The Effects of Question Type on Student Discussions

Russell Minshull

Abstract

As teachers, the questions we use play an important role in our practice. When teaching English conversations or discussions, the questions we ask our students will strongly influence the content of their conversations. For instance, it is often stated that open-ended questions will generate more dialogue than closed-ended questions. Considering this significance, teachers should experiment with various question types to determine which ones best suit their needs. Throughout this semester, I adapted my in-house textbook using different types of question, with the goal of eliciting nuanced discussions and observing the impact of different question types on critical thinking and student talk-time.

Keywords: Open-questions, Closed-Questions, Nuance, Critical Thinking, Student Talk-Time

Introduction

This paper is a reflection on a semester of a private university in Japan. The purpose of the study was to experiment with different types of discussion questions in order to investigate their impact on student discussions, primarily in terms of critical thinking and how much dialogue is produced.

The course in question is mandatory for all first-year students. The main designated course outcomes are building spoken fluency and communicative confidence in English, with faculty placing a high emphasis on student talk-time in order to gain practical experience in communicating in English. There are also peripheral goals to the course, such as providing students with critical thinking practice.

Teachers use a mandatory in-house textbook, which is structured to maximise student talk time during lessons. This textbook is called What's Your Opinion? (Fearn-Wannan, J. et al. 2021). Throughout the paper I refer to this textbook.

Every week, students participate in two group discussions, which account for the majority of the talk time, with each discussion lasting between 12 and 20 minutes depending on the size of the group. Each discussion is generally structured in the manner, with a preparation activity leading to two discussion questions.

In my previous experience teaching on the course, my feeling was that the questions used in the textbook tend to give mixed results. Some questions are written in an open-ended way. In my opinion, this type of question works well in a discussion. Students tend to produce a lot of dialogue, discuss multiple lines of inquiry, and give the impression that they have thought quite deeply about the topic.

Table 1

Examples of open-questions from the What's Your Opinion? Textbook

"What are some good ways companies can provide a good work-life balance?"
"When is a good time to study abroad?"
"What are some good things to do after high school?"
"How can student's use social media more safely?"
"What are some good solutions to the aging population problem"

There are a number of questions in the textbook that are not so open- ended. On several occasions, questions are binary in nature, requiring only an either/or response. There are also a few questions that are closed, requiring only a yes/no response.

Table 2
Examples of closed and binary questions in the What's Your Opinion? textbook

"Should all students get a part-time job?"
"Should everyone study abroad?"
"Is it important for everyone to experience living abroad?"
"Is social media good or bad for university students?"
"Should the Japanese government introduce other systems (apart from the exam and recommendation system) for entering university?"
"Is it easy or difficult for university students to be independent?"

While it could be stated that such questions give students an easy chance for rote-like practice of target phrases, or could push them into expanding discussions on their own, I find that groups do not usually take the initiative to do this. On the contrary, I find that this kind of question is often counter- productive.

Students can only provide the either/or answer, a framework that limits discussions in terms of ideas. Groups often cover similar ground in discussions, and their answers are often similar or repetitive. I believe such discussions are not particularly interesting for students, and that they are probably not getting much out of them. While it is not a stated outcome of the course, I believe that students learn things from each other about topics as they discuss them, and that binary questions limit this learning. In turn, students probably find these questions unrewarding to discuss. As Rizzo, Fairley and Nostas (2021:2) state, if we want students to learn something about the issues they are discussing, then we might need to ask questions that encourage them to think in a more nuanced way.

Moreover, open questions make us think more deeply than binary questions. Teachers are often advised to use open questions to enhance their students' critical thinking skills (Sarwanto., Fajari, L. E. W., & Chumdari: 2021). As stated by Dr Ken Beatty (2017, para 13) "with open-ended questions, a simple binary answer is not possible, and the conversational expectation is that you will think more deeply on the question." Therefore, it follows that by asking open-ended rather than binary questions to students, we can expect to enhance the level of critical thinking that goes into their discussions.

Furthermore, when there are limited angles to explore, the discussion tends to be brief. As a result, student talk-time can be limited. In the main discussion each week, a group of four needs to talk for 16 minutes, and I have sometimes found that groups will fall short especially if one of the questions does not generate enough content. It is often recommended that teachers use open questions in the classroom when looking for a communicative classroom that is rich in dialogue (e.g., Çakır, H. & Cengiz, Ö., 2016), because with more ideas to explore there tends to be more points to discuss. This leads to more opportunities for interaction. Therefore, in student discussions, it is likely that open questions generate more dialogue than binary questions, because there are more possible lines of inquiry and more possible topics to discuss.

In my experience, even where questions suggest a more in-depth comparison between options, discussions are often quite limited. For example, the textbook question "Which is better – the entrance exam system or the recommendation system?" could be a chance for students to conduct an in-depth comparison between the two systems, but instead, each student tends to present an argument for the system they prefer, before passing the turn onto the next group member. In my

opinion, this often leads to a lack of depth in discussions, as groups have no incentive to explore topics beyond these initial answers. Moreover, many students, in my experience, prefer to answer textbook questions as directly as possible, rarely seeking complexity in the subject. However, if we consider our students' age and educational experience, this is perhaps to be expected. As first-year Japanese university students, many do not have any experience with group discussions in English, and most evidence points toward a lack of confidence in this cohort when it comes to speaking English (e.g., Templin, 1995). Because of their lack of experience and communicative confidence, students may be hesitant to take chances in conversations and instead conform to the textbook's instructions.

Moreover, because students have limited experience in this kind of academic environment, it is highly unlikely they have practiced the skill of analysing academic questions. Various English for Academic Purposes textbooks and student/teacher resources, such as Uncovering EAP: How to Teach Academic Reading and Writing (McCarter &Jakes, 2009) and Barron's Writing for the IELTS (Lougheed, L, 2016), feature sections or even chapters on how to analyse academic questions. This suggests that understanding questions is a skill in its own right, and it follows that someone untrained might not look to answer a question in a nuanced way. Therefore, as our students are inexperienced in the academic environment, we should not expect them to discuss much beyond what is literally asked in the question.

If this is the case, then it is understandable if students give short answers to binary questions. Therefore, if we want them to discuss topics in more depth, then we have to write questions that guide them in that direction.

In summary, the purpose of this project is to provide students with questions that would encourage more nuanced discussions, critical thinking, and dialogue, which, in turn, would help them achieve these goals despite their lack of experience in analyzing academic questions

Questions

While a systematic approach to rewriting the questions was considered, eventually I opted to adapt the discussions on a weekly basis. This was done to provide a flexible approach to the project and to avoid having to completely redesign the textbook.

However, there were three question types that I favoured during the project. These were advantages and disadvantages questions, problem-solution questions, and hypothetical questions. The reasons for using the nominated question types are explained, and examples of the adaptations made are shown in tables.

Advantages and Disadvantages/Balanced questions

As mentioned, I have found that although textbook questions such as "should all students get a part-time job?" might vaguely imply that students discuss various sides of an issue, discussions will rarely go into much depth. If we could ensure that students discuss both the pros and cons of part-time jobs before drawing conclusions, then this would probably leader to richer, more nuanced discussions. One way to ensure that students could do this is by making in-depth discussions a mandatory rather than an implied process.

Students tend to closely follow textbook instructions, so if we write questions that explicitly tell students to discuss both advantages and disadvantages, then it is highly likely that they will. In

theory, discussions should be richer for going into details about both sides, and this could lead to more interesting and nuanced discussions.

I rewrote several questions to explicitly address the pros and cons of the relevant topical issues.

These were mostly advantages and disadvantages questions; however, there were one or two exceptions. The notable example, which I discuss later, is the following question:

1. "Which Japanese cultures are good to export to foreign countries?"

To which I added the following question, in order to make it explicit that they discuss both sides of the issue:

2. "Which Japanese cultures are not good to export to foreign countries?"

The following table shows some examples of advantages and disadvantages/balanced questions that I added to the course this semester.

Table 3

Examples of Advantages and Disadvantages/Balanced Questions used this semester

Original Questions	Adapted Questions
1. Which is better — the entrance exam system or the recommendation system? 2. Should the Japanese government introduce other systems for entering university?	1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the entrance exam system? 2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the recommendation system? 3. Which system is better?
1. When is a good time to study abroad? 2. Should everyone study abroad?	1. What are the advantages of studying abroad? 2. What are the disadvantages of studying abroad? 3. When is a good time to study abroad?
1. Is social media good or bad for university students? 2. Does social media make life easier for university students?	1. What do you think about the following social media apps? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? - Twitter - Instagram - TikTok 2. Which social media app is the most useful? (Think about different points of view).
1. What types of Japanese pop culture are good to share with other countries? 2. Is it important to share culture with other countries?	1. What types of Japanese pop culture are good to share with other countries? 2. What types of Japanese pop culture are **not** good to share with other countries? 3. Is it important to share culture with other countries?

Problem-Solution questions

In the textbook, several discussions include questions asking for solutions to problems, but without really discussing what is the actual cause of the problem. For example, in Lesson 2 ,the discussion asks for suggestions on helping hikikomori without discussing why people become hikikomori in the first place.

Problem solving is a valuable critical thinking skill, and therefore it is good that we ask students to discuss solutions to difficult issues. However, in general, when asked to suggest solutions to difficult problems, it helps to analyse the problem in-depth first. In a group problem-solving scenario, sharing information and reaching a mutual understanding of the reasons for the problem is highly valuable, even crucial. It follows that getting students to discuss the problem in-depth before they develop solutions should give them more experience with solving problems in a collaborative setting.

Moreover, it could lead to more insightful and considered solutions.

Therefore, I occasionally added questions to prompt students to discuss the reasons for a problem in-depth before discussing a solution.

Table 4

Examples of Problem-Solution Questions used this semester

Textbook Questions	Adapted Questions
1. What are some effective things that can help hikikomori? 2. Which is more important for hikikomori — communicating with family or making friends?	1. Why do people become hikikomori? 2. What are some effective things that can help hikikomori?
1. What are some good ways that companies can improve their employees' work-life balance? 2. Do Japanese people have a good work-life balance?	1. Do Japanese people have a good work-life balance? 2. What are some good ways that companies can improve their employees' work-life balance?
1. What is the best way to punish serious crimes? 2. Is it important to help criminals return to society?	1. Why do people commit serious crimes? 2. What is the best way to punish serious crime? 3. How can Japan reduce serious crime in the future?

Hypothetical Questions

A hypothetical question is one where students discuss an imaginary situation. For example— "if you were going to study abroad, where would you go?" These were used mainly as extra questions. The textbook usually uses two questions per discussion, and these were added as a third or fourth question. The hypothetical questions were used because they offer a chance for students to think creatively. Moreover, in my previous experience, this kind of question tends to be enjoyable for students.

Table 5

Examples of Hypothetical Questions used this semester

Topic	Question
Study Abroad	If you were going to study abroad, where would you go?
Work-Life Balance	Would you rather work very hard and have a lot of money, or have an easier work-life but have less money?
Social Media	How might social media change society in the future?

Reflection of the Results of the Adapted Questions

In this section, I will reflect on the discussions generated by the adapted questions, thereby discussing the three types of questions individually.

Results of the Advantages and Disadvantages/Balanced Questions

Generally, I think using these questions worked well in bringing nuance to discussions. Because the advantages and disadvantages were written into the questions, students were obliged to discuss both and this meant that when observing the discussions, there was clear evidence that students had considered both sides of the question. In general, there was a wider range of ideas than those in

previous courses. This gave me the impression that students were more engaged in discussions, and that they were thinking more and consequently might be learning more than with closed-ended questions.

Furthermore, this semester I had far fewer instances of groups finishing discussions before the allotted time limits, which implies that using this kind of question probably does generate more student talk-time. In certain instances this was because adapting the questions meant they had more questions to discuss; however, several discussions that were usually brief on previous courses were elongated, such as the part-time job and university entrance system discussions from table three above. Basically, ensuring they discussed various sides of a topic meant they had more to discuss.

The adapted discussion questions at times significantly changed the content of the student discussions, with the adapted Globalization of Japanese Culture discussion probably being the best example:

Table 6
The adapted discussion for the Globalization of Japanese Culture topic

1. Which types of Japanese pop culture are good to share with foreign countries?
2. Which types of Japanese pop culture are **not** good to share with foreign countries?
3. Is it important for countries to share their culture with other countries?

On previous courses, students were only required to discuss which Japanese cultures are, or would be, successful if exported abroad. Students almost always end up debating the features of Japanese culture they enjoy while ignoring the cross-cultural similarities, which I feel is the true goal of this conversation. A typical student response could say that manga is popular outside of Japan because it is beautifully-drawn, but my sense has always been that they are expressing their own tastes rather than a reason why non-Japanese people enjoy it as well.

Adding the question "Which types of Japanese pop culture are not good to share with foreign countries?" pushed them to consider why certain types of culture are popular abroad as compared to others. For example, students discussed how humour can be lost in translation and how western countries seem to prefer individual pop stars (e.g., Billie Eilish) rather than large pop groups (e.g., Nogizaka 46). My view is that propelling students toward this angle challenged them to think and contributed to discussions that were more intellectually stimulating than original questions.

There was an issue with this type of question, which was that sometimes students did not have enough ideas or require more time than normal to generate ideas. Early in the course, students were using the textbook preparation, which was not designed for the adapted questions, and therefore, not really appropriate as scaffolding for the adapted discussions. This issue was improved by having students brainstorm the pros and cons of both sides and making sure they had enough time to do so. This is something to remember when changing the textbook questions —if you are adapting or using new questions, you probably need to adapt the discussion preparation accordingly.

Results of the Problem-Solution Questions

Having students discuss the problems before discussing solutions added an interesting layer of content to their discussions. For example, when discussing why people become hikikomori, students discussed issues, such as bullying at school or family problems. When discussing why people commit serious crimes, they discussed issues, such as how children raised in violent homes might go on to

become troubled adults. Students were able to discuss these issues in a deep and insightful manner.

The adapted crime and punishment solution question three, "How can we help prevent serious crime in the future?" also provoked some interesting ideas, such as how a more equal society could help reduce crime. This discussion happened in the penultimate lesson and was the first time students needed to discuss how fundamental changes to society could improve an issue. I think that discussing such changes to society could have been beneficial in the other problem-solution discussions, as it makes for a logical conclusion to the discussion. For example, to conclude the hikikomori discussion students could be asked "What can Japan do to reduce social isolation?" and a similar question could be asked about how a shift in societal values or practices might help improve work-life balance.

Results of the Hypothetical and Dilemmas Questions

From my observation of students, they seem to really enjoy this kind of question. They use the hypothetical situation to think of creative answers, share humour, and become slightly more casual in the discussion. This feels like a good change of pace, and they seem encouraged to speak more, probably because they are having fun. Moreover, I noted that more follow-up questions were asked and that students would go on tangents sometimes. For example, "if you were to study abroad, where would you go?" would often lead to students discussing their travel experiences. In some classes, this kind of conversation can be lacking and perhaps gave them a chance to bond.

The future hypothetical question "how will social media change society in the future?" seemed difficult for students. They often remarked that the question was difficult and tended to hesitate before answering. However, they were usually able to answer eventually, such as by saying that people will have worse social skills in the future. This proved to be interesting to listen to.

In each instance, the hypothetical questions were used as a final question. I thought this would be appropriate, as hypothetical questions can be quite abstract and tangential, so my theory was that this would be better saved for after the main topics of discussion had been covered. However, it could be interesting to develop a discussion based entirely around this kind of question and observe the results.

Drawbacks to the Project

There were some difficulties and drawbacks to the project. As mentioned, occasionally students did not seem to have a lot of ideas for the more challenging questions. I had to adapt to this by giving them more time, and also by having them share their ideas during preparation time. It is highly recommended that when introducing questions that are more challenging in terms of critical thinking, they are given sufficient opportunity to generate and share ideas before starting the discussion. Moreover, it was essential that I change the preparation activity in the book so that it was suitable for the new discussion. Again, if you are going to adapt textbook questions, then you probably need to adapt preparation activities to suit the adapted questions.

Furthermore, I tended to use three or more questions per discussion during this project, and although this likely generated more student talk-time, toward the end of the term it seemed that students had difficulty continuing a discussion if there were just two questions in the discussion. On previous courses, many groups seemed to become adept at continuing discussions using target phrases and often could complete a full discussion with just two questions. I believe that providing

them with more questions may have hampered their practice of the target phrases, as the target phrases were less important to continue the discussion when there were other discussion questions available.

Conclusions

First, I would highly recommend rewriting binary and closed-ended questions into open-ended questions. Judging from my observations this semester, open questions are more likely to develop into a nuanced discussion. When listening to students discuss binary or closed-ended questions, I find discussions to be predictable and repetitive. Throughout this semester, with the adapted questions, students were discussing a wider range of ideas. In my view, the discussions were more entertaining to listen to, which lead me to believe that they would have been more interesting to engage in.

Second, I think it is a good idea to use questions that will explicitly guide students to the kind of content you want them to discuss. While a question such as "should all students study abroad?" might imply that students discuss the pros and cons of studying abroad, there is no guarantee that they will actually cover both sides in much depth. Alternatively, if you ask them "what are the pros and cons of studying abroad"? or if you ask them to discuss both the pros and cons separately, then you are far more likely to get a balanced discussion. In other words, if you want students to discuss certain content, then it is better to use discussion questions that lead them directly to that content.

I attempted to create new questions in such a manner that they would inspire more critical thinking exercise, and I believe I witnessed plenty of this throughout the semester.

I think that the question types used were conducive to this. With advantages/disadvantages questions, students have to analyse an issue in depth. Problem/solution questions mean students have to analyse a problem and then create a solution. Moreover, hypothetical questions allow students to think creatively and offer an abstract change of pace. Alternatively, these are far from the only types of question that could be used, and I will experiment with other types in the future.

On several occasions, some of the questions seemed difficult for students, but I welcomed this as I believe that students were being propelled to think outside of their comfort zone. Moreover, it felt more like they were learning something about the topic. While the discussions course is mainly about fluency building, I believe that it is beneficial to challenge students intellectually sometimes and while content learning is not a stated aim of the course, the students will find the course more rewarding if they are learning about the topics they discuss.

Along with the discussions being more interesting to listen to, and students needing to think in a more nuanced manner, another major difference this semester was that I believe they were producing more dialogue than those on previous courses. In previous courses, I have witnessed that students, particularly those in lower ability classes, would conclude discussions quickly, and I would have to intervene in some manner to continue the discussion. I found myself doing that rather less this semester, as a wide range of ideas seemed to produce more dialogue and opportunities for communication.

Despite the course being conducted online, I maintained contact with a few course colleagues, and we would often share discussion questions on social media group chat.

This proved a great help to the project, and I would encourage teachers to discuss their approach to the discussion questions and share their experiences.

Finally, another benefit of this project was that I felt that taking control of the questions from the textbook gave me more control over the course. As this is a mandatory course, with an in-house textbook, it can be easy to feel like you do not have much autonomy. The discussion questions dictate the content the students discuss and much of what they learn during discussions, and thus, by taking control of the questions I felt more ownership of the course. I recommend teachers to attempt to rewrite the textbook questions to suit their own purposes.

References

Beatty, K. (2017). Q is for Questions. Pearson ELT USA. https://longmanhomeusa.com/blog/q-is-for-questions/

Çakır, H. and Cengiz, Ö. (2016) The Use of Open Ended versus Closed Ended Questions in Turkish Classrooms. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, **6**, 60-70.

Fearn-Wannan,J., Kita,S., Sturges,J., & Young,D. (2021). What's Your Opinion? *Rikkyo University.*

Hurling, S. (2012). Introduction to EDC. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, 1(1), 1.2-1.9.

Rizzo, Fairley and Nostas. (2021). "Arguing to Learn": 4 Activities to Build Complex Arguments . TESOL Connections: February 2021 (retrieved article on 25/11/2021 from http://newsmanager.commpartners.com/tesolc/issues/2021-02-01/3.html).

Sarwanto., Fajari, L. E. W., & Chumdari. (2021). Open-Ended Questions to Assess Critical Thinking Skills in Indonesian Elementary School. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(1), 615-630.

Templin, S.A. (1995). Goal Setting to Raise Speaking Self-Confidence. *JALT Journal Vol. 17, No.2*, November, 1995.