

The Follow-up Question Workshop: an Activity to Encourage Students to Ask More Follow-up Questions

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ABSTRACT

The following activity, a modified version of 4/3/2 technique using props (fake microphones), is designed to improve the learners' ability to ask follow-up questions. By following the steps described below, teachers can enable students to become aware of what types of follow-up questions are useful to get more information from speakers, understand the right timing to ask follow-up questions, and learn to ask more follow-up questions. Suggestions about how to adapt this activity will be offered along with my reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Asking follow up questions is one of the most important skills in oral interaction and considered to be one of the learnable strategies if students are given an adequate opportunity to practice (Naughton, 2006). Follow-up questions encourage more dynamic interactions among students, which helps to avoid the situation whereby one student dominates the discussion and takes up other students' speaking time. It can also enable a quiet student to talk more by receiving more questions from other students. Additionally, asking questions is an important element of active listening; students can understand the speaker more clearly and show more interest to the speaker by asking questions. Lastly, it is often said that teacher's questions in the classroom foster the students' critical thinking skill; therefore questions that students ask other students could be assumed to have the same effect during a discussion. For these reasons, the assessment rubrics used in the English Discussion Course (EDC) place importance on this skill—asking follow up questions.

Students appear to recognize the importance in this course; however, this skill is challenging for some students to acquire and some students fail to ask any questions in a discussion. This difficulty may be caused by the students' communication style or their personality traits. It might be difficult for students to change their habits of listening carefully and not interrupting in order to respect the speakers' speaking time. Even though the teacher gives feedback to students that they should ask more follow up questions during discussion, some students' performance does not change. It is probable that they do not understand which questions are considered follow-up questions and they struggle both to choose an appropriate question and to judge the correct timing. To address these problems, the following activity was conducted.

CONTEXT

This activity was conducted for all levels (advanced, intermediate-high, intermediate-low, and low) in week 8 of the Fall Semester, with students discussing the topic of "Media." At the beginning of the course, the instructor introduced the concept and definition of follow-up questions. Since it was the students' second time to work on this skill (they had worked on follow up questions in the previous semester), they already knew basic follow up questions, both WH-questions (e.g. "Who...?" "What...?" "When...?" "Where...?" "Why...?" "How...?") and Yes/No questions (e.g. "Do you...?" "Can you...?"). Additionally, students had been exposed to

the difference between follow up questions and “Confirmation questions” or “Clarification questions” as defined by Kehe and Kehe (2003, 2009). In this course, confirmation and clarification questions are regarded as a separate communication skill—negotiating meaning—and have been practiced in a different lesson. Questions used to “keep the conversation” (e.g. *How about you?*) are also treated differently from follow-up questions (Kehe & Kehe, 2009, p. 17) and students practiced this skill in the Spring Semester.

TASKS AND MATERIALS

This technique is designed to help students improve their abilities to ask more follow up questions by grasping the concept of follow-up questions and getting used to the right time to ask (and receive) follow-up questions. The basic procedures are the same as the 4/3/2 technique suggested by Maurice (1983). Students are divided into two groups, speakers and listeners. The group of speakers talks to their listeners in pairs three times. Each time, the students talk about the same topic but with different partners. The time is reduced each time (3/2/1 minute each) and the role is switched after the speakers’ turn. The listeners are assigned to focus on listening by not interrupting or asking questions while keeping eye contact with the speaker. However, in this modified version, the purpose is not on improving the speaker’s ability to speak more fluently; it is on improving the listener’s ability to ask follow-up questions. Therefore, the instructor should emphasize the difference between the regular 4/3/2 activity and this activity.

PROCEDURE

First, twelve types of follow-up questions are introduced in addition to the basic follow up questions: (1) continuing asking for a reason (e.g. “*Why?*”), (2) continuing asking for an example until the idea becomes clear, (3) asking for information (e.g. “*Could you tell me more?*” “*Could you give me more details?*”), (4) asking for solutions/advice using “how,” (5) using superlatives and comparatives (e.g. “*What is the best TV program?*” “*Which do you like better, NHK or TBS?*”), (6) using “if” in questions, (7) changing the tense to the past (e.g. “*When you were a child, did you watch TV a lot?*”) or to the future (e.g. “*Would you like to watch TV more in the future?*”), (8) asking for an experience (e.g. “*Have you ever...?*”), (9) asking a generalized question (e.g. “*In general, do you think JAPANESE COLLEGE STUDENTS watch TV too much?*”), (10) asking a personalized question (e.g. “*Do YOU watch TV a lot?*”), (11) asking a subjective/judgmental question (e.g. “*So, do you think TV is GOOD?*” “*So, do you think TV is BAD?*”), and (12) indirect disagreement (“*Don’t you think...?*”).

Second, the instructor pairs the students as a usual 3/2/1 but tells them that the speaker is “an interviewee” and the listener is “a reporter” on TV. Giving a fake microphone to each reporter also helps to visualize this task—continuing asking relevant questions (follow-up questions) according to the interviewee’s answers. Likewise, using the microphone prevents the interviewees from speaking too much about their answers unless they are asked to do so by the reporter. This activity also relates to the lesson topic—“Media.” Only the opening question (“*What do you think of TV?*”) is given to the reporters and they have to start with this same question three times each time with a different interviewee.

Finally, the instructor has the interviewees count how many follow-up questions the reporter asked. Although the time is shortened every time, the reporters are encouraged to ask more or as many follow-up questions as their previous interview. Throughout the activity, the interviewees are not allowed to use questions to keep the conversation (e.g. “*How about you?*”),

but confirmation questions or clarification questions are allowed. The instructor monitors these behaviors and encourages the twelve follow-up questions outlined above. After the reporters' turn, the role is switched.

VARIATIONS

To make the goal more observable for the students and to encourage them to ask more questions during this activity, the instructor can change the time sequence. Rather than giving a shorter time for each interview (3/2/1), the instructor can give the same amount of time (e.g. 2/2/2), check how many follow-up questions the reporters asked in the first round, then tell them to ask at least one more follow-up question with the next partner. It is also possible to make it a competition, giving praise to the student who asks the most follow-up questions.

If time allows, the class can have some reflection time to talk about what kind of follow-up questions they asked or to share some interesting follow-up questions they used. Since the fundamental goal of asking questions is to get more information from the interviewee, having the reporters summarize what they heard from the interviewees may remind them of why they are doing this activity and help them think of more interesting or deeper follow-up questions.

In the group discussion, if some students are not asking any follow-up questions, just passing them the fake microphone can be a good non-verbal reminder. However, this action may be face-threatening for some students; therefore, the instructor needs to consider the students' personality and the group dynamics.

RECLECTIONS

This activity was successful in helping students grasp the concept of *what* questions are considered to be useful follow-up questions. They also practiced timing—*when* to ask these questions. The total number of follow-up questions increased since the reporters became more fluent by repeating the same task and because of the time pressure. In the following discussion activity, the students were able to ask more follow-up questions. The speakers also started making their answers shorter, enabling others to ask some follow-up questions. It should be noted that in following lessons, the total number of follow-up questions did not necessarily increase. This may be because the activity was conducted only once. Promoting the speaker's fluency is prioritized in this course; therefore, the regular 4/3/2 technique needs to be conducted. However, considering the importance of follow-up questions, this modified activity of 4/3/2 technique should also be combined and conducted more regularly. Just as students become more fluent in speaking through the 4/3/2 technique, they should be able to become more fluent in asking questions through this modified version of the same technique.

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