ASKING QUESTIONS

One of the most important things we can teach beginning level students is to ask clarifying questions and, above all, to say "I don't understand!" We have all witnessed (and I'm sure most of us have been guilty of) native speakers talking to beginning language learners assuming that what they are saying is being understood since they are not being told otherwise. Often this is because beginning language learners don't know how to do it. This lesson tackles this in a Low-Beginning class.

This lesson can be taught about a month into a Level 1 class - after the students have learned some basic vocabulary. (It could also be used in a Level 2 class.) Because there are a lot of examples and new vocabulary, it's probably best to spread this lesson out over the course of a week.

Day One

Introduce I don't understand. Chances are there are a few students who already know this so you can do this by speaking gibberish, speaking very fast or by using very difficult vocabulary and then stopping and looking expectantly at the students. Try this a few times until someone says it. From there you can write it on the board and then explain what it means to everyone else. (In the case of a class where no one responds after two or three attempts, skip to this point rather than torture them!) Emphasize how important it is for them to know these words and stress that they should use them whenever they need to.

Practice I don't understand by saying things to various students that they don't understand and having them tell you so. Then practice Conversation One, introducing any vocabulary they don't know. Read it as a class, then have students practice in pairs. Finally call on individuals to do the conversations.

(Note: Conversations One - Eleven [attached] can be written on the board as you go along for students to copy, or you can enlarge and copy the conversations to distribute as you go over them.)
Day Two

Review I don't understand and practice Conversation One as a group and then call on individuals.

Introduce: How do you spell that?, How do you write that?, and How do you pronounce that?. Explain all the new vocabulary and then practice conversations Two, Three, and Four, following the same procedure as above.

Day Three

Review the questions. Say things to various students that they won't understand (trying to elicit I don't understand.) Practice Conversations One-Four and call on individuals to do it.

Introduce: What does _____ mean?, What is a/an _____?, Could you please repeat that?. Practice Conversations Five, Six and Seven as above.

Day Four

Review the previous days' work and practice the conversations as above.


Day Five

Distribute Handout One or write on the board. Review everything. (You may want to enlarge this sheet on a postermaker and keep it on the wall for the duration of the semester.)

Distribute questions written on index cards (samples attached). All the vocabulary should be familiar to the students. Instruct each student to ask someone the question on the card. When their partner responds the first student must ask one of the follow-up questions on the board (or say I don't understand). Once finished the other student asks the question on his/her card and the process is repeated. They then swap cards and ask each other the new question. Once each pair has asked the second question and a
clarifying follow-up question, they then go on to another person and repeat the entire process.

Example:

Maria: What is your first name?
Chang: My first name is Chang?
Maria: Did you say Chong?
Chang: No Chang.

Chang: What is your last name?
Maria: My last name is Ramos.
Chang: How do you spell that?
Maria: R-A-M-O-S

They swap cards.

Chang: What is your first name?
Maria: My first name is Maria.
Chang: You said Maria?
Maria: Yes.

Maria: What is your last name?
Chang: My last name is Tam.
Maria: Did you say Tan?
Chang: No. My name is Tam.

They then move on to new partners.

This works well but is a bit complicated to explain so you must demonstrate and be persistent. Go in there and ask questions yourself. The whole thing must be closely monitored to work well. Let them go on until they have spoken with everyone (in a small class) or about 10 people (in a larger class). Slower students may ask the same follow-up question to everyone which is fine.

Follow up

Encourage students to ask these types of questions throughout the semester.
Asking Questions: Conversation Sheet

One:
A Where is the bathroom?
B The first door on the left.
A I’m sorry. I don’t understand.
B That door.
A Ok. Thank you.

Two:
A What’s your name?
B My name is Maryjane.
A How do you spell that?

Three:
A What’s your name?
B My name is Chang.
A How do you write that?
B (Write: Chang)

Four:
A What’s your name?
B Tomas.
A How do you pronounce that?
B TOE MAHSS.

Five:
A What does DOG mean?
B It’s an animal. It says: Arf, arf, arf.

Six:
A What is a CAT?
B It’s an animal. It says: Meow, meow, meow.
Seven:
A  Read Pages 5 and 6 in your book.
B  Could you please repeat that?
A  Read Pages 5 and 6.
B  OK. Thank you.

Eight:
A  Come to school on Tuesday.
B  Did you say Thursday?
A  No, I said Tuesday.

Nine:
A  My phone number is 665-9876.
B  That's 665-9876?
A  Yes. That's right.

Ten:
A  Come to school on Thursday.
B  You said Thursday?
A  Yes, you've got it.

Eleven:
A  Meet Anna at Van Ness on Monday.
B  Who again?
A  Anna.
B  Where again?
A  Van Ness.
B  When again?
A  On Monday.

Twelve:
A  Can I have the chalk?
B  What again?
A  The chalk.
B  Okay. Here it is.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT’S YOUR FIRST NAME?</th>
<th>WHAT’S YOUR LAST NAME?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHERE ARE YOU FROM?</td>
<td>WHAT LANGUAGE DO YOU SPEAK?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT CITY DO YOU LIVE IN?</td>
<td>WHAT STATE DO YOU LIVE IN?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT IS YOUR ZIP CODE?</td>
<td>WHAT IS YOUR AREA CODE?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT IS YOUR PHONE NUMBER?</td>
<td>WHAT IS YOUR ADDRESS?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT SCHOOL DO YOU GO TO?</td>
<td>WHAT IS THE SCHOOL’S ADDRESS?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT DAY IS TODAY?</td>
<td>WHAT DAY IS TOMORROW?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT DAY WAS YESTERDAY?</td>
<td>WHAT MONTH IS THIS?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT WAS LAST MONTH?</td>
<td>WHAT IS NEXT MONTH?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
QUESTION CARDS