Blank Questions – Levels of abstract thinking

Marion Blank's model of language use encourages the person who is asking questions of a child/children to simplify and restructure his/her language to a level at which the child can understand. The Blank model can be used in everyday exchanges with different children within the same group. Consequently, this model can be used effectively in the classroom and in multiple situations around the home.

An adult's language can be quite close to the features of the material (The objects are present or have just been removed and the questions directly relate to the objects in front of the child (Level 1) or the adult's language can be quite distant from the material (Level 4) where the most complex and later level of questioning, requires the child to reason and problem solve with materials unlikely to be present. At Level 4, the child often needs to draw on past knowledge or experience.

Levels of questioning in the classroom

Blank, Rose and Berlin (1978) devised a language analysis based on four levels, ranging from basic skills at level one to more complex reasoning skills at level four.

The emphasis in this model is on how the adult talks to the child.

Level 1: Matching Perception

When the student is at the earliest stage he best responds to things in the immediate environment. Use short questions and statements that only require response to key items and events including matching, identifying and naming objects.

Level 2: Selective Analysis of Perception

The student must focus more selectively on aspects of the question to reach a conclusion. He/she is required to undertake such tasks as identifying objects by function, describing and making basic classifications.

Level 3: Reordering Perception

Certain basic facts must be considered and evaluated before responding. The student needs to focus on the context in which the objects or events occur, describe a sequence of events and generalise about a set of objects.

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Level 4: Reasoning about Perception

The student must problem-solve at a higher level of abstraction. He/she must go beyond the concrete and talk about logical relationships between objects and events. Demands at this level include prediction about events, explanations and logical solutions.

Examples of questions at each level:

Level 1

Question type	Example
Scanning for a matching object	Find one like this
Identifying and object by sound	Show me what you heard
Identifying an object that has been touched	Show me what you touched
Naming an object seen	What is this?
Naming an object heard	What can you hear?
Naming an object touched	What did you touch/feel?
Imitating a simple sentence	Say this….
Remembering pictured objects	What did you see?
Remembering incidental information	What did you see (at the shop?)

Level 2

Question type	Example
Describing a scene (visually available)	What is happening?
Recalling items named	What things did we see?
Recalling information	Who did..? where was..? What did he do?
Completing a sentence	You cut with a…..
Identifying and naming characteristics of objects	What colour, size, shape, texture, location, number
Identifying objects according to function	Which one do we….(eat)
Describing objects by function	What do we use a ……for?
Attending to two characteristics	Tell me two things that are….and ….
Identifying differences	How are x and x different
Citing an item within a category	Tell me something that is (furniture)

Level 3

Question type	Example
Finding objects that can be used together	Which one goes with this? (shoe/ shoelace; knife/fork
Describing what might happen next	What will happen after this?

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Assuming the role of another person	What might x say?
Stating how a person might feel	How might x feel
Following two stage instructions	Do …..and then….
Identifying similarities	How are these the same? What do all these have?
Identifying objects by exclusion of a characteristic	Which one is not?
Naming an object by exclusion	Tell me something that is not…
Identifying an alternative	What else can..? What can we use instead of?
Giving directions	Tell me how to do it
Arrange pictures in a sequence	Make these into a story
Describing pictures in a sequence or retell an event that happened	Tell me the story What happened when…
Generalising about a set of events	What happened to all of these when (I put them in water)
Defining a word	What is a …

Level 4

Question type	Example
Predicting a change in position	Where will x go if…
Predicting a change in structure	What will happen if (we put these in the freezer)
Justifying a prediction	Why will/ won't x happen?
Justifying a decision	Why would/wouldn't it…
Identifying the causes of an event	What made x happen
Formulating a solution to a problem	What might you do?
Formulating a solution to a problem (from another's perspective)	What might she do?
Selecting the means to a goal	How will she get (some money)?
Making an inference from an observation	How can we tell x is x? (the girl is tired?)
Explaining the construction of objects	Why is x made of x?
Explaining the logic of compound words	Why is this called a (motorbike)

On the internet you can find examples of **bookmark reminders** of Blank's question, and Twinkl (www.twinkl.co.uk) has a range of **picture based activities** with questions for different levels.

David Haley
Director of Children's Services

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AT EACH LEVEL FOR SCIENCE

The following example demonstrates how to use the Blank Language Scheme to structure questions at different levels. Blank is very versatile and the principles can be applied to most subjects and activities.

Level 1
Point to the test tube.
What's this? (point to the Bunsen Burner).
Find me another one like this (pick up the gauze).

Level 2
What did you use to light the cotton wool?
Point to something that burns.
Where did you put the test tube?
What is the mat for?

Level 3
'Fill the water to the right level in the test tube and fix it to the clamp. Light your Bunsen Burner carefully and open the hole on the side'
Tell me how you heated the water.
What happened to the thermometer during the experiment?
What does 'fuel' mean?
What does 'efficient' mean?
Arrange a series of pictures into the correct order to show what happened (supported level 3)

Level 4
What will happen to the water?
Why do you need to wear safety goggles when doing the experiment?
How do you know which fuel is the most efficient?

EXAMPLES WITHIN CURRICULUM AREAS

English
- Summarising information – picking out the most relevant bits of information
- Retelling a sequence of events from a story
- Identifying what a character may think, feel and do in a situation
- Explaining how we can tell how a character is feeling
- Justifying the action of a character
- Solving a problem

Maths
- Understanding a series of instructions to complete a sum
- Explaining how to complete a sum
- Defining words and symbols

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- Justifying why a calculation was done
- Solving a mathematical problem involving language

Science
- Recounting, in sequence the steps taken in an experiment
- Predicting the outcome of an experiment
- Defining words and technical terms

Geography
- Recounting a step by step event i.e cloud formation, the rock cycle etc
- Predicting the outcome of a course of action i.e deforestation
- Presenting a solution to a particular problem
- Justifying why a particular course of action is correct.

Reference: Levels of questioning in the classroom. Cluster Lanuage Project May 2009 (sue Jamal and Gwen Lancaster LBL Support Team, Chaucer Centre. Merton Council.

Ann Forrester, Speech & Language Therapy – July 2016

David Haley
Director of Children's Services