

# Learning How to Ask Questions



Suzanne Meyer, the assistant director of the English Language Institute at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, says that many students need to develop critical thinking skills.

In other words, students need to learn how to collect information, and then evaluate the information and apply it to a new context.

She says, “We need to get students actively engaged in inquiry, from the beginning levels on, into those levels where they really are close to professional and university contexts.”

One way to develop critical thinking skills, Meyer says, is to teach students to be creative about the types of questions that they ask.

Meyer says that there are many benefits engaging in question-asking activities with English learners. Question-asking activities help students to become better at speaking English.

She says, “Question-asking overall helps students be better language learners. Not for the obvious, because you ask a question you get an answer. Often, questions are the initial point of contact, so if my question is not good, then that’s going to direct the level of our conversation.

Meyer also says that question-asking may help develop critical thinking skills by giving more ideas.

People who can ask questions are very confident, and when they are confident, you can have more interaction. That extra interaction might lead to critical thinking because you are more likely to actually have a conversation in some fashion into a new setting if you are in an ESL scenario. I think overall, just the whole question-asking idea has so many benefits.

There are many strategies to improve question-asking and develop critical thinking skills. One possible strategy, says “Meyer is to use question-asking patterns that start with concrete questions and will lead to abstract questions.

For example, if students were reading a new text, they would design much better questions using three-different steps.

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In the first step, students create questions about information in the text that they are reading.

In the second step, students create questions about how the information in the text connects to their own life.

In the third step, students create questions about abstract ideas - ideas that came up in the questions about themselves.

If students follow these three steps, they have not only practiced creative ways to ask questions, they have also learned critical thinking.

Meyer says that when teachers tell students which questions to answer, students are more reluctant to be creative about the types of questions that they ask.

Practice developing your own questions! Try making a list of questions that start from concrete to abstract, like the steps outlined above. Check with your teacher to make sure that your grammar is correct, and try to practice in the classroom.

1. You just met a foreigner at a bar. Write down 10 questions you would ask them.
2. You met a foreigner who has been in Japan for 20 years - Write 10 questions you would ask them.
3. You have already asked all the boring questions about the foreigner. Use that information and keep the conversation going by asking 5 questions.