TEXT	*ASK A FOOLISH QUESTION* (1953)
AUTHOR	Robert Sheckley
THEMES	Asking questions (unit 6), trips (unit 7), inventions (unit 12), computers (unit 12)
VOCABULARY	Space, asking and answering, fantasy worlds
WRITING	Students write questions.
SPEAKING	Interviews using prepared questions

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Collections of science fiction short stories – both as books and magazines – were hugely popular in the USA from the 1950s until the 1970s. This short story appeared in one of those collections. Sheckley (1928–2005) is not a famous author but he is one of numerous science fiction (SF) writers who produced material for this profitable market. A main drive behind the interest in tales dealing with ideas about other worlds, planets and life forms was the development of the space programmes in the USA and the USSR. An ability to travel into space made the question of 'What's out there?' one which could, with time, be answered. SF writers could explore imaginative scenarios related to that question.

WARMER

Find some examples of science fiction magazine/book covers from the 1950s and 1960s. Tell students to imagine what the stories are about, based on the covers. You can build up a list of 'space' vocabulary on the board as you do this.

ABOUT YOU

Use the discussion questions to get students thinking about how, why and when they ask questions. Elicit the meaning of the word *foolish* as it may be unfamiliar. Perhaps ask for ideas/examples of what a foolish question might be.

Use the introduction to ask for predictions about who or what Answerer might be.

1 Students read silently or you read the text out loud. Check vocabulary comprehension and use the glossary, giving more examples if necessary. Explain that *viewed as* like *seen as* are mainly used to describe an opinion or point of view. *Legitimate* is an important collocation here as a *legitimate question* is one that the speaker has the right to ask and deserves an answer. In pairs, students describe what they imagine Answerer looks like.

2

Possible answers

1 Each group sees him differently – perhaps he changes his look for each group. 2 They went away (*departed*) and they made Answerer for other groups.
3 Answerer cannot answer questions that are not legitimate. 4 Probably questions about science, the universe, etc. (ask students for suggestions)

VOCABULARY

3

Answers

1 C I have a legitimate reason for missing class.
2 E They departed at the end of the film.
3 A The physicist wrote a book.
4 B He is viewed as the best player in the world.
5 D She nodded her head to show she understood.

4

Answers

1 creatures – explain the collocation *sea creatures*. Students might provide some imaginative answers – humans live in the sea if they are in a submarine, or physicists if they are working underwater?
2 aliens, or creatures (used as a synonym for *aliens*) in books and films 3 physicists – some humans – aliens perhaps? 4 humans and physicists – creatures and aliens (as far as we know) 5 aliens

WRITING

5 Depending on how you want to use this activity, spend some time establishing what a legitimate question is. For example, compare 'Where is the station?' to 'What makes blue?'. The latter doesn't provide a context to make it answerable. Some questions have an answer, but are unanswerable, although that doesn't mean they are not legitimate, e.g. 'How many stars are there in the cosmos?'.

MIXED ABILITY

Rather than do the writing freestyle, assign question frames. Ask weaker students to write questions beginning '*Who is … ?*' '*Where is … ?*' '*What is … ?*', etc. Ask stronger students to write questions beginning '*How old … ?*' '*Why did … ?*' '*Please tell me … ?*' etc. Question forms are often difficult to produce accurately, so this is a good activity for revising grammar rules and word order.

SPEAKING

6 Groups of about five are probably best. A, B, C and D ask E, then A becomes Answerer and so on. You might want to set a time limit – in this way the different groups should proceed at the same speed. Each question and answer session lasts, say, four minutes. After four minutes, the Answerer changes, even if not all the questions have been asked. It's also a good idea to appoint a 'hot seat' for Answerer to sit in and with each changeover everyone moves to a new seat.

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