Eliciting is a technique that ESL teachers often use to obtain information about what their students do or don't know. Eliciting techniques are helpful as a diagnostic tool, allowing teachers to easily determine what their students need, without having to waste time rehashing content already covered in class. Eliciting also creates a learner-centered environment as it prompts students to think about the chosen topic in a broader sense, allowing students to share what they know with their peers. There is much you can elicit from students such as language knowledge, background information, general knowledge, opinions, feelings, associations, ideas, questions and answers, etc.

Studies have shown that students become more involved in a lesson through elicitation because they are actively producing speech and giving information. In other words, students become active learners, rather than just passively listening to teacher instruction. Elicitation allows students to exchange ideas and tap into their own collective knowledge. Furthermore, research supports the notion that students are more likely to retain new content through elicitation as it helps to make the teaching and learning of new knowledge more relevant to students.

Depending on the objectives of a lesson, there are many ways eliciting can be used to promote active participation from students. However, there needs to be some initial input or stimulus from the teacher to get things started. Examples of initial input or stimulus can be warm-up questions or visuals, which are covered in more detail later in the article.

Elicitation can present a bit of a challenge with students who come from countries where teachers have a somewhat elevated social status and where maintaining face can be a real concern. This can mean they may be reluctant to respond because they are conditioned to expect that teachers have all the answers, and there is also a fear of giving the wrong answer and appearing foolish in front of peers. However, if the teacher promotes a cooperative learning environment and is persistent, these students can feel more comfortable with elicitation and even enjoy it.

One way to avoid long silences is to consider nominating students to answer particular questions. Do not always rely on a select group of students to respond and give praise and encouragement for any response regardless of it being relevant or not. The aim is to positively reinforce participation. It also helps to give students time to think about what they are going to say and for the teacher to ask more open-ended questions, which have more than one possible correct answer. If you find there is a minimal response from the class, try giving them more input to help direct their thoughts. Below are some techniques you can use in your classroom for eliciting.

Eliciting vocabulary

Use elicitation when you want your students to come up with a word on their own. Many teachers try to elicit vocabulary from their students as a way to review a previous lesson. There are many ways this can be achieved. A commonly used technique is to have students match words to their definitions. Provide students with a definition and see if they can supply the correct word. Learner dictionary definitions normally contain clear definitions that are easy for students to understand, so having those on hand is ideal when you are trying to elicit vocabulary.

You can also use synonyms to elicit target words. When you use this technique, make a statement and ask students to paraphrase it by using synonyms. You can also use antonyms as a useful way to elicit words from students. Even the act of pretending to forget a word serves as a prompt to get students guessing the particular word you are trying to elicit from them.

For young or visual learners, flashcards or pictures help elicit vocabulary. You can play a variety of games with flashcards to elicit vocabulary. Some examples include Flashcards at Dawn, Mr Wolf, or Whisper. Instructions for these activities can be found in the ESL Flashcards Games section of the website. Or you can use the flashcards as visuals to play a memory review game or even Pictionary. Another way to use visuals in the classroom is by incorporating 'spot the difference' activities, which students often enjoy. More often than not, students become more engaged the moment they see pictures or visuals as they add an element of fun to lessons. Pictures help to bring words to life and allow students to make the connection between the word and the object associated with the word.

Instead of having students write things down in a list, try using mind maps or word clusters. Mind maps or word clusters work better with older students and can also help to elicit vocabulary. Studies suggest that mind maps encourage creativity because the visuals help to promote ideas by encouraging students to see the links and connections between different concepts or words. Simply start by writing a general topic in the center of the board and have the students add words that relate to the topic.

Students often pick up new words quickly, but a problem emerges when they are not given sufficient opportunity to use the words they have learned. Without repeated exposure and practice, the retention of new vocabulary wanes. So, try to find ways to regularly practice the words you teach in class and use them in contexts students will remember. For instance, after eliciting vocabulary about the four seasons, students can work on a review activity like "Seasonal Sort-Out" where they use their existing knowledge to complete a sorting activity. Another example could be after completing an activity about food and drink for beginners, you revisit the items by applying them to the context of creating a shopping list. Try using the worksheet, "My Shopping List" as a way for students to review language connected to food and drink. There are a variety of supplementary worksheets that can be found throughout the website, many of which include fun activities that can be used to review General English topics.

Eliciting grammar

Many teachers often use close-ended questions to elicit grammar. When incorporating teacher-centered methods, asking close-ended questions allows for more control over the lesson and the target language that you want your students to produce. However, there are alternatives for eliciting grammar that are more engaging and interactive. For instance, you can use modeling, a drawing, or a situational dialogue. Create some kind of context for the students to understand the grammar point and then follow up with Concept Check Questions. As an example, let's use this technique with the present continuous. To start the lesson, show a picture of a student in the classroom. For learners who need extra information, have a list of base verbs on the board for students to access. Then, write the following question on the board: What is the student doing (in the picture)? If the students are struggling to come up with words, provide more context by modeling an example sentence or increase the wait time after each question.

If you are doing a reading exercise, ask students to give you examples of the grammar point from the text. For example, have students do a treasure hunt, where they need to find as many present simple verbs as they can. You can also ask students questions that require them to answer using a particular grammatical form. Try dividing your students into smaller groups and giving them a list of conversation questions or dividing the class into pairs and giving each student in the pair a respective set of questions. Certain topics lend themselves to particular grammar structures such as talking about the weekend or a recent vacation or trip (past simple) or describing a routine (present simple). You may also want to try giving students the grammar points first and then eliciting some example sentences.

Eliciting target language in reading activities

Prediction is often used when teaching reading. Normally, headlines or photos are used to elicit ideas from students. This approach gets students to predict elements of the story, key concepts or themes, and language that are likely to be encountered. This helps students focus their reading and usually aids their comprehension of the text.

Presenting headlines or showing photos from current event stories, is one way of incorporating realia or authentic materials in the classroom. Studies have shown that the use of authentic materials in the classroom makes lessons more meaningful and allows students to make the connection between the target language and real life. Predicting is also a useful strategy to help students apply the target language for giving descriptions concerning who, what, where, when, why, and how. You can also get students to expand on a text to practice giving more details. If you've recently covered a lesson on parts of speech, for example, you can ask students to add adjectives to particular nouns or add details to the story.

Retelling a story or text can also serve as a tool to elicit target language. For instance, you can start by providing techniques for how to paraphrase sentences and how to summarise longer passages. To make things more interesting, students can also tell or summarize the story from one particular character's perspective, in the first person or third person, or even present the story as a TV news item. Another way to review a text is to divide students into two groups and have them create their own questions about the text and quiz each other. Alternatively, you can divide the students into smaller groups to elicit the target language through book talks. In these sessions, you can get students to share new words they learned from the text, or share their ideas, opinions, or feelings about what they have read.

Eliciting techniques for current knowledge and new ideas

When a lesson is topic-based, it's useful to begin by eliciting students' current knowledge and understanding of the topic. This can be done by brainstorming with the aid of mind maps or other graphic organizers. Brainstorming helps students to come up with ideas and information related to the topic you are going to teach. The students can work in groups or as a whole class to think of words and associations related to the topic. If done as a class, write up any vocabulary or ideas given which the class might find useful. If done in smaller groups, students can explore the topic with their peers and create word lists or clusters which can then be shared with the rest of the class. Other ways to elicit current knowledge and understanding include using text, pictures, or even telling a story or anecdote and then asking for students' reactions. This approach to eliciting is a benefit to both teachers and students. Teachers can gain more insight into students' understanding of particular topics which helps inform future lesson planning. For students, brainstorming activities help reinforce existing knowledge and assist in acquiring new knowledge.

Freewriting is also a useful activity to help draw on students' existing knowledge. Ask the students to free-write for a few minutes in response to a topic or question. Students will likely draw on past experiences or existing knowledge to help them complete the activity. Again, specific questions or prompts can help to get students started, especially for students who require more input.

Final thoughts

Eliciting is a helpful tool that all teachers should utilize in their classrooms. As you can see, elicitation can be employed in numerous ways and can be used to teach and review a variety of English skills. Elicitation does not have to be limited to a repetitive question and answer routine. Instead, try implementing the techniques mentioned in this article to make your lessons more interactive. Not only does elicitation serve as a diagnostic or formative assessment tool, but it is also an effective way to help your students become active learners. Elicitation also helps students to explore the target language by comparing their existing knowledge with new content. Most importantly, it allows students to apply what they've learned in different contexts in a more meaningful and memorable way.