

Creating Questions: Progressive Exercises for Building Speaking Confidence

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INTRODUCTION

What makes a good conversationalist? Many years ago, Dale Carnegie (1936) suggested that a good conversationalist is one who is a good listener and who can ask good questions. He wrote that if you learn to ask questions about what interests the people you talk to, and then listen to the answers, the people you converse with will find you to be a very interesting conversationalist. Why? Simply put, people love to talk about themselves and what interests them. With this in mind, I focus many of the first semester lessons in my mid-level Freshman English (FE) classes at Asia University (AU) on having students create questions.

This article describes a progressive series of classroom exercises designed to help intermediate language learners develop their ability to ask questions, and develop their conversation skills. These exercises are aimed at promoting speaking fluency. They are not focused on producing perfect spoken grammar. Sutherland (as cited in Richard-Amato, 1996) notes that fluency and grammar need not be taught in the same lesson, especially at the lower levels of language learning. I agree with his argument. Swain (as cited in Richard-Amato, 1996) believes that speaking production gives students an opportunity to “test out hypotheses about the target language.”

In my FE classes, the students are tested on grammar in written tests several times through the semester, and their speaking fluency is tested in a speaking test at the end of the semester. Most, if not all, of my students have studied English grammar in junior high and high school. The exercises described in this article, however, are aimed at assisting the students in using the language they already know, versus teaching them new grammar. My goal is to build the speaking confidence of the students.

These exercises progress from a) writing questions in pairs, through b) developing spoken follow-up questions, and finally to c) individuals carrying on extended conversations with a partner. Initially, students have the support of a partner and time to prepare questions. As the semester progresses, they learn to create their own questions spontaneously and carry on conversations with another student in English.

The process of creating questions is introduced in the first unit of the textbook for this course (Lee, 1998). The first question-creating exercises we use are from this text. The remaining exercises in this article are independent of the text. They are flexible enough that they could be used with any subject matter. These exercises provide the students with additional practice in asking questions beyond what is in the textbook. Initially, we spend one day a week on speaking exercises. Some of these exercises will take an entire 45-minute period, and others may be used as a shorter lesson, for a warm-up, or as a concluding exercise. We spend the last two weeks of the semester, after the students have completed their written final examination for this course, entirely on speaking exercises to prepare them for their speaking test.

PART 1: USING THE TEXTBOOK

Exercise 1 a) Question Starters

In the first unit of our text, there are exercises in which student pairs write questions about a woman and her daily schedule. This is the beginning of our series of question creating exercises. Pairs work together to create questions and are given ample time to do so. On one page, there is a matrix with the English question words: why, who, what, how, when, and where. Students use these words as prompts to stimulate the process of creating questions. I ask them to include: which, do, is, and can. For this class, and the rest of the semester, I write these ten words on the board for every class session in which we work on speaking and conversation exercises. I also expand the list to include other tenses or forms of these words, such as: can/could; be: is/are/was/were; how long/how many/how much, etc., for additional help to get students started. However, as the semester progresses, I shorten this list to the original ten words.

Exercise 1 b) Writing Questions About Pictures

Another textbook exercise from Unit 1 has students write five questions about a picture in the book. I lengthen this exercise and use it for one 45-minute class. I ask groups to write as many questions as they can think of about their assigned picture. Students use the above-mentioned list of question words to help them write their questions. Near the end of the period, students in each group take turns reading their questions to the class. These student-generated questions could be used for a following grammar lesson, during another class period, if desired.

PART 2: BEYOND THE TEXTBOOK

Exercise 2 a) Writing Questions With a Partner

In this exercise, students work in pairs and write three questions on a given topic. I find that general topics are best, because they allow for many types of questions. Topics can be chosen that require the use of certain grammar, such as past or future tenses. With my level of students, and with our focus on fluency, questions in the simple present and simple past tenses are quite acceptable. The higher-level students in my classes will often use more complicated grammar. Students take turns reading their questions to the class when finished. I then give students a new topic and they repeat the exercise.

Exercise 2 b) Writing Questions With a Partner, Step Two

An expansion of 2 a), above, is to have pairs write ten questions using each of the ten question words on the board about a given topic, or about a picture. I give them plenty of time to do this, and give them assistance when they need it. When finished, students share their questions with the class.

I remind the students that they can use any of these question words with any topic, and that in their native language, they would probably be able to do this quite quickly and easily. As a model, I choose a new topic and make a question with each question word listed on the board, as I point to it.

EXERCISE 3: “QUESTIONS FOR JOE”

Exercise 3 a) Pairs Creating Spoken Questions

The students now begin to ask questions without first writing them down. They continue to have the support of working with a partner. Pairs work together to ask me one question on a topic that I have written on the blackboard. I begin by writing: “Questions for Joe about: _____” on the board. I usually begin with a simple topic that students feel comfortable talking about, such as food, sports, etc. As students get used to the exercise, I ask them to choose their own topic. I give students two minutes to think about possible questions about the topic, and to choose who will ask the first question. I tell pairs to ask me their question so that the whole class can hear. I answer and then ask another pair. I choose pairs randomly to maintain student attention. If students hear their chosen question asked by another pair, they must then decide on another question. I model correct grammar by repeating the questions that I hear, and work verbally with students that are having trouble formulating a particular question. I remain flexible and accept nearly all questions that the

students generate. Again, our focus is on the students being able to communicate their ideas. Having a partner to help them think of a question helps to lower students' anxiety at this early stage of our questioning sessions. In a 45-minute class period, there is usually time to complete this exercise with at least two different topics. The second time through the exercise, I will ask the second student in each pair to ask me the question.

Each time I repeat this exercise, I like to allow a little less time for students to prepare their questions. I am usually pleasantly surprised with how quickly they pick up the exercise and are able to come up with original questions.

Exercise 3 b) Individuals Creating Spoken Questions

Each student is now individually responsible for asking me a question. I write the topic on the board, give them a minute or two to think about possible questions, and then begin asking students for their questions. Students do not write their questions. If a student has not thought of a question by the time I call on them, I tell them that I will come back to them later, and then I call on another student. All students must ask me a question. Any question that has not already been asked is acceptable. By requiring original questions, students must pay attention to the questions that are asked so that they do not ask a question that has previously been asked. If a student does repeat a question that someone else has asked, I ask them to think of another question, and return to them after a few minutes.

If some students have trouble thinking of a question, I refer them to the question word list and remind them that they may use any question word with any topic. I sometimes give a student more time to think and will go on to another student and come back to this student a few minutes later. It has been my experience that all students in my classes have been able to create a question in this exercise without too much difficulty.

A variation of this exercise, which I use in a class of students who are not paying close attention to the exercise, is to begin this exercise with all of the students standing. Students then raise their hand when they have a question, and may sit down after they ask me their question. (I first learned this technique from Gina Thurston at AU.) This exercise works quite well. The students are motivated by the fact that as soon as they produce a question, they may sit down. This adds a little tension to the exercise, but students are still given all the time they need to formulate their questions. This small amount of added stress seems to produce a positive result. Swain (as cited in Richard-Amato, 1996), in her writing about student interaction in the second language classroom, noted that a student merely knowing that he or she will be expected to speak may be a "trigger that forces the learner to

pay attention to the means of expressions needed in order to successfully convey his or her own meaning". Conveying meaning is the foremost goal of these exercises.

I have found that all of my students have been able to continually produce sensible questions in this exercise when it is presented in a relaxed manner. I am able to adjust the atmosphere of the class by the way in which I answer the questions. I often use humor to keep the exercise lighthearted. The students soon get used to the exercise and generally seem to have fun with it over time.

EXERCISE 4: FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Exercise 4 a) Pairs Asking Follow-up Questions

With students in pairs, I first explain the term "Follow-up Questions." I write the definition "A follow-up question is a question about your partner's last answer" on the board. I write a sample two-person conversation on the board, and give verbal examples of others. I model how the original topic of a conversation may change as new questions are asked about the topic of the speaker's last answer.

I then put students into pairs and ask the class to give me a topic, which I write on the board. I ask them to think for one or two minutes about possible questions on this topic, and to decide which student in each pair will ask the first question. Then, after this time, I begin by asking myself a simple question about the topic, out loud, for example "Joe, do you like (topic)?" I answer the question and then ask the first pair to ask me a follow-up question. Of course, only one partner will ask me the question, but the two students may create the question together. Students may not ask a question that has already been asked. I answer this question and ask the next pair to ask me a follow-up question, and continue around the room in this manner until all pairs have asked me a follow-up question. I then ask for a new subject and repeat the exercise, this time calling on the partner who did not speak to me the first time, to ask the question that the pair created.

To get students thinking about questions and conversations, I give them a simple homework assignment. I want to reinforce the idea that what we are doing by asking follow-up questions in this exercise is really something that they are already know how to do. I remind them that they most likely ask follow-up questions every day in their native language. Many of the follow-up questions they ask in English may be the same as, or very similar to, the ones they commonly ask their friends in their own language. I ask the students to listen to themselves and their friends talk in their native language, and to think about these questions: Do you and your friends ask follow-up questions? What type of questions do you ask? Who

asks the questions? One person, or both/many? We discuss their observations briefly at the beginning of class for several days in a row. This homework could be done as a written assignment, as well.

Exercise 4 b) Individuals Asking Follow-up Questions

This time, exercise 4 a), above, is performed with individual students, rather than pairs, asking the follow-up questions. By now, students are becoming comfortable with asking questions with less and less preparation. This exercise could be used as a warm up or ending activity, or repeated several times for a longer exercise.

EXERCISE 5: CONVERSATIONS CHAINS

Exercise 5 a) Asking a Number of Follow-up Questions

With this exercise, we begin student pair conversation practice. The students will change partners throughout the class period so that they have the opportunity to speak with various students. This gives them the opportunity to work with, and negotiate meaning with, many different students, and helps to keep them focused.

I begin by putting the question words on the board and reviewing the notion that all of these question words may be used with any topic. I choose a topic and elicit student questions using each word. This helps the students to remember that this can be done. If they are at a loss for a new question, they may choose any question word from the list and make a question with it, no matter what the topic is that they are discussing.

I then put students in rows of facing pairs. I label one row "A" and the other "B." After students have spoken to their partners for a specified period of time, I request one row of students (A) to move one seat to the right. The newly created pairs will then begin the exercise again. (I first learned this technique from Michael and Dee Anne Bess at AU [1999].)

Each student is given a list of ten "conversation starter" questions. They use one of these questions to help them quickly start a new conversation when they change partners. I like to use a mixture of questions on various subjects so that students must think of follow-up questions in conversations about numerous different topics. These questions could be related to topics from the text or topics previously discussed in class.

I explain that each A partner is to ask their B partner question number one, and then at least two follow-up questions. I stress that they should stay on the topic of this first question and try to continue speaking until I tell them to change partners. I put these instructions on

the board. In roughly two minutes, or when I hear that a majority of students have asked at least two follow-up questions, I ask them to change partners. Then, B partners ask question two and at least two follow-up questions, etc. Time permitting, after several rounds, I will then require students to ask at least three follow-up questions for each question.

Exercise 5 b) Timed Conversations

A progression of 5 a) is to change the requirement from a certain number of follow-up questions to a time requirement. I first explain that in real conversations between 2 people, both partners often ask questions, and the topic may change over the course of the conversation. I model a conversation with a student in which the topic changes as I ask questions that steer the conversation to a new topic. I encourage the student to also ask me questions as we talk.

I explain to the students that their new goal is to keep speaking in English for one minute. If their partner cannot think of a follow-up question, they should ask him or her a question on the current topic. If there is a lag in the conversation, either partner should ask a new question. I also remind them that the questions “And you?” or “What about you?” are acceptable questions to keep the conversation going, as long as they are not overused.

To begin with, students are given another list of conversation starter questions. One student asks his or her partner a question from the list, and the two students try to keep talking for one minute, in English. After several rounds, I extend the time requirement to two minutes.

Exercise 5 c) No Written Questions

This is a further progression. This time students do not receive question lists. Instead, I write a topic on the board as I have done before. Partner A asks partner B any question on this topic and the two try to keep talking for two minutes. This exercise is initially less structured than the previous one, and is useful to further challenge the students' conversation skills.

Exercise 5 d) On Their Own

In following lessons, the time limit for the conversations is extended to three minutes at the beginning of the period, then to four minutes, and finally to five minutes, changing the topic each time. At this stage in our conversation practice, I find that I am often cutting short many conversations with the lower time limits. Five minutes of continuous conversation in English with one partner is an obtainable goal for most of my students.

KEEPING STUDENTS ON TASK

To help keep students focused on the conversation exercises, and to keep them from speaking in their native language, I remind them, as necessary, that they will have a speaking test at the end of the semester in which their goal will be to keep an English conversation going for 5 minutes in English with their partner. I remind them that they have told me that they rarely speak English outside of class, so in class is the best place for them to practice for their test. The majority of my students continue speaking English throughout most of the conversation exercises.

CONCLUSION

This series of exercises has proven to be quite successful with my level of FE students at AU. By gradually building from written pair work to pair conversations, the students are given time and support to help them build their speaking confidence.

As students become accustomed to the exercises, I try to set the level of challenge in the speaking lessons just beyond what is comfortable or easy for the students. Research in learning and development supports this approach. In summarizing both Vygotsky's theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development," and Krashen's theory of "i + 1," Richard-Amato (1996) states, "Learning then should always be one step ahead of development."

The exercises discussed in this article may be tailored to fit many classes of ACTFL level novice-mid and above (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles, Swender, 1999). Designing the lessons to be just beyond what is comfortable for the students seems to push them to new levels of English speaking ability. Each year that I have used this progressive approach to building speaking confidence, I have been impressed to hear the majority of my novice-mid and novice-high FE students carrying on relatively natural sounding conversations with a partner for five minutes, completely in English, by the end of the first semester.

References

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