

Book Review

Big Questions in ELT by Scott Thornbury

(Scott Thornbury (2013). *Big Questions in ELT* [Kindle DX version]. www.amazon.com)

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The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing. – Socrates

Socrates instigated critical inquiry and debate by formulating questions, commonly referred to today as the Socratic Method. Scott Thornbury's (2013a) *Big Questions in ELT* takes a similar approach by posing questions so that the reader think critically about central themes in teaching and learning English as an additional language. In fact, throughout the 91-page book, the reader will encounter 21 chapter titles in the form of questions. Moreover, each chapter consists of a section of discussion questions, not to mention additional questions sprinkled throughout the chapters themselves, totaling more than 189 questions for the entire book. Chapter questions as titles, questions throughout the chapter, and a section at the end of each chapter for discussion questions culminate into a short book, taking the reader on a journey of reflective inquiry through today's predominant issues related to English language teaching (ELT) practices, *à la* Socratic Method.

The way in which the author wrote this book is intriguing and perhaps a process that will become more common in the future. Thornbury (2013b) maintains a public blog, *An A-Z of ELT*, which was the basis for this book. The book chapters were extrapolated directly from the blog with only slight modifications, and eight discussion questions were added at the end of each chapter, followed by a reference list. Specifically, each chapter begins with a title question, followed by three-to-five pages of explanation around each chapter question, a section of eight discussion questions, a reference list, and finally a link to the blog itself. The links at the end of each chapter make the book a bit more interactive since the work was actually an Amazon Kindle eBook that was downloaded via the Internet. For the purposes of this review, terms *book* and *Amazon Kindle eBook* will be used interchangeably. This eBook, sold through Amazon Kindle, is set at a current price of \$7.99 (United States dollars), and at the time of this writing has not been made available in printed form.

The purpose for writing the book was to make an "unwieldy blog" of ideas into a "more friendly format" (Thornbury, 2013a, Introduction Section, paragraph 5). Thornbury noticed that many ideas shared on his blog were emerging repeatedly, often in the form of questions, hence the need for a book with a large number of questions, both as chapter headings and as ending discussion questions. The chapters are stated in the table of contents as the following questions:

1) How many words do learners need to know?	8) What is fluency and how do you teach it?	15) How do you achieve 'flow' in your teaching?
2) Why are some learners unwilling to communicate?	9) Should we push our learners?	16) How does identity impact on language learning? [<i>sic</i>]
3) Are there different learning styles?	10) Why focus on form?	17) How do you get a 'feel' for a second language?
4) Is the use of the learners' mother tongue a good idea?	11) What is scaffolding and how do you do it?	18) Can you learn a language if you're not paying attention?
5) Where do errors come from?	12) Is there a best method?	19) Do rules help you learn a language?
6) Is language learning all in the mind?	13) Is there anything wrong with rote learning?	20) How do you teach reactively?
7) What is the best age to start?	14) What makes an activity 'communicate'?	21) Is practice good and what is good practice?

The questions above, and thus the overall purpose of the book, are to afford both in-service and pre-service English language educators to reflect on their practice by "re-activating and continuing the online conversations that the original blog posts triggered" (Thornbury, 2013a, Introduction Section, paragraph. 6). Indeed, posing questions as chapter headings indicates a lack of answers within the profession, according to the author.

Thornbury wrote this book with his blog in mind. The reader can easily trace prior conversations regarding the chapter topics by clicking on the hypertext link at the end of each chapter. Because I read the book on a mobile device that also had an Internet connection, this process was seamless. Toggling back-and-forth between online blog comments and book chapters help situate content by providing additional perspective. The chapters appear to not be in any particular order, but it is clear which questions resonated most with those responding to blog posts. The following chart, which was collected on July 13, 2013, lists the number of replies made to each respective blog post (in bold) along with the corresponding date:

1) How many words do learners need to know? (81 -03/10/2010)	8) What is fluency and how do you teach it? (92 -17/12/2009)	15) How do you achieve 'flow' in your teaching? (39 -30/05/2010)
2) Why are some learners unwilling to communicate? (19 -30/01/2010)	9) Should we push our learners? (33 -11/07/2010)	16) How does identity impact on language learning? [<i>sic</i>] (65 -13/06/2010)
3) Are there different learning styles? (46 -21/03/2010)	10) Why focus on form? (54 -16/10/2011)	17) How do you get a 'feel' for a second language? (44 -19/02/2010)
4) Is the use of the learners' mother tongue a good idea? (65/26 -15/10/2010 & 21/04/2010)	11) What is scaffolding and how do you do it? (20 -04/04/2011)	18) Can you learn a language if you're not paying attention? (51 -22/08/2010)
5) Where do errors come from? (25 -09/05/2010)	12) Is there a best method? (38 -28/11/2010)	19) Do rules help you learn a language? (41 -20/02/2011)
6) Is language learning all in the mind? (53 -12/12/2010)	13) Is there anything wrong with rote learning? (56 -08/04/2011)	20) How do you teach reactively? (16 -14/11/2010)
7) What is the best age to start? (58 -17/01/2010)	14) What makes an activity 'communicate'? (39 -15/08/2010)	21) Is practice good and what is good practice? (72 -29/05/2011)

Granted, simply counting blog post replies speaks little to the actual substantiveness of the exchanges transpiring within the author's blog, but it does indicate which topics appear to resonate with blog readers most: defining fluency and how to teach it, using the mother tongue in the English language learning classroom, and learning how many words English language learners need to know. Interestingly, the chapter question that received the fewest replies was how to teach reactively; albeit a prevailing topic concerning teaching roles in ELT, it only received 16 replies in the blog.

The strongest chapters of this book are those where the author provides insight and possible and practicable solutions. Thornbury cites Wilson Nelson (1991) in advising English language educators to provide feedback to students when they ask for it, also referred to as 'point of need teaching' (Thornbury, 2013a, Chapter 20, paragraph 10). In Chapter 12, the author explains the prevalence of a coursebook-as-method system whereby what teachers teach and how they teach are determined by textbooks. Finally, in chapter nine, the author offers a list of ideas in how to approach *pushing* learners by repeating tasks, applying public performance, among others. Although not generating many replies in the author's blog, these three questions speak volumes when it comes to the role of the English language educator and the kind of relationship that exists between teacher and English language learner within a community of practice.

Of the 123 references used throughout the book, 26 came from primary research articles, primarily from two academic journals: *Applied Linguistics* and *ELT Journal*. Only eight of the 26 primary research articles were published between the years 2008-2012 (the book was published in early 2013). For a 91-page book with 21 chapters, 189+ questions with 123 total references, *Big Questions in ELT* includes plenty of sources that provide additional reading related to the topics covered. However, assuming that the most current primary sources were considered for the book, researchers will find an obvious absence of current empirical studies (i.e., within the last five years), covering a wide range of topics related to teaching and learning English as an additional language: lexical approach; teaching roles, methods, and techniques, and interlanguage processes. The book relies primarily on expert opinion to address title questions with a few exceptions where the author makes his own suggestions towards practicable solutions. Ultimately, it is up to the reader to reflect and adopt any "answers" to the many questions presented, often requiring expert opinion beyond the numerous references included in the book.

Big Questions in ELT is a collection of blog posts with discussion questions that were added to each chapter so to provoke deep critical reflection inquiring how the English language is learned. With a mobile device connected to the Internet, the reader enjoys a seamless reading experience between an Amazon Kindle eBook and the hundreds to blog replies that add further perspective to the salient issues that run throughout the ELT profession. This book is the result of asking more questions than it answers (think Socratic Method). This can be useful in pre-service programs and in-service workshops and discussion forums whereby teacher practitioners harness informal pedagogical dialogues to link teaching practices with empirical research. The shortage of primary research articles in this book however, serves as an invitation to (participatory action) researchers to contribute more to current literature by systematically setting out to find contingent solutions to reoccurring questions (i.e., problems) that emerge across ELT cultures. *Big Questions in ELT* lays the framework for cultivating informal pedagogical dialogues that are shown to now extend across social networks. Indeed, such dialogues

now may extend beyond local, face-to-face exchanges to exchanges that use current technologies to form a more global dialogue, searching for answers to prevalent questions that are of particular concern to the English language educator.

References

Thornbury, S. (2013a). *Big Questions in ELT* [Kindle DX version]. Retrieved from www.amazon.com, May 1, 2014.

Thornbury, S. (2013b). *An A-Z of ELT: Scott Thornsbury's blog*. Retrieved from <http://scottthornbury.wordpress.com>, May 1, 2014.