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Use of Rapid Question and Answer Exercises in the ESL Classroom

Alfred B. Porter Jr.
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USE OF RAPID QUESTION AND ANSWER EXERCISES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Alfred B. Porter Jr.

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirement for the
MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING DEGREE
at the
School for International Training
Brattleboro, Vermont
June, 1981

ABSTRACT

This is a study on the use of rapid oral question and answer exercises as a tool in language teaching. It pays particular attention to the mechanics of asking and answering questions in the large classroom; and that question and answering is an essential learning process of mental expression.

This project by Alfred B. Porter Jr. is accepted in its present form.

Mary Ann Bannes

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INTRODUCTION

I have found that rapid oral question and answer work is a handy device in language teaching, because it helps the student to use some of the skills he obviously brings to the classroom and better prepares him for communicating his real life needs. Also, such practices provide students with the kind of situations they will face when they start to speak English on their own. They need training in how to make split-second choices between two or more contrasting gramatical forms.

It is up to the teacher to create situations in which the student can use all the language at his command, and to show him how he can demonstrate his inventiveness without ever resorting to asking the teacher, "How do you say this in French?"

This practice gives the student an immediate opportunity to create "live" sentences of his own. He is able to incorporate the new structures and vocabulary he has learned in the class into his own language, and this practice will help make it possible for him to engage in conversational situations outside the classroom.

As a teacher of foreign languages I have found that one of the major problems in using question and answer exercises is that the teacher talks too much and the students talk too little. The teacher dominates the questioning. Although this is an economical teaching procedure, it isn't always good for the student. He may become too dependent on the teacher.

It is my plan in this paper to suggest an effective and practical approach to giving the student experience in give-and-take question and answer exercises. The reader should keep in mind that this form of questioning, in my opinion, can be performed at various times during the class-period. I have used it as a review or a warm-up practice in my classes and have frequently used it to start free conversation sessions. There should be some form of free conversation every day in the class. This serves many useful purposes. It gives the students the chance to use the language which they have learned in natural situations.

What follows in this report is a description of the procedure I have developed for asking and answering questions in the large class setting.

The three topics I have chosen for discussion are:

- 1) directing and distributing students' questions;
- 2) pausing, pacing, corrections; and
- 3) helping students to improve their answers.

This report is based on my personal experiences as a teacher of English to speakers of other languages, and course work I have done for the Master of Arts in teaching languages program, 1980-1981, at the School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

DIRECTING AND DISTRIBUTING STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

This section is concerned with direction and distribution of questions and getting students to ask and answer questions in a more realistic way — by way of several practical examples. I have divided it into several parts: the teacher, procedures, correction, pausing and pacing.

My experience has shown that skillful directing and distributing of questions involves students more closely. They are more likely to participate and enjoy talks if they know that they have a fair share of discussion time. This type of exercise non-threatingly draws in the student who is reluctant to participate in discussions. For example the teacher may say to Paul:²

Paul, ask Sonia: "What did you do today?"

Paul asks Sonia the question using the very same words which the teacher has given him. The teacher could then direct the answer or follow by saying:

Sonia, tell Paul: "I went shopping and bought a coat."

Sonia answers by saying the very words which the teacher has given her.

From this kind of conversation the teacher may proceed to a more complicated form in which he indicates what he wants the student to say but does not supply the actual words.

For example:

Paul, ask Sonia what she did in class today.

In this kind of indirect questioning Paul will be required to manipulate the verb and the word order so that he can phrase a proper question for Sonia to answer, Sonia will be told:

Sonia, tell Paul that you studied verbs.

In this kind of guided answer Sonia, too, will have to show that she knows how to handle the language.

After the students have learned to formulate questions and answers and when they can handle these small conversations well, the teacher can show them how to expand the practice and learn additional verb forms by using them in natural situations.³

A. The Teacher

Standing alone in the classroom, the teacher has little to guide him except what he knows, what he observes and understands, and what he senses and feels. What he feels is very important. He must be able to see everything that goes on at any given time, monitor the class, and be sensitive to what is going on while he works. Somewhat as an artist, the teacher moves towards his teaching objectives.

In question and answer exercises the teacher's role is to question, decipher, and then to follow-up, always moving toward a definite end. This requires a wide range of vision, patience, and control. The significance of this width of vision has been recognized in speed reading.⁴ The more a

reader is trained to see with one glance, the quicker he can read and the better he understands what he has read. This can also apply to the classroom teacher. That width of vision varies with each teacher and determines the size of the class with which he can deal effectively. Some can work with a class of no more than twenty people. Most teachers, however, are faced with an enrollment of 15-30 students with the number usually in the higher register.

My courses at the Catholic high school in northern Spain easily averaged thirty students; however, my two intensive classes at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez had twenty—two students per class. At no time should concern with one student preoccupy the teacher to the extent that he neglects the total class situation. Training in this way to language instruction will give the teacher enormous power in the class. It is the power of good classroom management. In my days at the University in Puerto Rico, my students called it "having eyes in the back of the head." It's a lot of work, but it can be done and well. I imagine the most worthwhile and immediate effect is the students' creative abilities are brought into play from the beginning of the course, and the teaching is based on the student's interests and desires.

The teacher, using this technique, controls the class and doesn't usually let misbehavior go untouched. It minimizes discipline problems. The teacher is tuned in on any disturbance, even in the most remote corner of the room.

Most of all, the teacher must recognize the realities of

class life as well as the complexities of individual personality. He must recognize that language learning is a long process and that it requires his conscious effort. If he is well aware of his own impact on others, he can work to influence the class in a desirable direction. If he is blind to his own motives and to his own behavior, he may work hard and yet defeat his own purposes.

Learning is cumulative and should proceed from simple to complex, from concrete to abstract. Learning logically proceeds from known to unknown. A student should experience success from the very beginning of class. This presupposes a carefully planned sequence so that the student can proceed in a positive way. For example, here is one way I have found effective for getting students to genuinely ask and answer questions.

Divide the class in two groups. Give all the students in Group A some information regarding bus schedules. (See below). This would work well if the teacher is planning an outing. Students in Group B should not see it.

	Cost			Last	Seat
	<u>Single</u>	Return	Frequency	Bus	Reservation
Bratt-Bell, Vt.	\$ 6.80	\$11.15	Every 30	12:05	NO
			mins.	a.m.	
Bratt-Sin, Mass.	\$10.00	\$34. 12	Every 45	1:15	YES ·
		e e	mins.	a.m.	
Bratt-Hart, Conn.	\$39.00	\$52.60	Every 3	12:45	YES
			days	p.m.	

Next, give Group B a similar bus schedule, but with information missing.

	Cost			Last	Seat
	<u>Single</u>	Return	Frequency	Bus	Reservation
Bratt-Bell, Vt.		\$11.15	·.		
Bratt-Sin, Mass.	\$10.00		Every 45		YES
	•		mins.		
Bratt-Hart, Conn.				12:45	YES
		•		p.m.	

The key to the exercise, which can be exploited to give the student practice using various structures, is that members of Group B will depend both on the question-asking structures they know and on the situations in which the scene is set. For example, one student might ask another:

"How often do buses run from Bratt to Hart, Connecticut" or maybe get a reaction such as "I think that the fare is too expensive, let's go some place else", or "Can you tell me the time of the last bus from Bratt to Bell, Vermont?" The whole idea gives the student practice using necessary survival skills.

This exercise still varies if the students take on the roles of employees who work in the bus terminals or at the information desk.

The practice works by establishing an information gap between students or between the two groups. One student or group knows something the other student does not, but he does not know exactly what questions he is going to be asked. The

teacher in this case controls the types of questions that will be asked by controlling types of information which are given or not given.

B. Pausing and Pacing

Most novice teachers ask more questions than they receive answers. Their failure to obtain answers is often due to lack of pauses and to lack of variation in their delivery of questions (pacing). Immediately after asking a question, I pause and look around the class. However, this varies depending on the tempo at which I want to go. There are non-verbal cues which tell you whether or not someone has the answer. For example, the raising of a hand; also, when a person is ready to answer, he opens his mouth slightly, he may lean forward slightly, he may open his eyes slightly wider or he may raise his head. In this way the teacher can discover whether students have studied their work or prepared for that day's lesson.

The speed of delivery of a question is determined partly by the kind of question being asked. Low level practice questions can be asked quickly. For example:

Question: How old are you?

Answer: I am 19.

or

Question: What's your name?

Answer: Mike.

More complex questions should be preceded by a short pause, asked slowly and clearly, and should be followed by a long

pause. Again, if the first person cannot answer the question then I usually pause briefly before redirecting it to another student or to the entire class. This is another way to keep the students alert and more ready to learn. Asking complex questions at the quicker pace results in confusion and the students will probably remain silent and baffled.⁸

C. Corrections

During the rapid question and answer exercise the teacher has several possibilities for correcting errors. For example:

I) He may say the correct form.

Student A: I have 19 years old.

Teacher: Oh, you are 19 years old, or

I am 23 years old. How old are you?

2) He may hear the error but choose not to correct it at that moment. It's been my procedure or custom to use the other students' knowledge and power in the class. For example:

Student 1: I have 22 years.

Teacher: Mmm. (teacher looks to another student and then asks...) How old are you, Peter?

Student 2: I am 25 years old.

Teacher: How old are you, Henry?

Student 1: I am 22 years old.

The teacher may also use this time to show the variance among many answers, especially after students have been practicing a particular form for some time and have a pretty good command of it.

T: Good morning, Shirley. How are you?

- S: Very well, thank you. And you?
- T: Very well, thank you. How are you, Arthur?
- S: Very well, thank you. And you?
- T: Oh, Okay. How are you, Rachel?
- S: Okay. And you?
- T: Not bad; fine; wonderful; great; magnificent; fantastic.

I have found that shifting the error to the class was most helpful. Even the less aggressive student can be given the incentive to try to engage in conversation.

It is important that the correction (of an individual) doesn't interrupt the flow of the lesson or distract the others. The teacher should avoid creating situations where he (the student) flounders and fumbles; and, in which he is penalized for producing incorrect responses. It's not conducive to establishing good language habits.

D. Procedures

There are several basic types of question-answer exercises, and each one can be done in a number of different ways; for example:

- 1) the teacher asks all the students a question; one student will answer;
- 2) the student will ask the teacher a question; he will answer;
- 3) pairs of students will face each other and practice a given lesson;
- 4) a student will ask another student a question;

5) students will question each other in chain fashion.

Proven class success largely depends upon how clearly and understandably materials to be learned are communicated to the students. The teacher must give the impression that he is looking directly at each student at all times and is giving each one his utmost attention. It's a hard chore but a meaningful and realistic one. Questions promote understanding and they overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. They focus attention and create interest. In many of my class exercises I have intentionally given them the appearance of a game, or an elementary lesson, by provoking the students into making a series of questions and answers or comments about my activities as the teacher or those of other students. By game I am referring not only to the willingness with which students accept communication solely in the target languages, but also the willingness with which they enter with me into the reality of their classroom. We need a good question in order to have a good conversation.

I found it helpful to make up a checklist on questioning to look at before and after making the weekly lesson
plans. I wanted to pay particular attention to:

- 1) Am I pausing after asking most of my questions?
- 2) Am I distributing my questions so that I am reaching everybody? Is it being done evenly?
- 3) Am I speaking clearly and distinctly?
- 4) Am I using prompting techniques to help students formulate their comments?

5) Am I giving students time to reflect and think more deeply about their answers?

It is important to ask questions in random order. If the teacher asks questions in random order, the student never knows when he is going to be questioned and should always be alert and ready to answer the next question. "The readiness is all" that counts. 10

I found asking the question before stating to whom it is addressed to be effective. For example, the teacher should ask:

- A. What's the name of the man in the black coat? ... (pause) ... Betty rather than
- B. Betty, what's the name of the man in the black coat? In example B only a few of the most diligent students will be paying attention. In example A the student knows that the teacher is going to expect an immediate response, and due to the random questioning he just doesn't know when his name will be called by the teacher in fact, he feels that every question may be for him because there is no rule or system.

I have found that students pay a lot more attention when they know that they will receive no warning that they are about to be asked a question other than by the teacher's look look directed at them, especially if the teacher is likely to look directly at someone who happens to be whispering to someone else or to be looking out the door or window. It is very likely that a student could get two or more back to back questions. Therefore, if the teacher asks the question

before he says which student must answer, every student must prepare an answer to every question. To make it even more obvious that the questioning is completely at random, the teacher has memorized all the students' first and last names and can ask the questions, pause, look at one or more students, perhaps make a gesture to signal one student to answer, and when he has their utmost attention and they think that they are the chosen one, he calls on someone else by name on the opposite side of the room. This really keeps them on their toes!

This makes it possible for my practices to move along much more rapidly, and also makes it possible for me to shift my attention rapidly from a student in the front of the room to one at the back of the room, or from a student on one side of the room to a student or students on the other side of the room.

Name calling is preferred as a technique simply because it seems to be less rigid and impersonal than snapping the fingers or pointing at students. By following this approach the student is less likely to daydream, and it leaves no time for the students to decide that they are bored.

It is known that daydreaming most often occurs during slow teaching methods in which the teacher calls upon one student at a time in turn. Daydreaming often results when the learning experience isn't within the learners' interest and comprehension levels (where material lacks proper register) and where the teacher relies solely upon words. 11

A small scale model of an effective question and answer exercise follows:

There are twenty-three students in the class. They are all university students. The class meets three days a week for two-hour sessions. The program is considered intensive. The teacher is cognizant of everything that is going on in the classroom. He knows each student by his or her first and last name. Each student has had an interview with the teacher before entering the course. The students are already familiar with this form of questioning because of previous lessons. The teacher's success depends on how much he can feed off the students' awareness and ability to converse in the target language. The students are not allowed to use their native tongue in the class.

Teacher: Hello, Jane. That's a nice looking tie you have on, Charles. What time did Helen ask

Marta to go to the show last night, Mario?

Mario: Hey, Helen, what time did you ask Marta to go to the cinema last night?

Helen: Marta! I didn't go to the movies with Marta last night. I went with Paul. (Now, it is up to Marta if she chooses to tell me. At a lower level, I would ask for it again).

Peter: What did they see, Harry?

Harry: What did you see?

Paul: We saw "Midnight Cowboy".

Alice: Henry, would you ask Maggie or Tony what's

going on today, because I really didn't understand last week's discussion on Women's Lib.

Henry: Maggie, did you hear what she said?

Maggie: No, I didn't, but maybe Carmen or Albert did?

Henry: Oh, Maggie, ask John.

Maggie: John, could you repeat what Alice said?

John: Do you know, Marta?

Marta: Yes, I do. It's ... (she pauses and doesn't finish).

John: Thanks, Marta. Sure, the topic is: What's on for today?

The teacher started by asking two students questions but involved others, because he had noticed that the others were not paying attention. It has been my rule to ask at least three students or get the attention of several with the last one doing all the work. Marta became immediately attentive because she was quite aware of the strategy, and she was now alert to answer questions from the teacher, or from her classmates. There is no time to reflect because the exercises are spontaneous. It has proven to be quite effective in getting the students to teach themselves because they have to do all exercises in the target language.

It was my practice in classes in Spain and in Puerto Rico to let students know the formula: I don't understand; 'I don't know; What? Come again; I'm sorry, I didn't get that. Also, Would you please repeat? and other classroom conversational "survival" vocabulary are possible responses.

It is helpful when a speaker does not know the correct answer to a particular question or when he doesn't understand. It keeps the class moving, and it doesn't slow down the pace. I think this is a good form of participation. For example:

Teacher (to student A): Did you go to the cinema last night?

Student A: Yes, I did.

Teacher (speaking to student A, but nodding the head for student B): Did he (or she)?

Student B: I don't know.

Teacher: What do we do when we don't understand?

Class: We ask or say I don't know or understand.

Student B (to student C): Did you?

Student C: No, I didn't, but I will tonight.

Student B (to teacher): He didn't, but he will tonight.

These are rules which in my experience must be followed strictly if effective questioning is to result:

- 1) Do not stand only in front of the class; move about in a natural way. The constant mobility keeps the learners alert. Arrange the furniture in a semi-circle. Frequently change the seating arrangement because of the natural tendency to ask more questions or favor one side of the class-room over another. (Mine has always been the left corner, out of the way). 12
- 2) Do not write on the blackboard right away. Although I feel writing and reading play an important part in language instruction, writing on the board slows down the pace of the

instruction when using questioning. Most of the time it's a distraction.

- 3) Pronounce everything clearly.
- 4) Students' books should be closed.
- 5) Forget about asking questions in order. Refrain from asking questions in alphabetical, row, aisle, or any other systematic way, but change the pattern as often as possible with a brisk tempo.
- 6) Do not give away the name of the intended student in the questioning before asking him to recite. Have all students participating in class. Use the rapid approach; give students the appearance you are looking at two or more at one time, but call on someone on the other side of the room. Try to always keep at least three students involved in every talk.
- 7) If the exercises are being paced, do not wait for a delayed answer; select another person and then return to the person who failed to answer before. In my classes in Puerto Rico, students who did not have the answer right away learned to ask someone else, thereby not slowing down the pace of the class or causing interest in the topic to diminish.
- 8) Even though speaking the student's language at times gives a clear-cut answer, I believe it's very important to speak in the target language.

HELPING STUDENTS TO IMPROVE THEIR ANSWERS

There are several tactics for helping students to improve their answers and to speak English freely. One I have used with my own students is to have them comment on each others answer(s). If a student makes an incorrect response, I immediately ask for another opinion. I also do this when the answer is correct. For example:

Student A: I have twenty years old.

Teacher: That sounds like Spanish or the Spanish version. Alice, how old are you?

Student B: I am twenty-two years old.

Teacher: How old are you, Albert?

Student A: I am twenty years old.

Teacher: Mary, is that correct?

Student C: Yes, I think so.

Teacher: Ask John the question.

Student C: How old are you, John?

Student D: I am twenty-one years old.

Teacher: Yes, it's correct.

Frequently, I play with my own age -- saying, for example, that I am much younger than I really am. Another approach which seems to be popular is having the teacher write two lists of questions on the chalkboard. One list contains only simple fact questions, and the other consists

of only thought questions. 13 The students are then asked to:

- 1) look at the lists
- 2) the teacher asks them which kind of questions they prefer and why
- 3) the students are then asked which are fact and which are thought-provoking questions.

A procedure I have used is to set up a simple exercise on a topic requiring students to give their opinion. For example:

Write a short answer not more than five lines, on Why
Women Should be Housewives. They don't sign their papers
because this is simply informal and a non-threatening exercise.
The papers should be posted around the room so that each
student can see the other students' work. An overhead
projector can be used to flash several papers on the screen.
This is good if the class is large. With the projector
students can read each others' papers. A discussion can be
developed around the theme.

I have found these points very effective in aiding my students to talk. An error notebook in which students can record errors from corrected papers is also useful.

During skit presentations at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez I frequently sat with the students and took notes on oral mistakes made by the students. I preferred this to interrupting the performance to correct mistakes. After the skits, I asked one student in the class to summarize the

skits. Later I discussed the errors informally in class (sometimes jokingly) with the class as a whole. The viewers (the students) had to ask the actors questions. While note-taking, I paid particular attention to those types of errors which hinder communication. I believe an imaginative teacher could conduct a taping of an actual skit from time to time. The students could later be asked to detect errors in a replay session of their own spontaneous production and suggest corrections and improvements. This technique makes the students more alert to their own mistakes and to other possibilities for expressing their meaning which they have not been exploiting, and also gives them an opportunity to hear themselves.

CONCLUSION

In summary, my exposure to new ideas and concepts at the School for International Training in Vermont, combined with my two years of hard personal experience as a teacher of the English language and through direct personal involvement with children, teenagers and adults has confirmed my belief that rapid oral question and answer exercises are important for the mastery of a foreign language. Rigid discipline has also cleared up a multitude of knotty problems that have harried me for some time. I find in it a new tool especially suited to my own personality.

Of all my students in the U.S. and abroad those who have really used the language most and have learned it best, were those who got their practice from making up sentences of their own from the very early beginnings. I've found that the student must always relate to what he is doing.

I hope this paper has served to dispel the existing misunderstanding about the function of intensive questioning in English as a Second Language classes. I have attempted to devise some alternatives to the traditional teacher/student question and answer style.

I feel that it is particularly useful to point out that the teacher should be keenly (mentally and physically) aware of the environment in which he will teach. To emphasize that, I have chosen to place heavy weight on the topic of directing and distributing. This is one area in which I feel a teacher should have or should develop expertise, I wanted to present and demonstrate the kinds of knowledge, skill and insight teachers need to develop if they are to use questioning techniques in the most effective manner.

Self-sufficient, student-based group learning activity can be developed within a class as a result of this training. I hope I have given fairly detailed information on teaching techniques, presented a wide variety of questions and their answers, and have shown the importance of situational activities.

In conclusion, I believe that the use of meaningful rapid question and answer practices is an essential learning process and form of mental expression and that it is a vital part in language instruction.

NOTES

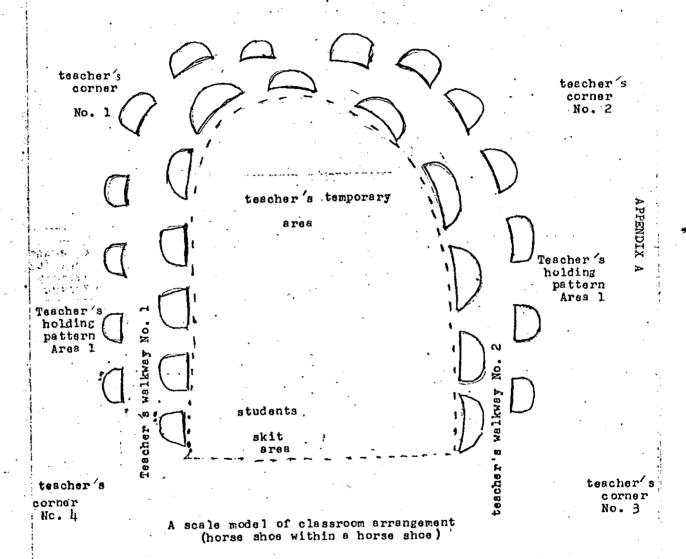
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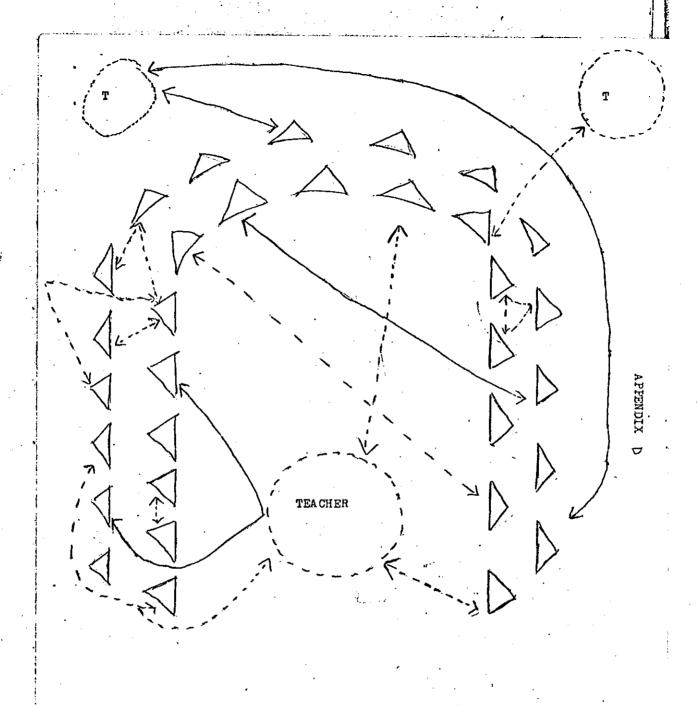
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DDDDDDDDD DDDDDDDD DDDDDDD DDDDDDD DDDDDDDDDD DDDDDDDDD

-where is Siberia? -How many boys are their in this class? -Who wrote Macbeth? ... -What is the largest city in the -What a the capital of France? -Did it rain yesterday? U.S.? -Many wives are happy to be housewives and stay home taking care of the house and children. In the future, do you think any men will choose to stay home and be househusbands while their wives work? -What would you dolf you get an A -What do you have to est to have a balanced dist? -Should little girls be raised differntly from little boys? QUESTIONS

pprox Many of the questions were taken from my classes in Fuerto Rico and from the lab manual at the university.



A visual concept of student to studet and, teacher to student interaction

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