Interrogative Structures and Their Responses as Speech Initiators and Fluency Booster for Second Language Learners

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Abstract

It is observed that one of the major problems of learners of English as a Second Language is framing appropriate questions to seek information and giving responses in appropriate structures with appropriate tense. It is also found that when learners do not have this skill they feel reluctant to start conversation. This also affects their fluency in speech.

This paper is an experiment to find out how the knowledge and skills of framing questions will help the second language learners to overcome their initial difficulty in speaking the language. We also propose to investigate how learning to respond in appropriate structure that reflects the question would enhance idea generating capacity and fluency in speech of the second language learners of English.

The experiment started with drill on simpler question structures and the use of the same structure with slight alteration for responses. For example, verbal questions were tried first for different tenses as well as for active and passive sentences. Then students were gradually introduced to information-seeking questions from simple to complex structures. An intensive drill on words rearrangement for responses is essential to eliminate the inhibition in exchange of information. Adding discourse markers may also help enhance the fluency. In all these, however, student

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inquisitiveness is essential for speech initiation and prolonging the conversation with appropriate responses.

Application of the Study

This experiment in language learning process is based on the hypothesis that necessity to communicate or get information in the second language speaking environment presupposes that one must have the knowledge and skill to use interrogative structures properly to kick start the communication process and to sustain exchange of information.

As English has its own way of arranging words for framing questions and rearranging word for responses, a drill in the pattern is imperative to start and sustain the communication by means of exchange of ideas.

This precept has been tested in the study conducted at an engineering college in Tamilnadu, where learning English was primarily intended for achieving adequate communication skills in the second language in order to meet the professional requirements.

Subjects and Their Background

The subjects for the study were carefully selected conducting a diagnostic test which covered an assessment of spoken and listening skills, besides writing and reading skills. Here the prominence was given for spoken and listening skills, starting from short exchange to longer conversations.

The subjects had already passed their 12th Grade/Standard exams. They had studied English as a Part II language for twelve years. Their Part I and Part III subjects were -- learned using their first language. Their class room situation and experience, as far as English is concerned, had guided and led them towards memorization of materials and acquisition of some knowledge about English grammar and usage and modern ideas including some knowledge about the culture represented in English writings. In short, English was not taught as skills but as a knowledge-based study. The acquisition happened in the past became a temporary storage. Improper learning and blind memorizing made their past efforts futile. Lack of knowledge and practice resulted in lack of confidence to handle the language in the present.

It was found from the diagnostic test that the subjects were ignorant of various forms of verbs, subject-verb agreement, appropriate syntactic rules and patterns for interrogatives. They were less articulate, and non-responsive to questions directed to them in English. For verbal questions, their answers were either 'yes' or 'no'. No details were given. For information seeking questions, there were restricted utterances with improper syntax or no response as:

    T: Have you read all the questions in this question paper?

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L: Yes/No.

T: Do you understand all the questions?

L: Yes/No.

T: What part do you find difficult in the question paper? Can you explain it?

L: No response. Speaking task… (No further utterances.)

Our Experiment

In our experiment, input to the subjects was given in the form of structure of questions that apply to conversation. For detailed responses, Ekroth (2004) suggests, "Ask open questions that require more than a Yes or No. These are the "Wh" and "H" questions beginning with What, Why, Where, and How. This technique works better than "closed questions" that limit the response, such as "Did you like the movie?" Instead, "What did you like about the movie?" draws out a more interesting and detailed response".

In our experiment, for the purpose of drill, the drill activity started with "Closed question." Students were asked to provide the responses by reflecting on the tense and structure of the question and also by changing persons.

Examples:

Teacher: Do you want to improve your communication skills?

Student: Yes, I am *want* to improve my communication skills? (Always 'am' is used with I)

Input:

T: You want to improve your English. – is a statement.

   While framing a question, the verb should be divided as:

Want= Do+ Want. Wants= Does + want.   Wanted = did + want.

Now by bringing the auxiliary before subject, the statement will become a question. Thus the sentence becomes: Do you want to improve your English?

By training the subjects (students) in different tenses and pronouns they can overcome their inhibition to speak. They have learnt and practiced the use of personal pronoun with possessive pronoun in their articulations as it is found in the instances given below. For example: 'I' with 'me', 'he' with 'his,' etc.

T: Does your friend help you improve your communication skills?

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L: Yes, my friend will help. (Wrong tense, correct the student with right answer.)

T: Yes, my friend helps me improve my communication skills.

Same sentence with different tenses:

T: Did your friend help you improve your communication skills?

L: No, don't help. (Wrong and short response.)

Explaining why it is wrong, and teaching how correct response should be.

S: Yes, my friend helped me improve my communication skills.

Or

No, my friend didn't help me improve my communication skills.

Here the learners were taught how the negatives are formed with the addition of 'not' in contracted form with the auxiliary verb. Thus, by starting the lesson with micro level question structure acquisition, the learners were trained to make utterances fluently and without mistakes. This task is completely oral and the objective is to train learners to cope with the demand from day-to-day situation.

Experiment Level-I Conversation Drills

Question tag (sentence of confirmation) was given as input.

A. Skills inculcated: Even though question tags are, in an actual sense, sentences of confirmation, this practice helps the learners to become familiar with the basic structures and make suitable changes in the structure according to the changes in persons and tenses.

i.   He comes by car, doesn't he?

ii. Manoj waited for his friend, didn't he?

iii. There wasn't enough food left? Was there?

iv. You have done the lesson, haven't you?

v.   You will be able to do that, Won't you?

B. Sample application in Short conversation

L1 Not many students in this class do exercise in the morning, do they?

L2 No, they don't, but they should understand that health care is very important in

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this mechanical life.

L1 According to our recent survey, most of us have one or the other problems, haven't we?

L2 Yes, we all do, and it is a sad thing.

Verb level structural modification is possible by the drill in Tag questions. Subject verb agreement as well as negative formation of verb and their usage become familiar to the learners. They could utter single idea sentence followed by tag after this practice.

Experiment Level-II Conversation Drills

Verbal questions were given as input.

    a. Do you watch television very often?

    b. Did you visit a museum last night?

    c. Has this wall been painted recently?

    d. Will your friend meet you at the airport?

    e. Could you see the tower from the plane?

Templates of verbal questions with different tenses in both transitive verbs (active and passive voices) intransitive verbs were given to the subjects. The activity started with the articulation of sentences in the template. With assistance, the learners imitated the structure with slight modification using different verbs and different tenses. Continuous drill on sentences generation enabled the learner to become familiar with the structure and acquired the skill to fluently articulate the ideas in second language.

In this level, the learners were not confined to questions alone. It was slightly turned out to be a conversation with exchange of ideas. Moreover, the learners' involvement in the process of conversation was also increased. They tried gradually to come out of the frame work of the structure of the assignment. Here the teacher became a facilitator by restricting his role of teaching. The learners gradually shifted from the linguistic layer of exchanges to purpose-oriented exchanges or business-oriented talk. To acquire specific and purposeful information, the learners were taken to the next level of the experiment.

Experiment Level-III Conversation drills

Information seeking questions for purpose-oriented exchanges:

    a. Where should I park my car?

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b. How can she possibly do it?

c. What did you complain about?

d. Why has he decided to stay with you after his recent visit?

e. Which issue, do you think, will be the cause for the downfall of this government?

Use of appropriate information seeking interrogative pronouns in the beginning of questions as in the above practice enables the learners feel at ease in asking question fluently. Learners were given drill in framing questions for a set of topics as a sample given below;

Topic: The Taj Mahal

What is the Taj Mahal?

Where is Taj Mahal situated?

Who built the Taj Mahal?

When was it built?

Similar kind of exercises serves as speech initiator and fluency booster in spoken situation. The learners should not restrict themselves to question structure alone. He can extend to other patterns of sentences.

Learning a Second Language Through the Use of Question Structure

Learning a second language through the use of the question structure is not at all a novel process. We all gradually mastered our vocabulary, meaning and syntactic aspects of our first language as small children using this very same technique. There seems to be an innate propensity in all of us to raise questions, seek answers and information, and integrate these as part of our knowledge and language use. Our experiments listed above actually tried to replicate this first language acquisition in second language performance. Through repeated performance, second language competence is bound to be strengthened.

Note that these questions were not treated as interview structures, like questions from one side and the answers from the other. The purpose of this question structure was not to argue but to ask, gain information and sustain the conversation. The learners initially had the difficulty in arranging words correctly for the questions. Practice helped them to overcome the difficulty. Thus, the passive and uninvolved learner can be pushed to initiate and play a major role in conversation by compelling them through the use of the question structure. This method can be used where the learners have adequate exposure and competency in the second language but they

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experience or reveal difficulty or lack of practice in speaking.

Questions internalize the conversation process and help overcome the inhibition and create a compulsion to participate in the conversation. Finlayson (2001) explains, "Questions are an act of here and now. They force you to be a part of the conversation, to make an immediate exchange of ideas, while sharpening your mind to focus on what is wanted".

Second language learners' major difficulty is in getting involved in the conversation. When such learners, at least during practice, put themselves in the position to seek information by initiating conversation with questions, they can overcome the psychological barrier to speak. Our experiment showed that the practicing the question structure as part of the conversation helped students to improve their speaking fluency even as it improved their grammar.

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