

SOME ACTIVITIES CONCERNING QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: Question formation is a source of difficulty for learners of English. Whether to invert the word order or to use DO-insertion may seem a major difficulty to a beginner, and even advanced learners make errors in question formation. Our paper is a brief review of the nature of the verb in English and its behaviour in question formation, followed by three activities which are fun and helpful to students practising questions in English.

Key words: question formation, verb, errors, word order

VERB CLASSES

It is a well-known fact that there are a number of ways for classifying verbs in English. One way is to divide them according to how they behave in question formation: Group A verbs, which are moved to the head of the sentence, and Group B verbs, which require DO-insertion.

In Group A are included the BE forms (*am, is, are, was, were*), helping verbs (the BE verbs and *have, has, had* used in progressive and perfect forms), and modal verbs (*can, could, shall, will, would, may, must*, etc). These verbs constitute a finite set. But we should consider the thousands of other verbs in the English language, as well. All these lexical verbs belong to Group B. It is less complicated if we think of English verbs in terms of these two categories. The problem rests in how we get our students to remember when to use DO-insertion.

QUESTION FORMATION

In order to get students accustomed to the mechanics of question formation we might begin by using Group A verbs, as question formation with these verbs requires merely inverting the word order and putting the BE verb or helping or modal verb at the head of the clause/sentence. It is easier to begin with Yes/No questions and then to work on *Wh*-questions. Students see that there is nothing magical about question formation when they add a *Wh*-word. The process is still the same. We can begin teaching question formation with verb phrases that contain Group A verbs. On the board there are sentences in which the various components – noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase, etc. – are set off with slash marks. A question mark drawn at the end of each sentence indicates that we are forming a question. The helping verb or the BE verb is circled and an arrow is drawn from it to the head of the sentence. No matter how long the sentence is, the process is still the same. The challenge begins when working on questions including verbs which require DO-insertion. Most students have found it useful when I "interrogate" them about the type of verb we have in the verb phrase. For instance, if I put some simple sentences on the board:

John/works/in the shop/every weekday

My mother/called/earlier/yesterday

You/need/a visa/ to enter/the United States

Her friend/wrote/that letter/to the bank/last month

The train/arrived/on time/in Bucharest

Mary/left/for London/early in the morning

Students focus on the verb phrases in the sentence, and I ask if we have a BE verb, a helping verb, or a modal. If the answer is "no," then I tell them "the DO-alarm is on", and we need to insert a DO form at the head of the sentence. The marker for tense or person on the lexical verb is "attached" to the DO-form, leaving the lexical verb unmarked:

Does John/works/in the shop/ every weekday?

Does John work in the shop every weekday?

Did My mother/called/earlier/yesterday?

Did my mother call earlier yesterday?

Do You/need/ a visa/ to enter/the United States?

Do you need a visa to enter the United States?

Did Her friend/wrote (**write**)/a letter/to the bank/last month?

Did her friend write a letter to the bank last month?

Did The train/arrived/on time/in Bucharest?

Did the train arrive on time in Bucharest?

Did Mary/ left (**leave**)/for London/early in the morning?

Did Mary leave for London early in the morning?

SOME "QUESTIONABLE" ACTIVITIES

20 Questions For beginners and intermediate students, the simple game of "20 Questions" is very popular. It provides practice in forming Yes/No questions and proves to be a great exercise in listening comprehension. Students form a circle. The teacher has 10 cards which have a general category and the name of a person, place, or thing. A student chooses a card and reads out the general category (e.g. "It's a country."). He/she can only answer "yes" or "no" to the students' questions, so students ask only Yes/No questions. To keep the game going longer, they are to ask general questions for one round before asking more specific questions (e.g. "Is it Ireland?"). Here are some cards that could work well:

A FAMOUS WOMAN (Marilyn Monroe)

A FAMOUS MAN (Albert Einstein)

AN ANIMAL (giraffe)

A PLANT (carrot)

AN OCCUPATION (vet)

AN ISLAND (Greenland)

A COUNTRY (China)

A COLD PLACE (refrigerator)

A SPORT (ice skating)

TRANSPORTATION (boat)

FOOD (rice)

There are all kinds of possibilities. The teacher may find that by choosing some items that are not too commonplace, students are forced to ask more questions. This game can be adapted to all cultures. Students have to listen very carefully to clues. No one is allowed to ask specific questions or to make a guess until you have gone through one round. The person who has correctly figured out an item gets to draw a card and answer the students' questions in the next round.

Reverse Interview. For intermediate to advanced students "Reverse Interview" can be fun. In this game the teacher – or, even better, a student – provides answers to questions that the students have to form. The "interviewee" might take the role of a well-known person (or someone in the class or the school), and students have to figure out who the person might be. First the answer is given; then students must provide a question that would elicit that answer.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

“I’m married.”	(Are you married or single?)
“I have two sons.”	(How many children do you have?)
“I enjoy dancing and reading.”	(What are your hobbies?)
“I used to work in a kindergarten.”	(Where did you used to work?)
“They went to a private school.”	(Where did your children go to school?)
“It’s Spencer.”	(What’s your maiden name?)

In this example, it is clear that the “interviewee” character is Princess Diana. It is important that the interviewee save the more “revealing” information until later in the “interview.” Students may specially enjoy this activity if the person in question is someone they know from their school or community. They can work on their own answers to interview and have students form questions that would elicit those answers.

Eavesdropping. A variation of the reverse interview is “Eavesdropping.” Here students listen to one side of a conversation, for instance during a phone call, and figure out what questions were asked. A conversation may sound like the following one. This activity can be oral or written, the oral format offering extra practice in listening comprehension.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Yes, I've just had a bowl of soup.	(Have you had lunch?)
It was tomato soup.	(What kind of soup was it?)
No, my mother did it.	(Did you make it yourself?)
She's in Brasov this afternoon.	(Where is she?)
She's visiting my aunt.	(What's she doing there?)
I think she'll take the train back.	(How will she get back?)
No, she only goes once a month.	(Does she go to Brasov often?)
On Saturday I'm going to Mangalia if the weather is fine.	(What are you doing this weekend?)
Yes, please come along!	(Can I join you?)
How about at the bus station?	(Where should I meet you?)
It leaves at 10 o'clock.	(What time does the bus leave?)

CONCLUSION

Students spend a great deal of their time *answering* questions, but they often need more opportunities to *ask* them. These activities provide such opportunities. In advanced classes teachers might consider making students responsible for writing questions about texts that they have read. Your

students might enjoy writing questions about assignments that they have read and having classmates to answer them. It allows them to focus on important details in their reading. Thus, such activities like the one we have mentioned above can be both useful and fun.

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