

A person can acquire knowledge of grammar and syntax, and build vocabulary, but this in itself does not result in functionality. Knowing the mechanics to ride a bicycle or play a piano is insufficient to actually riding or performing. Knowing the mechanics of a language is necessary but insufficient toward its application in real life. Realistic experience develops proficiency between thought and action; the state of doing without thinking about doing. Conversation is fluid; often unpredictable. Improvisational exercises aim to reproduce this fluidity and unpredictability in the classroom, but outside the formality of the classroom. It seeks to reproduce the experience of real-world conversation through an approach both engaging and enjoyable, and where the only wrong answer is not to engage in the atmosphere of teamwork with fellow student. Each set of exercises, published in the four 2019 editions, is built around a theme. The first set lays the foundation through simple story development. The second set employs question and answer situations to develop conversational interplay. The third addresses precision. Finally, the fourth utilizes improvisational role playing to unite everything into an active, conversational format. The ultimate goal is to provide students with the personal confidence in their ability to readily employ the language they are learning in everyday situations anywhere in the world.

Improvisational Techniques

Group 2 of 4: Developing language through questions

ROBERT PINE

It is obvious that questions are a very important element of life. From the most simple “How are you?” and “What time is it?” to the detailed query into a technical design, how many questions do you ask in a day? From a general request for information, to testing an idea, to leading someone to a conclusion, even to discover if someone really knows what they purport to know, how many reasons have you to ask a question? And from grammar to vocal pitch, how many methods do you employ to ask questions?

Questions are integral to all aspects of daily conversation, from the most casual to the most scientifically detailed. Furthermore, the reasons and ways to ask a question greatly outnumber the purposes for which to make a statement. This begs the question: why is the role of questioning relegated to a minimal level in language instruction?

The interrogative can be employed in contrast to the declarative. One basic reason is diversity in the method of instruction to provide variety in lesson planning. More to the instructional, questions are formulated differently than statements. This distinctiveness challenges and expands the mental process by which language learners convert the internal statement of the thought into the structurally different interrogative. It is the alternative structure inherent in a question – a perspective unique from the declarative – that adds an extra dimension to understanding grammar and syntax, plus building comfort, confidence and creativity in the use of language. The person who cannot ask clear questions has not mastered the language.

Each lesson in this group holds the question as its centerpiece. Process and performance revolve around, and are composed of, the creation of questions. In these

improvisational exercises, and those in the future editions, you discover how – with students running the lesson – you have the opportunity to concentrate on observation of how each of them is performing, how quickly they are interacting, with what level and diversity of vocabulary they are communicating and how confident they are in the conversation. From these notes you can design additional, individualized study for each student.

What's my line?

“What's My Line?” was a very popular American television game show with several international versions. It was the longest running prime-time game show in television history. To get a feel for the exercise, google “what's my line” to watch the best 1950-67 episodes on YouTube.

PROCESS

A student is selected to be the “contestant” and sits next to your desk. Four additional students, selected to be the panel asking the questions, sit at a reasonable distance across from you and the contestant. You are the “moderator”, guiding the process and from time to time clarifying “yes”, “no” and “maybe” answers.

The contestant selects an occupation – “line” of work, thus the name of the show – by drawing from a collection of face-down sheets on which you have written, in large letters, various occupations. Be sure to include many unusual and humorous “lines” of work. Of course the panel does not see the occupation, but to involve the class in the exercise show the selected occupation to the class.

Panel members ask the contestant yes/no type questions to learn clues leading toward the identification of the occupation – what the guest sells, manufactures distributes or the service performed. A string of related questions develops knowledge about the product itself, how it is made, how it is used, who uses it and other attributes. This is a team effort, so each panelist should listen to the questions and answers of the other panel members. Panel members can take notes on the questions and responses to assist in determining the answer. Here are some examples of questions:

- *Does it involve a product? Is it a service rather than a product?*
- *Is your work performed: Indoors? Outdoors? In an office? In a home? Is it performed in a particular room? Below ground? Above ground? On a farm?*
- *Is it performed by: Hand? Speaking? Writing?*
- *Do you make or manufacture something? Do you make it with your hands? Is it made by machine? Is it something you perform rather than make?*

- *Can both men and women use your product or service? Is it only used by a man? Woman? Can a child make use of it? Is it something a pet would use?*
- *Can you eat it? Can you drink it?*
- *Do you work in the health industry? Do you work in the entertainment business?*
- Questions regarding its size, material, shape, where used, how used, etc.

In the show each panelist asks yes/no type question until a “no” is received. An alternative is for questions to be asked by panelists in sequence. The lesson ends either with the discovery of the occupation, after some set number of “no” answers are received, or at the end of a set time limit.

Who am I?

The questioning process in this detective exercise requires the naming of a wide variety of specific attributes of well-known persons from history or current events, such as artists, musicians, actors, writers, politicians, movie stars and characters from popular movies and books. In preparation for this exercise, you develop a collection of cards with each of them containing the name of the person to be discovered. It is helpful to include a list of facts and traits about this person to which you can refer if there is uncertainty about an answer.

VERSION 1

The class is an amnesia patient. Select a student to come to the front of the class and draw a card. Only the student and you know the name of the person or character.

Instruct the class that their questions must be in a format answerable only with a “yes” or “no”. These include “Am/Was I”, “Do/Did I”, “Have I”, etc. Suggest that these include questions about gender, age, profession or occupation, tools they might use, time period in which they lived, personal or physical traits, things for which the person might be famous, etc. From time to time, as the program moderator, you might need to referee a question that is vague, needs restating for clarity or might have “maybe” as a response. You might need to respond to a question for which the student does not know the answer.

One by one, usually in seat order, members of the class ask the student at the front a question about their identity. Write the facts of the “yes” answers on the board so the class can refer to them. At any point in the questioning any student in the class can suggest their thought as to their identity. You can continue until the identity is discovered, or one rotation through the class or to a certain time limit.

If memory is restored before all the amnesia students in the class have asked a question, note the next student in the sequence of questioners. In the following game start the rotation with that student so all students have the opportunity to ask a question.

VERSION 2

A member of the class is selected to be the amnesia patient. This student steps outside the classroom for a moment. Another student draws a card from the deck and hands it to you. You tell the class the identity of the amnesia patient. You might provide them with some general facts about this person. The amnesia patient returns to the class. In the same manner as Version 1, he or she attempts to discover their identity by asking questions of the class. You decide how the class or members of the class respond to questions. Again, the only allowable answers are “yes” and “no”. If the full class responds with both “yes” and “no”, as the moderator you act to clarify the question or the answer. On the board in view of the amnesia patient and class, write those facts for which the answer “yes” is given. The patient refers to this list to analyze the clues toward a solution and to develop new questions. As in Version 1, limit each patient to a certain period of time, number of questions or number of “no” answers to end the exercise.

NOTES

In addition to the use of a specific person, one can employ other categories, often relating to other class work on geography, history and science. For example:

- a major city in the world identified through geographic, landmark, historical and demographic questions;
- something physical such as an astronomical object (a particular planet or constellation, a comet or galaxy, etc.), a particular animal, etc.

Questioning conversation

A challenging and exciting method by which to enhance conversational technique is to have a dialog in which every sentence is a question. This exercise works best with three to five participants, though two advanced and quick thinking participants can provide an interesting, rapid fire tête-a-tête.

PROCESS

Begin by reviewing the ways questions can be asked in English.

Interrogative Words: *Who, What, Where, When, Why, Which, How...?*

Interrogative Phrases: *What if...? How else...? How much...?*

How many...? How often...? How about...? etc.

At what...? In what...? For what...? By what...? etc.

Subject/Verb Reversal (usually with: *to be, to have, to do, can, may*)

Am I...? Do you...? Is/Does he/she/it...? Are they...? etc.

Isn't he/she/it/the...? Don't you...? Aren't they...? etc.

Is it that...? Is/Are there...?

Have I/you/we/they...? Has he/she/it...? Are you/they...? etc.

Will I/you/he/she/it/we/they...?

Could/Would/Should it be/have/make...?

Can I/you/we/they...? May I/you/we...?

Intonation (the word in bold has a stronger stress to place the focus or the question)

*He left at **noon**?* *He left at noon?*

*He **left** at noon?* *He left **at** noon?*

Also discuss how certain question forms can be used for “yes” and “no” because they are self-answering questions. Sarcasm is often the purpose of these responses. “Yes” examples are: “Is the earth round?” and “Is the pope Catholic?”. “No” examples are: “Do pigs fly?”; “Am I made out of money?”; “Can I walk on water?”.

Select the participants to come to the front of the class. The class can suggest the characters, a place and an opening topic of conversation, or you simply let the group start on their own. Participants are to speak as in a normal conversation. They can address any member of the group in addition to the last to ask a question. They can interrupt with new ideas, of course in the form of a question. A question can be directed to the group, as well as to a specific participant.

The key point is that participants must phrase each of their one sentence comments in the form of a question using any question forming technique. The question can be one or two words or a full sentence or phrase. If a comment is not made in the form of a question, or it restates the prior question, you signal that the speaker must rephrase. The exercise is completed when you believe it has run its course, the story line itself has run to a logical conclusion, or the participants are exhausted.

As an example, here is the start of a “Questioning Conversation” with three speakers:

A Should I go to the store while I have the time?

B Do you need something?

A Why else would I ask about going?

C How many times have you gone only to browse?

B Are you keeping count?

C Why not?

A Are you confusing me with someone else?

B And who might that be?

C *Is there someone else with fifteen store credit cards?*

A *Why did I ask you about going?* Etc.

Press conference

This questioning exercise requires full, conversational responses. A “yes” or “no” answer is unacceptable unless required by the nature of the question or specifically requested by the questioner. The news reporters are seeking facts, reasons, explanations and details regarding the news announcement.

Students watch the news, so have a familiarity with how the press works, what they are attempting to acquire and how reporters ask questions. However, prior to the start of the exercise it serves the students well to discuss the role of the reporter, types of questions they ask, how they ask them, how they handle the shallow answer, how they respond when a reply attempts to avoid the question that was presented, etc. Ask for examples they remember that impressed them, such as weak questioning or tough questioning or a particularly good question. Ask for cases when as they watched the news interview they thought “this is what you need to ask”.

The person or persons making the news have complete freedom, while keeping in character, to respond however they wish, but their answers must be consistent throughout the press conference. Their responses can be detailed and clear, as well as superficial and vague. One answer not acceptable in the exercise is “no comment”.

As in a real press conference, students are able to create new questions from those already asked by probing more deeply into any answers that appear to be incomplete. They can ask another member of the newsmakers the same question to see if information is consistent. As a reporter, they should take notes to enable them to identify inconsistencies between answers, thus opening that point to further questioning.

PROCESS

Two to four students, positioned at the front of the classroom, are making an important announcement at a special press conference. (With the right student, a solo press interview is possible.) Give them a few moments to decide on the nature of the announcement, which of them will take which roles, to prepare their initial statement to the press, etc. The remainder of the students is the press corps; or as an alternative you can select a small group of students – say five to eight – to be the press corps.

The newsmakers open the press conference with a short declaration of why the press has been called. It

begins with a statement of who they are and their roles: for example, the key person or persons plus spouse, attorney, coach or others. Then there is the clear definition of the nature of the news being announced. Only the nature of the event is made. No reasons or justifications are provided. It is the press, through their questioning, that is to discover these points. They then open it to questions from the press.

Members of the press raise their hands when seeking to be recognized by the newsmakers. This is especially important when the full class is the press corps. Part of your role is to ensure no one monopolizes questioning so that all who are with a question have the opportunity to ask it. Similarly, all of the members giving the conference are to be actively engaged. In this regard, instruct the newsmakers that more than one of them can answer a question, expanding on, or even countering, the answer of another. Also, if things slow a bit, you can interject a question to open a new line of inquiry or suggest a different angle on what is being explored.

Instruct the press corps that they can ask any question considered relevant to the announcement, or by asking questions based on the answers to prior questions. They are free to repeat a question if they have a different direction for that question or if it seemed not to be fully answered. You are the judge as to when the interview is closed by declaring “One final question”.

Here are a few “breaking news” items that have proven successful and fun:

- *Santa and Mrs. Claus announce their retirement;*
- *Union leaders for Santa’s elves announce a strike because of poor working conditions, lack of pay, long hours, only two days off on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day;*
- *1st, 2nd and 3rd place winners in a hot pepper eating contest;*
- *A very popular music band announces it is breaking up;*
- *Individual or team recipient of the Absurd Achievement Award (many options are available from the Guinness Book of World Records);*
- *The three bears announce their law suit against Goldilocks for breaking, entering and damage to property.*

ROBERT M. PINE Absolwent studiów MBA i matematyki na Uniwersytecie De Paul w Chicago. Od 2007 r. działa w stowarzyszeniu WIESCO. Jako jego prezes organizował i prowadził letnie projekty językowe w Poznaniu, Wrocławiu, Krakowie, Oświęcimiu, Woli Batorskiej i Nowej Rudzie. Wspólnie z fundacją NIDA w 2014 r. w Giżycku szkolił nauczycieli języka angielskiego. We współpracy z litewskim ministerstwem edukacji i nauki przygotowywał programy szkoleniowe dla nauczycieli w Wilnie. Pine (oryg. Pieńczykowski) jest chicagowianinem o polsko-litewskich korzeniach.