What are concept questions?

They are questions that are designed to check learners have understood the meaning of a piece of grammar, an item of vocabulary or a functional expression. The word "concept" is used to signify the essential meaning of a piece of language.

Why use them?

Firstly, because they are an efficient and effective way of checking learners have understood something. They are more effective, for example, than asking learners "Do you understand?" because a) learners may think they have understood something correctly but in reality they have not, and b) learners may be reluctant in a classroom setting to say out loud in front of their peers that they have not understood something since this may expose them to ridicule.

Secondly, because concept questions always work. The concept questions for an item will always be the same since the essential meaning of a piece of language does not change. There may be some examples when the meaning is partly dependent upon the context, but simple adaptation of the concept questions will take care of this. Once you know the concept questions for the use of a particular tense, for example, they will never change and will always work, whatever the example sentence.

Thirdly, because they are a tool for developing the language awareness of teachers. By learning to design and use concept questions, teachers learn to think closely about the meaning of items of language in a systematic and thorough way. In other words, they can be used to develop a teacher's language awareness skills.

When do you ask them?

Concept questions can be used on two occasions. Firstly, they can be used when a new piece of language is introduced and the teacher wants to check that all the learners have understood the meaning. They are therefore used during the "Checking understanding" stage of a lesson, or at any time a new piece of language comes up and needs checking. They are particularly useful when the item of language is complex, or does not exist in the learners' language, or is used in a different way, or is a false friend.

Secondly, they can be used as a correction technique, either to remind the learner of a concept they have forgotten, or to get the learner to think about the concept of a piece of language they are using. For example, if a learner says "I visit my aunt at 3 o'clock on Saturday", you may want to check if the learner wants to talk about a regular habit (ie something the learner does every Saturday at this time) or whether the learner wants to talk about a definite arrangement for this Saturday at 3pm. By asking the learner "Is this something you do every Saturday?" and "Is it a definite arrangement?" we get the learner to think about the difference in meaning and the correct form that is needed.

How many concept questions do you ask?

It depends on the meaning of the item being checked, but usually it will be somewhere between one and five. If you find that you are asking a lot more questions than this, it probably indicates that you are asking some questions which are either superfluous or irrelevant.

How do you make them?
Look at the sentence below:
    He <u>used to</u> play football.
Firstly you need to break down the meaning of this sentence into a number of statements.
    1   He doesn't play football now.
    2   He played football in the past.
    3   He played football many times in the past.
These three statements are a complete description of the meaning of "used to" (Past Habit) in the example sentence. All that needs to be done now is to turn the statements into questions.
    1   Does he play football now?   (No)
    2   Did he play football in the past?   (Yes)
    3   Did he play once or many times?   (Many times)
Notice that the answer we expect learners to give is written in brackets. If, for example, the learners answer "Yes" to the first question, we know that they have not understood correctly and clarification is needed.

There are also several other design features that need to be considered. Notice that the language used in the concept questions is simpler than the language being checked. The answers that the learners are required to give are short and simple. Furthermore, we do not use the item itself in the concept question. We do not, for example, ask "Did he use to play football?" since it is possible to answer "Yes" without understanding the meaning of "used to". All the rules for the design and use of concept questions are summarised below.

Rules for the design and use of concept questions

1   Break down the concept of the item into a series of statements of meaning. A dictionary may be helpful if the item is a piece of vocabulary.
2   Make sure the statements of meaning are expressed in simple language.
3   Turn the statements into questions.
4   The questions should be concise and simple.
5   The language you use must be simpler than the language you are checking.
6   The questions should not normally use the language you are checking.
7   Sort the questions into a logical order.
8   Write down the correct answers you expect the learners to give.
9   The answers should be short and simple.
10   If they answer incorrectly, state the correct answer and provide clarification.

The same procedure applies for checking the concept of vocabulary items and functional exponents, though with these you will need to take into account other features such as register, style and connotation. For example, for the following sentence:
    "Could you open the door for me, please?"
The concept questions are:
    1   Is this an order or a request?   (Request)
    2   Am I being polite or impolite?   (Polite)
In conclusion, well-designed concept questions not only check understanding but also allow you to talk about the meaning of language in a very simple and clear way.

Exercise 3   What is wrong with these concept questions?

1   **I'm seeing the doctor on Friday.**

a)	Am I feeling well?	(No)
b)	Am I going to see the doctor on Friday?	(Yes)
c)	Will I see the doctor on Friday?	(Yes)
d)	Do I want to see the doctor?	(Yes)
e)	Do I have a date with my doctor?	(Yes)

2   **I'll see him at 7.00.**

a)	Will I see him at 6.00?	(No)
b)	Will I see him at 7.00?	(Yes)

3   **I should have told her.**

a)   Would it have been a good idea if I had decided to tell her? (Yes)
b)   What might have happened, had I told her? (I don't know)

4   **Another cowboy bites the dust.**

a)	Does the cowboy chew the dust?	(No)
b)	Does the cowboy eat the dust?	(No)
c)	Does the cowboy bite the dust?	(Yes)

5   **I didn't know if I was coming or going.**

a)	Was I coming?	(I don't know)
b)	Was I going?	(I don't know)
c)	Did I know if I was coming or going?	(No)

6   **I have to leave early.**

a)   Is it incumbent upon me to make an early exit? (Yes)
b)   Is there an external obligation upon me which is forcing me to undertake an action
which will take place prior to the time I would normally choose to do it? (Yes)

7   **He managed to open the window.**

Did he manage to open the window?   (Yes)

8   **hedge**

a)	Is it really a hedge?	(Yes)
b)	How do you know?	(???!)

9   **wardrobe**

a)	Is it a chest of drawers?	(No)
b)	Is there one in your house?	(No)

10   **wardrobe**

What is wrong in this interchange between teacher and student?
Teacher: Who knows what a wardrobe is?
Student: I know! I know! It's a kind of fish.
Teacher: Well, you're almost right.

Exercise 7   Concept questions **without** time lines

Think of situations to illustrate the meaning of the sentences below. Then write concept questions for them.

1   I <u>had</u> my car <u>repaired</u>.

2   a)   I <u>have to</u> start work at 7.00am.
       b)   I <u>don't have to</u> get up early on Sunday mornings.
       c)   You <u>mustn't</u> smoke in class.

3   She <u>should have locked</u> the door.

4   He <u>must be</u> drunk.

5   a)   I saw him <u>swim</u> across the river.
       b)   I saw him <u>swimming</u> across the river.

6   Don't ring now. She<u>'ll be eating</u>.

7   a)   He <u>needn't have got up</u> early.
       b)   He <u>didn't need to get up</u> early.

8   She <u>should</u> pass the exam.

9   I<u>'m getting used to driving</u> on the left in England.