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# Reexamining the Role of Focus Questions in Understanding and Retaining Concepts

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**F**ocus Questions are certainly not a new idea but are worthy of frequent reexamination because of their potential for significantly positive influence on students' ability to learn, retain, and extend information listened to or read. Importantly, focus questions can also facilitate students' ability to extend understanding beyond the information given. In this article I will first provide an example lesson and then explore ways that focus questions can be used to encourage students' involvement with new information.

I chose to use focus questions in October, 1998, when I taught lessons for Michigan elementary school students based on my experiences in Kerala State, South India, where I taught English for grades 4, 5, and 7 at Mathen Mappillai Memorial Public School during the full 1996-1997 school year. My overall goal was to introduce Michigan students to a country half a world away in a very personal way and in a way that would encourage them to retain major concepts, to begin to understand another culture, and to generate their own questions about India. My presentations varied from 15 minutes to almost an hour and were made in a total of 10 first- through fifth-grade classrooms on

two school days. I first made a content outline and organized slides and a few other visuals. I then wrote nine focus questions following my outline.

1. Find the following on the world map:
  - a. India
  - b. Kerala
2. When is India's Independence Day? What empire was India a part of until 1947?
3. Why was Gandhi very important for India?
4. If you were a native of South India, what would you wear?
5. If you were a native of South India, what would you eat?
6. If you were a native of South India, where would you buy food?
7. If you were a native of South India, how would you travel?
8. If you were a student at Mathen Mappillai Memorial Public School, what would you study every day? What would you wear to school?
9. Name 5 animals that you might see in India.



I used all nine focus questions and encouraged comparisons between India and the United States for older students, either distributing questions before the lesson to small groups or reading all questions to the class. Distributing the written questions and giving students a chance to read them in advance worked best. I did not ask students to write their responses, but it was clear that some students believed they would have benefited from this opportunity to structure responses and write down a few of their own questions before the discussion. For younger students, I used only about half of the focus questions. I read these to the children and reminded them to listen carefully so they would be ready to respond. I added a song or story that I had often shared with Indian children to build interest at the beginning of the lessons for younger children.

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For example, my telling of the fable "The Crow and the Pitcher" resulted in a spontaneous, student-centered discussion of ways the crow could

solve his problem of not being able to reach the water in the pitcher.

I was delighted by the students' interest in a country so different from their own, their curiosity about Indian schools, and their accurate responses to focus questions. More importantly, their own questions reflected excellent insights and understanding. Indeed, when I returned to the school in following weeks, a number of students approached me with additional well thought-out questions. I was only sorry that there was so little time for questions from students in most classes. Ideally, focus questions would set the stage for student-centered research and discussion of related texts.

#### **Why did I choose to use focus questions?**

Focus questions can encourage attention to new information and build retention. In the remainder of this article I will discuss ways

to use focus questions before, during, and after listening to or reading new information. These strategies are most appropriate for reading expository text or listening to new information in a content area. With minor adaptations focus questions could also effectively guide reading narrative text or listening to stories or poems.

#### **What are focus questions?**

Focus questions are questions asked before reading or presentation of new information. In combination with general introduction or activation of prior knowledge, focus questions help students know what is important when reading or listening. They serve as a way to select things for remembering or extending. Focus questions provide a teacher-directed model for later independent study. As with my India presentations, the focus questions helped students to quickly focus on major concepts and opened the door for student curiosity. Several teachers commented on how eager students were to learn more about India and especially about her children and schools.

Anticipation guides (Readance, Bean & Baldwin, 1989) offer a teacher-directed way of structuring expected information in advance. Focus questions are similar in that they highlight the structure of new information to be listened to or read. Focus questions call for active involvement by students as they seek answers to specific questions and use these answers to build an overall understanding of and curiosity about a new topic.

#### **Preparation of Focus Questions**

The purpose of using focus questions is to guide students' response to and retention of material read or presented. Care in preparation of the lesson and related focus questions is, therefore, essential. Any lesson plan format can work well. The Literacy Lesson format discussed by David Cooper (1997, p. 56-58) is one possibility. This format uses three lesson components, first introduction, then reading (or listening) and responding, and finally extending.



Selecting material to be read or presented requires attention to time available, ability levels of students, and major points that the lesson emphasizes. Writing focus questions clearly and concisely also highlights major points. Finally, teachers can write one or more questions for each member of the class or decide which might be given to more than one individual or group. For example, a year of teaching in India provided me with a multitude of concepts and stories that I can share. In preparing for my lessons for the 10 Michigan classes, I considered first my offer to teachers for short lessons (of as little as 10-15 minutes); second, my need to limit the number of focus questions to fit the short time available; third, my knowledge that ability levels, attention span, and interests were varied with each class; and finally, my understanding that my role as first-time, visiting teacher in the classes meant that I needed both to introduce the topic and outline my expectations for the format of the discussion. I limited possible content to topics I knew to be interesting for elementary school students and about which they had sufficient prior knowledge to allow meaningful connections to the new information. Therefore, children, schools, and animals were my focus.

### **Types of Focus Questions**

Depending upon the purpose of the lesson and the age and experience of the students, fact questions only, higher level questions only, or a combination might be used. In developing focus questions refer to taxonomies of questions. Benjamin Bloom suggests six levels of questions: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (See Gunning, 1992, pp. 231-232) Jim Guszak identifies five types of questions: predict, locate, organize, remember, and evaluate (1978, pp. 232-239). Thomas Barrett emphasizes the literal, inferential, and critical levels (See Cooper, 1997, p. 5.). Also consider the four levels of authentic instruction discussed in the Michigan Curriculum Framework: higher-order thinking, deep knowledge, substantive conversation, and

connection to the world beyond the classroom (1996, sec. IV, p. 2). Typically, a combination of question types is most effective since this encourages thinking at different levels and from varied perspectives. Especially when small groups work together, divergent questions with several appropriate responses encourage active involvement and critical, creative thinking. The focus questions I chose for my India presentations were primarily literal level, but I encouraged comparisons between the United States and India throughout. This meant that many students and I were involved in substantive conversation that built shared understanding of living in another country. Taking this one step further, I gave one middle school class in Michigan this year and three last year the opportunity to exchange letters with Indian friends, thus building real connections to the world beyond the classroom.

### **Organizing for Responding to Focus Questions**

Focusing on a small set of questions makes it easier to share all questions with the whole group in advance. Students should be responsible not only for answering their own questions but also for being ready to answer other questions if their peers are stumped. I found students eager to respond to and ask as many questions as possible. Distributing questions in advance made it easy to ensure all had chances to participate in the discussion. As the lesson begins, the teacher can give questions to student in a variety of ways. The first possibility is for the teacher to prepare questions for each individual in the class. All students can work with the same question(s) or each individual can focus on a different question. Focus questions can be randomly assigned or directed to fit individual abilities or interests. A second possibility is working on focus questions in pairs; a third is working in groups of three to six.

### **Format for responses to questions**

Focus questions should be answered orally in a group discussion after reading or listening to new information. This allows all to



focus on important concepts or to extend or critically analyze these. Students should be asked to answer their own questions. If help is needed, other students can volunteer to help. Depending on the purpose of the lesson and time available, teachers can restrict discussion to questions asked or encourage expansion of the basic concepts. Students can be asked to write answers during or after the reading or presentation and might be given time to meet with their group and frame responses before discussion.

### Evaluation

Lessons that include focus questions can be evaluated by observation of student interests and proportion of on-task behavior. Quality of responses to each focus question is a key. Was the question answered accurately? Was the answer stated effectively and put into appropriate context? Were creative or insightful statements or questions included? In addition to evaluation of the discussion, teachers can also choose to evaluate the quality of written responses to questions prepared by individuals or groups.

Focus questions are an excellent strategy for clearly stating lesson expectations, actively involving students throughout the lesson, and encouraging attention to and retention of material read or listened to. Teacher guidance using focus questions models skills that students can learn to use independently as they study in content areas.

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