talk time, check out this American English webinar: Teacher Talk: Presentation Skills for Teachers.

Calling on Students: Even when beginner students are ready to respond, they may still need additional time to answer. Beginners may start to answer but struggle to produce the needed language, or they may make an error during their responses. As teachers, we are often quick to respond and to assist our students in these situations. However, if our goal is to help learners develop their English, it may actually be better if we wait to let the student work to form a response on his or her own. If the student continues to have difficulty after 5-10 seconds, we can then provide guidance or ask a clarifying question to help.

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT RESPONSES

In addition to asking questions that are easier to respond to, teachers can also let beginner students communicate responses in non-verbal ways. Even though it is important to give beginners frequent chances to practice producing language in the English classroom, mixing in some non-verbal activities can have positive effects. The following non-verbal strategies can be used with any of the question formats described above. These strategies can take away some of the pressure that beginners often feel when speaking English, and successful communication, even if non-verbal, can motivate students.

Hand Signals: Students can respond to yes/no questions by using a hand signal such as the "thumbs up" for yes or "thumbs down" for no. Hand signals can also be used to show agreement or disagreement with a statement, or to indicate whether something is true or false.

If asking students to make a choice between multiple options, designate a number for each option. Then students can indicate their answer choice by holding up one, two, or three fingers, etc. As mentioned in the earlier discussion about multiple-choice questions, do not give beginners too many choices at first.

Stand Up/Sit Down: When responding to questions with two answer options, students can stand or sit to indicate their response. Similar to hand signals, this strategy can be used for yes/no questions, true/false questions, agree/disagree statements, or either/or questions.

Move to the Answer: This strategy also uses the full body to respond. Designate different areas of the classroom for different responses. For example, divide the classroom in half and designate sides as yes/no, true/false, agree/disagree, etc. To respond to the question, students move to the side that indicates their response. This strategy can also be used for reviewing content that lends itself to two different categories or topics.

As students become more proficient, the corners of the room can be used, and thus the number of responses can be increased. For example, if using multiple-choice questions, label the corners A, B, C, and D. This technique can also be used to help students "sort" information into up to four different categories.