

“What Is It?”: A Multipurpose Language Teaching Technique

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What is it?

It's interesting.

It's easy to make.

It makes your learners think.

It's good for work in pairs, groups, or with the whole class.

It gives each learner a chance to show his skill.

It can be used for listening, reading, writing, or speaking.

Do you give up? The answer is: my favorite teaching technique—the “What Is It?” technique.

Teaching the spoken skills

Let's look at an example of this technique used as a listening and speaking exercise. First, the teacher thinks of something that his students know well, and he describes it:

It's *black and silver*.

It's *quite heavy*.

It's made of *metal and rubber*.

It costs *a lot of money*.

We can find it *on the roads*.

It has *two wheels and a motor*.

It's used for *going from one place to another*.

What is it?

When a student thinks that he knows what the teacher is describing, he raises his hand. He does not shout out. When the teacher reaches the end of the description, he asks one of the students who has raised his hand to name the object he has described.

The teacher describes several things in this way while the students listen and try to guess the objects being described. Then the teacher writes an example on the blackboard, using the same sentence patterns as in the example above. He then gives another example to show that all he has to do is change the underlined words to make a new description:

It's *brown*.

It's *square*.

It's made of *wood*.

It costs *about fifty dollars*.

It has *four legs*.

We can find it *in a classroom*.

It's used for *writing, reading, and resting*.

What is it?

Having the Students Choose. Next, the teacher chooses something for the class to describe, and the students suggest substitutions in the model sentences on the blackboard to make a good description. When they can do this easily, the teacher asks one of them to think of something and then describe it by closely following the model on the blackboard. While the student describes the object, the teacher and the other students try to guess what it is. This is one of the good features of the "What Is It?" technique: each student has the chance to possess information that the others in the class, including the teacher, do not have. The student knows what he is going to describe; the others do not. They must therefore listen carefully to his description in order to find out what it is. This puts the student in a superior position to the teacher and the other students in the class. In many classrooms this is a rare situation; usually only the teacher is in the superior position. The "What Is It?" technique enables us to change this situation.

Providing Practice for Beginners. Even beginners can use the "What Is It?" technique for language practice. The teacher puts the following simple patterns on the blackboard:

 a shop.
We can find it in a school.
 a house.

 silver.
It's brown.
 colorless.
 black.

 metal.
It's made of wood.
 glass.

 big.
It's square.
 round.
 long.

 a neck.
 a lid.
 a handle.
It has four legs.
 four corners.
 numbers on it.
 ink in it.

 holding things.
 holding water.
It's used for drawing.
 sitting.
 eating.
 telling the time.

On another part of the blackboard the teacher writes this pattern or puts up a chart containing pictures of the following things:

 a chair.
 a tin.¹
 a ruler.
 a clock.
 a box.
It's a pen.
 a glass.
 a blackboard.
 a table.
 a knife.
 a bottle.
 a pencil.

The teacher also writes each noun in this pattern on a small piece of paper and distributes these among some of the students. One of the students then describes the object on his piece of paper by reading appropriate sentences from the patterns on the blackboard. The other students listen, and when the description is finished they read aloud the appropriate sentence from the last pattern, naming the object. Here is an example:

Student A: We can find it in a shop.²
 We can find it in a house.
 It's silver.
 It's made of metal.
 It's round.
 It has a lid.
 It's used for holding things.

Student B: It's a tin.

Teaching vocabulary

The "What Is It?" technique can also be used to introduce new vocabulary. Let's imagine that the teacher wants to introduce the word *stirrup*. He may describe it as follows:

A stirrup is silver.
A stirrup is strong.
A stirrup is made of iron.
A stirrup has a flat bottom.
We can find a stirrup on a horse.
A stirrup is used to put your foot into when you ride a horse.

When the teacher finishes his description he tells the students to try to translate the word into their mother tongue. (If there is no roughly equivalent word in the mother tongue, they can draw a picture or point to one of several pictures that the teacher may make available.)

1. In American English, *It's a can* or *It's a tin can*.

2. In American English this would probably be *store*.

While describing a stirrup, the teacher repeats each sentence once or twice before going on to the next one. He also goes back and repeats the previous sentences several times before he reaches the end of the description. In this way the students will have heard the new word *stirrup* many times by the end of the description. They will also have listened with close attention because they want to discover what the new word means. Some teachers make the mistake of giving the meaning of new vocabulary too quickly. Once the students have been given the meaning of the word, they have no reason to pay attention any longer. Experiments on remembering (Jenkins 1974) have shown that recalling the *form* of a word (its spelling or sound) is more difficult than recalling its *meaning*. For this reason, techniques that give the student an opportunity for repeated attention to a new word *before* discovering its meaning are important for vocabulary learning. If the learners are asked to translate *stirrup* after listening to the description, this is in some ways the same as a direct translation where the teacher says, "*Stirrup* in your mother tongue is _____." But the differences are important: Direct translation is quick; the "What Is It?" technique, involving the describing of the object before the learners are asked to translate, wastes some *teaching time*, but it makes valuable use of *learning time*. By listening to the description the learners have heard the new word several times, they have had to make an effort to get the meaning, and they have been active in telling the teacher what they think the translation should be (Nation, *English Language Teaching Journal*, forthcoming).

Limiting the Information. The order of the sentences in the "What Is It?" technique is important if the teacher wants to keep the meaning of the new word away from the learners for as long as possible. The following example shows how this may be done. This time I will teach a technical word used in botany. As you read the description, make a note of the point at which you felt that you knew the common name for the technical word.

Brassicas are green.

Brassicas are made of leaves.

Brassicas have big leaves.

One costs about sixty cents.

We can find brassicas in most vegetable gardens.

Brassicas are round.

Brassicas are used for eating.

Many people cook brassicas before they eat them.

You should not have been able to guess that the new word *brassica* referred to cabbages, cauliflowers, etc., until after you had read almost all of the sentences. So, in constructing a "What Is It?" exercise the teacher should make sure that the first sentences do not provide too much information. In this way he can give the stu-

dents an opportunity to meet the new word several times.

Providing for Individual Work. The "What Is It?" technique can also be used for individual vocabulary work, with the exercises on cards or in a book. Here is an example:

ONE MORE SENTENCE

From the five "Missing Sentences" given at the end, find the one that belongs to each of the groups of related sentences. Write the number of the sentence and, next to it, the name of the object described in the group of sentences to which it belongs.

A farm is a big piece of land.

A farm is usually in the country.

Sometimes a man grows vegetables or rice on a farm.

A hen is a big bird.

We eat eggs from a hen.

A hen eats corn and other things.

A hen cannot swim.

A map is very useful.

A map is a picture of streets, roads, towns, and cities.

A map shows us the hills, mountains, and rivers.

A restaurant is a building.

A man sells food in a restaurant.

People can buy many kinds of food and drink there.

Sometimes a telegram brings good news.

Sometimes a telegram brings bad news.

We send a telegram at the post office.

The Missing Sentences

1. We use it when we want to know the way.
2. People go there to eat.
3. Sometimes a man keeps animals there.
4. People keep it and feed it.
5. It travels quickly through a wire.

This exercise may also be used to teach verbs, adjectives, or adverbs; in that case the missing sentence has an empty space where the new word should be.

Introducing Vocabulary Incidentally. The "What Is It?" technique can also be used to introduce new vocabulary incidentally. This often adds extra interest. For example, if the teacher is describing a *fork* in a listen-and-guess exercise, he might say:

It is silver. Silver is a color as well as a material.

Can you think of other things that are silver but are not made of silver?

It is long.

It usually has four prongs. Do you know what a *prong* is? . . .

The value of the "What Is It?" technique in teaching vocabulary lies in the opportunity it provides the stu-

dents to give repeated attention to the new word while requiring them to play an active part in discovering the meaning. It can be used in classes where English is the medium of instruction for subjects such as geography, mathematics, and general science as well as in special ESL classes.

Teaching the written skills

The "What Is It?" technique can be used in creating short puzzles to give practice in reading. The students read the description and respond by doing one of the following:

1. completing a sentence
2. writing a name
3. drawing a picture
4. choosing a name, picture, or sentence from several given choices

Here is an example to illustrate these different kinds of responses:

It is usually colorless and partly round. We can find it in houses. Every house has several of them. It is made of glass and metal. It shines when electricity passes through it.

1. We usually use it when _____.
 2. What is it?
 3. Draw a picture of it.
 4. It is a _____.
- cup pot bulb window

Providing for Individual Differences. It is easy to give useful composition practice in a class with a wide range of ability by using the "What Is It?" technique. The teacher introduces the technique in the way described at the beginning of this article. Then he tells the students to write a description of something, using the model sentences that he has put on the blackboard and adding other suitable sentences if they can. In this way, the students who have only a little difficulty with English can add many sentences that are not based on the model; these who find writing difficult can use only the model sentences.

Even when learners describe the same thing and use only the model sentences it is unlikely that any of the descriptions will be exactly the same; the "What Is It?" technique is a good bridge between strictly controlled composition and free composition. After the students have written their compositions they can exchange them with other students in the class, who read them and try to guess what is being described. Composition work thus becomes a communicative activity.

Using Other Questions. There is no reason why the technique should be limited to the question "What is it?" There are many other possibilities: "What book or film is it?," "Who is it?," "What country or city is it?," "What animal is it?" Here are some examples of possi-

ble models (Nation, *Language Teaching Techniques*, forthcoming):

- a. Each student describes one of his friends or a person that everyone knows:
He is about *thirty years old*.
He is *one meter eighty centimeters tall*.
He has *black hair and brown eyes*.
He is wearing a *blue shirt and black trousers*.
He is wearing *glasses*.
He is *carrying a bag / sitting near me*.
Who is he?

- b. Each student describes an animal and the others try to guess its name:
It is *big*. It is *brown*. It has *four legs*. It has *horns*. It has a *long tail*. It does not have *wings*. It lives *in a field*. It can *give us milk*. It cannot *fly*. Its body is covered with *thick skin*. It is *tame*, so it is *not afraid of people*. What is it?

- c. Each student chooses and describes a different country, city, or place:
It has a *warm climate*. It has *three seasons*. They are *the wet season, the dry season, and the cool season*. It is a *small country*. It has a *small population*. Many of the farmers in that country *grow rice/raise cattle*. It sells *wood* to other countries. It buys *cars* from other countries. It is part of *the Middle East/Asia/South America*. It is to the south of/near *the Indian Sea*. Its neighbors are *India and Burma*. The people there speak many languages. These languages are *Singhalese, Tamil, and English*. The capital city is called _____ . What country is it?

- d. Each student has a different book and describes his own book:

Jane Eyre was written by *Charlotte Brontë*.
Charlotte Brontë lived *over a hundred years ago*.
She was *English*.

Jane Eyre is an *interesting* book. (Instead of *interesting* you can have *long, difficult, expensive, famous, etc.*) It has a *hard cover*. It is *three hundred and twenty pages long*. It has *twelve chapters*. It has *many pictures (a table of contents, an index, some questions at the back)*. It has a *red cover*. There is a *picture of a girl* on the cover. It was first printed by *Oxford University Press* in *1864*.

It is a *love story*. It is about a *young girl*.

Summary

The "What Is It?" technique has many useful features:

1. It can be used to teach vocabulary and to give

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practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

2. It involves the students in meaningful communicative activity.

3. It gives each student a chance to be in a superior position as the source of information. Students performing are much more interesting than the teacher performing.

4. It can be used with classes containing students of widely differing achievement in English. It can also be used with beginners or advanced learners.

5. It requires little work from the teacher but a large amount of effort and attention from the students.

6. It can act as a bridge between controlled and free

activities in speaking and writing.

7. It can provide challenging opportunities for attention to repeated material in listening, reading, and vocabulary-learning activities.

8. It is fun for both teacher and students.

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