

Questions for Communication: Classes which Improve Competence in the Art of Asking Questions in English

SENNECK Andrew*¹

(Received September 27, 2024)

According to uncertainty reduction theory, the uncertainty inherent in intercultural communication can be reduced by asking the other party questions. For this reason, training in the art of asking questions in English is an important element in improving intercultural communicative competency. This study gives an introduction to three classes taught by the author which aim to improve students' question-asking skills.

Introduction

This study explains in detail the content of three of the English classes which are usually taken by either first year or second year students in the Faculty of Education at Yamaguchi University. The first section briefly describes the content of the three classes and describes the desirability of improving competence in the art of asking questions in English with the goal of intercultural communication. In sections two, three, and four, the three classes are described in detail including examples of activities performed during class or assigned as homework tasks. Section five discusses improvements which can be made to make the three classes even more effective.

1. Outline

The three classes described in this paper are English for Communication, Practical and Comprehensive English I, and Practical and Comprehensive English II. English for Communication is predominantly taken by first year undergraduates in their first semester in the Faculty of Education at Yamaguchi University. For students on the Education for Intercultural Awareness Course, English for Communication is a core class, completion of which is a requirement for graduation, but students from other courses often join the class too. Students who are planning to qualify for a licence to be an English teacher usually then proceed to take Practical and Comprehensive English I in the second semester of their first year, and Practical and Comprehensive English II in the first semester of their second year.

The aim for the English for Communication class is to refresh students' thinking about English by getting them to think about English grammar in a different way, and to thereby familiarize themselves with how native speakers of English use the English

language to communicate. The two Practical and Comprehensive English classes developed from two previous classes named Oral English I and Oral English II, and have a clear focus on speaking skills, but with significant opportunities for simultaneously exercising and improving listening skills. The syllabus has been designed to value practicality, so students do not spend any time conversing about abstract subjects; the entire focus of the topic selection is on themes which the students will be able to use regularly in order to describe their daily lives, their common experiences, and those things in life which are important to them.

This paper is concerned with how these three classes can contribute to improving competency in the art of asking questions in English. Improving competency in the art of asking questions is important for intercultural communication. As Rader (2018)^[1] expresses it, "When we ask questions with a genuine desire to learn and understand we show our interest and intention to connect with others". More importantly, being confident in asking questions makes a significant contribution towards reducing uncertainty as described in Berger and Calabrese's (1975)^[2] uncertainty reduction theory (URT). As Neuliep (2015)^[3] suggests, "communication with a stranger, particularly a person from a different culture, can be frightening and full of uncertainty". Neuliep continues to explain that people from low-context cultures, which includes many English-speaking cultures, ask lots of questions to reduce the uncertainty involved in initial intercultural exchanges, and states that, "as information-seeking behavior (question asking) increases, uncertainty decreases".

Competency in asking questions is therefore a vital skill to develop in order to overcome the uncertainty involved in intercultural communication.

*山口大学教育学部, 〒753-8513 山口市吉田 1677-1, asenneck@yamaguchi-u.ac.jp

2. English for Communication

2-1 Outline of the Class

The aim of the English for Communication class is to help students think about English in a different way. English for Communication aims to make students think of English as a tool for communication rather than a school subject which must be studied in order to get a good grade and pass a test.

It may appear obvious that English, or any other language, should be considered a tool for communication, but the common test for university entrance taken by Japanese students at the end of their high school studies contains no communicative element. A result of this is that pedagogical approaches to teaching English at high school in Japan can sometimes be likened to the way that Latin used to be taught in schools across the world; Latin was a language which could be analysed, translated, and understood, but it was not a language for self-expression. English for Communication encourages students to think about English in the way that a native speaker of English thinks about it, and to value communicative effectiveness and accuracy of self-expression.

After a couple of classes designed to help students think about communication in general terms, and to highlight a few of the idiosyncratic features of communication between native speakers of English, the class proceeds to examine in detail the manner in which eight of the most commonly-used tenses are employed by native speakers for communicating their thoughts and ideas. There follows a two-week investigation of how the same eight tenses work when they are used to form questions. The class terminates with the students putting their knowledge of communicative English to the test in a game scenario, and then finally a written test in which students must complete conversations by writing the questions which would have generated the replies shown on the test paper.

2-2 First Lessons: Communication in General and Communication in English

In the first class of English for Communication, the students are required to think about communication in very broad terms. They are reminded that communication involves the sending and receiving of a message. Students are shown panels from a French comic book in which two characters are attempting to introduce themselves to people who do not speak their language. The comic book used is *Asterix and the Great Crossing* (Goscinny and Uderzo, 1975)^[4] and the story imagines what might have happened if two warriors from Gaul at the time of the Roman Empire, had been blown off course while fishing and ended up crossing the Atlantic Ocean to discover America, centuries before Columbus. The two ancient Gauls cannot communicate with the

native Americans they encounter, so they strike poses to demonstrate their character, their attitude to life, and their likes and dislikes.

The students are shown a page from the comic book which contains no words in the pictures, and the students must work in groups to try to guess what message the Gauls are attempting to communicate. The messages which the Gauls intend to convey are, in fact, rather simple, “We are brave”, “We like our food and drink”, “Sometimes we lose our tempers”, and so on, but with no linguistic communication the students invariably find it extremely difficult to guess the correct meaning of the poses being made. The exercise is designed to make the students aware of the importance of linguistic communication for accurately conveying an intended message.

In the second class, students are shown the transcript of a section of dialogue taken from *The Lego Movie* (2014)^[5]. The clip is a humorous list of behaviours which are described as being instructions for, “How to fit in, have everybody like you, and always be happy!” This list of instructions includes two areas of communication in which Japanese styles of communication differ from those used by English speakers.

The first is the higher frequency, compared to Japanese, of name usage in English communication situations. The second is the concept of always returning a compliment. After explanation of how these ideas are used by English speakers to communicate with each other, the students create conversations in which they greet each other by name, and then give and return compliments. When communicating in English it is important to be prepared to give and receive compliments because, as Spencer-Oatey and Kadar (2021)^[6] suggest, complimenting behaviour can be “deployed in first-time encounters as a powerful strategy to enhance rapport”. In addition, Bennett (2013)^[7] remarks that, “people who mainly use compliments seriously find their casual use superficial and inauthentic”, and this is why Japanese people need to be prepared to encounter this style of communication in English.

2-3 Mid-section of the Class: How English Speakers Use the Most Frequently Used English Present and Past Tenses

In the mid-section of the class, eight tenses are covered in eight weeks. Each tense is examined in detail with the aim that students will start to think about the tense in a different way and that this will help them to feel more confident about using that tense for themselves when communicating in English. Table 1 sets out the tenses studied and the mnemonics suggested for remembering the function of the tenses.

2-3-1 Simple Present Tense

The simple present tense is introduced as being the “NOW” tense and students learn to associate it with the following adjectives of frequency: always, usually, often, sometimes, hardly ever, and never. Students write true statements about themselves which use the simple present tense and each of these adverbs of frequency.

Students are also reminded that the simple present tense is the tense used for describing a person’s physical appearance and try to write a description of some of their own idiosyncrasies by using the simple present tense. (For example, I have short hair. I have a pretty nose. I have irregular teeth.)

Tense	Mnemonic
Simple Present	NOW
Present Continuous	RIGHT NOW
Present perfect	BEFORE NOW
Present Perfect Continuous	BEFORE NOW and RIGHT NOW
Simple Past	THEN (at that time)
Past Continuous	AT THAT PRECISE TIME
Past Perfect	BEFORE THEN
Past Perfect Continuous	BEFORE THEN and AT THAT TIME

Table 1: Mnemonics for remembering tense functions

2-3-2 Present Continuous Tense

The present continuous tense is presented to the students as being the tense for describing actions which are happening “RIGHT NOW”. Students consider the fact that there are only certain conditions under which they are likely to use the present continuous tense when talking about themselves and they think about why statements such as, “I am singing” or, “I am playing tennis” are usually superfluous. The answer is that it is usually obvious to an observer what a person is doing without the need for an explicit statement concerning their action.

Students are next asked to consider that, with the ever-changing usage of language, use of the first-person present continuous tense has recently become more common. When people start a conversation on a mobile phone it is widely considered to be important to ascertain what the other party is doing and where they are at that time, and to thereby confirm whether it is convenient for the conversation to proceed. For this reason, mobile phone conversations often begin with questions such as, “Where are you?”, or “What are you doing?” The latter question usually requires an answer using the first-person present continuous tense because the other party cannot see for themselves what is happening.

Mobile phone conversations therefore commonly involve the use of expressions such as, “I’m cooking dinner”, “I’m watching

TV”, or “I’m having lunch”, all of which would not normally be necessary to state in a face-to-face conversation. The students taking the class practice imagining themselves in pretend situations and then “phoning” each other in class to practise making use of the present continuous tense in a mobile phone conversation.

Students also practice using the long-term application of the present continuous tense, in which a long-term situation, or project, has started but has not yet finished. Examples could include, “I’m reading a book about education in Finland”, “I’m writing an essay about special needs education”, or even, “I’m thinking about what career to choose after graduation”. By the introduction of example situations in which the present continuous tense can be used in this way students can become more confident about using the tense correctly for themselves.

2-3-3 Present Perfect Tense

Tense number three is the present perfect tense and students are encouraged to associate this tense with the mnemonic of “BEFORE NOW”, and to imagine this tense as being used to describe “experiences”. Although the present perfect tense can be used to describe any experiences, from the point of view of communication in English, the present perfect tense is generally used quite specifically for the purpose of telling other people about the unusual experiences you have had in your life. However, even in that situation, it is much more natural to use the simple past tense to describe an out-of-the-ordinary experience such as “I went for a ride in a helicopter when I visited Hawaii”, or “I drank a mouthful of beer by accident when I was seven”. This is why the present perfect tense is often used in interrogative form to open a conversation about an interesting topic which will hopefully lead to greater communication. Examples of this could be, “Have you been to Kyoto?” (when talking to a foreign visitor to Japan), or, “Have you ever seen a ghost?” The students practise using the present perfect tense by asking each other questions about unusual things which they might possibly have done, and then they tell each other their stories about their unusual experiences by using the simple past tense. Students are also reminded that the present perfect tense can also be used to talk about a very ordinary experience provided it is used as a negative. For young people living in Japan, it would be most unusual to say, “I have eaten a hamburger at McDonald’s”, however, on the contrary, if a young person were to say, “I have never eaten a hamburger at McDonald’s” it is such an unlikely fact that it would be a conversation starter.

Students also practise using the second usage of the present perfect tense, when it is used to mean that an action has just been

completed for example, “I have just finished my homework”, or “I have just eaten.”

Although the construction “I have never...” is extremely useful, students are reminded that it is always incorrect to use the construction “I have ever...”. Possibly because of confusion with the “I have never...” construction, it is common for Japanese people to state, for example, “I have ever been to Hokkaido”, even though this is incorrect English usage.

2-3-4 Present Perfect Continuous Tense

When students are introduced to a new way of thinking about the present perfect continuous tense, they are told to remember it as being the tense of “BEFORE NOW and RIGHT NOW”.

There are two main classroom activities which aim to instil in students an appreciation of the uses of the present perfect continuous tense. First, students are shown a PowerPoint presentation which provides clues to an activity that has only just been finished. For example, one slide shows the following hints which appear, one at a time.

He is standing by the sea.

His body is wet.

He is drying himself with a beach towel.

The students are then shown a photograph of the person who has been described in the sentences. The students work together to practice making appropriate sentences to describe what the person has been doing. In this example the correct answer would be, “He has been swimming in the sea”. Other situations used are, “He has been eating spaghetti”, “She has been running in a race”, and, “They have been skiing”. Students are asked to remember this usage of the present perfect continuous tense as the “just finished” usage.

The class proceeds to explain the second common usage of the present perfect continuous tense, which, as an aid to memory, is nicknamed the “How long?” usage. It is explained that the present perfect continuous tense is commonly used to ask and answer questions which start with the words, “How long?” In order to practice this, students are first reintroduced to the phrases which commonly are used to answer “How long?” questions.

Students suggest common time periods, such as, “for 10 minutes”, “for 2 years”, and also, “since April” or “since I started going to junior high school”. However, they are also introduced to other expressions which are frequently used such as, “all my life”, “since the day I was born”, and “for as long as I can remember”. The students also discuss expressions which, due to their youth and limited life experience, they have not yet had opportunity to use. Examples of these expressions are, “since I got married” or “since I graduated from university”. The activity

encourages the students to use a variety of these expressions.

A PowerPoint presentation is used to show the students a wide variety of situations which have been continuing for an unspecified period of time. Each student is provided with a worksheet onto which they must write down, either their own, personal, truthful answer, or an answer which would be appropriate either for the situation in question, or for the person they are pretending to be. The students work in groups of 4 or 5. Each student responds to each new PowerPoint slide by writing down an idea to answer the “How long?” question. After each student has written down an answer on the worksheet, students compare their answers with the other students in their group. Students are encouraged to check each other’s answers for illogical or potentially unnatural expressions such as, “It has been raining for 20 years”, or “I’ve been working for Toyota for 5 minutes”.

Here are some of the questions for which students must imagine appropriate answers:

How long have you been studying at Yamaguchi University?

How long has it been raining?

How long have you been going out with your boyfriend?

How long have you been playing basketball?

How long have you been working for Toyota?

How long has Elon Musk been making money?

How long have you been waiting here?

How long have you been feeling unwell?

How long have you been smoking cigarettes?

When students are writing their ideas on their worksheets the teacher ensures that, for each question, they write a full sentence. For example, in order for the students to practise the present perfect continuous tense it is necessary for them to write down in its entirety, “I have been waiting here for 20 minutes”, and not simply “20 minutes”, a statement which would answer the question, but which would provide no practise for using the present perfect continuous tense.

2-3-5 Simple Past Tense

In the second half of this intensive practical examination of the basic tenses of English the focus switches from the “present” tenses to the “past” tenses. It is therefore natural that the simple past tense comes first among the past tenses.

In reality, students often feel confident about using the simple past tense correctly, but review is still necessary. Students are asked to consider what is the opposite of “NOW” in English. Although students invariably make a first guess of “BEFORE”, they are taught that “THEN”, which in this case means, “AT

THAT TIME” is the correct opposite of “now” and therefore the best way to think about the concepts involved in the simple past tense.

During class time, the students review the words which are commonly used with the simple past tense, including “yesterday”, “the day before yesterday”, and also combinations using “last” (last week, last year, last summer) and “ago” (one hour ago, two months ago, five years ago). Students then practise creating pair conversations to make use of the simple past tense. As a task for homework, the students have the simple challenge of writing down, in order, seven things that they did before leaving their home and coming to class that morning. A sample submission would look like the following:

I got up at 6:30.

I shaved.

I had some yoghurt and fruit for breakfast.

I brushed my teeth.

I got dressed.

I checked my bag.

I locked my front door.

It is always interesting to note the knowledge gaps in students’ basic English. Writing in the simple past tense about the routine actions which are performed every morning might be thought to be an activity beneath the level of university students. However, it is surprising how many incorrect expressions are used, particularly in regard to getting dressed, brushing one’s teeth, and putting on makeup. The students are required to submit their homework to the teacher two days in advance of the following weeks class. This allows the teacher time to select any strange or unnatural expressions from the students’ homework and to prepare a task for the next week in which the students assume the role of teacher and try to discover what is the problem with anonymous example sentences which were written by their classmates.

2-3-6 Past Continuous Tense

In the English for Communication class, the past continuous tense follows after the simple past tense. To assist with students remembering how the past continuous tense is used they are taught that the mnemonic for it is “RIGHT THEN”, with the meaning of “at that precise time”, and they are invited to picture it in their mind as being the “Detective Conan tense”.

The English for Communication class uses the nickname “Detective Conan tense” because the past continuous tense is the tense which is frequently used in English when a detective is talking to a suspect about their whereabouts at the time when a

crime was committed in order to establish whether or not the suspect has an alibi. A typical conversation between a detective and a suspect often follows the pattern shown below:

Detective: Where were you at 2:30 on Saturday last week?

Suspect: I was in the park near my house.

Detective: What were you doing?

Suspect: I was taking my dog for a walk.

As demonstrated, it is the past continuous tense which is required for second half of this kind of information exchange. Therefore, in order to practise using the past continuous tense the teacher introduces an imaginary crime that has been committed on the previous evening, and the students split into teams of detectives and suspects in order to ask each other where they were and what they were doing on the previous evening. In order that every student’s whereabouts can be ascertained, the students later switch roles, with the former detectives becoming suspects and vice-versa, and finally the class decides together which student, based on their proximity to the crime scene and the suspicious nature of their activity at that time, should be considered as the prime suspect for the crime. The whole scenario is designed to allow the students an opportunity to practise using the past continuous tense.

Students are also introduced to a second usage of the past continuous tense, which for the purpose of memorability is nicknamed the “combination” usage. In this case the verb using the past continuous tense is used in combination with a verb in the simple past tense to express the idea of something which happened while something else was taking place. The verb describing the longer-term action uses the past continuous tense and the verb describing the shorter-term happening uses the simple past tense, as shown in the following examples.

While I was hanging out my washing, I saw a beautiful butterfly.

While was shopping in the supermarket, I met my English teacher.

Finally, in the past continuous tense class, the students are also introduced to the “simultaneous” past continuous usage. In this case the past continuous tense is used for both verbs in a sentence to describe two things which were happening concurrently. The following example sentences demonstrate the “simultaneous” usage of the past continuous tense.

While I was doing my homework, I was thinking about what to cook for dinner.

While I was talking to my mother on the phone, I was tidying

my room.

For the homework task relating to the past continuous tense the students must answer a number of questions for which their answer will necessarily involve them using the past continuous tense in its “Detective Conan” variation, but also in its “combination” and “simultaneous” usages. Examples of homework questions are as follows, all of which offer students the opportunity of expressing for themselves what they were doing at a precise time in the past.

What were you doing at midnight on December 31st last year?

What were you doing the last time you felt an earthquake?

What else were you doing while you were eating dinner yesterday evening?

2-3-7 Past Perfect Tense

The past perfect tense is introduced to the students as being the “BEFORE THEN” tense, with the interpretation of “then” meaning “before that time”. Students are asked to remember this tense as the tense for describing something that had already happened before another action in the past took place.

In order to practise the past perfect tense, students use the homework they submitted when practising the simple past tense in which they described ten actions they had completed before leaving their house that morning. For practising the past perfect tense, the students work in pairs and describe each event but in reverse order of the events happening.

Before I locked my front door, I had put on my shoes.

Before I put on my shoes, I had picked up my smart phone.

Before I picked up my smart phone, I had checked my bag.

The students also do a class activity in which they write down their personal answer for things that they had done before various stages of their life as they grew up. The questions are shown to the students via a PowerPoint presentation and students follow a cycle of LISTEN → WRITE → ASK → CHECK to compare their answers with the other students in their group. Examples of the questions used in this activity are shown below.

What had you learned to do before you were 2?

Which English words had you learned before you went to junior high school?

How many different prefectures had you visited before you started studying at Yamaguchi University?

How many friends had you made after one week at Yamaguchi University?

As with the activity outlined in 2-3-4 used for practicing the

present perfect continuous tense, students listen to the question first, then they write down their answer (this time using the past perfect tense). Next, they ask the other students in their group about the other students’ answers to compare information and then they work together to check that the English they have written down is correct.

2-3-8 Past Perfect Continuous Tense

The final of the eight common present and past tenses examined in this section of the English for Communication class is the past perfect continuous tense and it is recommended that students remember it as the “BEFORE THEN and AT THAT TIME” tense. It is explained to students that, when using the first person singular and talking about yourself, the opportunities for making use of the past perfect continuous tense increase greatly as your own age increases and as you pass more of life’s milestones, such as graduating from university, getting married, becoming a mother or father, or gaining a position of responsibility in your professional career.

Due to these limitations caused by the relatively young age and lack of life experience of university students, the teacher first demonstrates use of the past perfect continuous tense by creating a timeline for his own life on the whiteboard and indicating various milestones with dates. The teacher then demonstrates making example sentences using the past perfect continuous tense such as, “I had been studying Japanese for four years before I came to live in Japan”, or “I had been living in Osaka for eight years before I moved to Yamaguchi.” The students’ attention is drawn to the fact that sentences which make use of the past perfect continuous tense are often significantly longer than the more straightforward constructions they had been using to practise the other tenses.

To practise writing past perfect continuous sentences for themselves, the students are asked to pretend that they are an elderly man or woman looking back on their life. Students choose whether they are going to pretend to be eighty, ninety or one hundred years of age, and they must then decide how long they are going to pretend having been doing a certain activity before they experienced either good fortune or bad fortune. The students are introduced to twenty happenings which could have occurred in the course of an elderly person’s life, such as, “I won the lottery”, “I needed a liver transplant”, or “I got fired from my job.”

Students are assigned at random a pattern of behaviour which might have been ongoing for several years before the happening occurred. For example, one student might draw a slip of paper saying, “I used to go to Hawaii three times every year so I decided

to buy a house in Honolulu”, while another student might draw a paper which states, “I used to eat caramel all day and all my teeth fell out”. Students then complete a worksheet by asking eight other students about their eventful lives. This gives them opportunities to practise using the past perfect continuous tense, as in the following roleplay.

Student A: How old are you?

Student B: I’m 90.

Student A: Tell me about your life.

Student B: I used to live in England but then I emigrated to Japan.

Student A: How long had you been living in England before you emigrated to Japan?

Student B: I had been living in England for twenty-two years before I emigrated to Japan.

On their worksheet, each student must write down the question which asks their partner how long they had been doing a certain activity before they did something or they experienced something which changed their life. At the end of the roleplay conversation and after the “how long” question has been written down, the students work together to check that the “how long” question has been written down correctly.

As a homework task, students are invited to write a description of the lives of their four grandparents following the example shown below.

My paternal grandmother, Mabel, learned how to knit when she was at primary school. She raised five children and nine grandchildren and was always knitting sweaters, scarves, hats, and socks for everyone. She continued knitting right up to the end of her life. She died at the age of 89. At the time that she died, she had been knitting for over 80 years.

The objective for the homework task is to set up an opportunity for the students to make use of the past perfect continuous tense when talking about the life of a real person who is or has been known to them personally.

2-4 Questions Using the Eight Tenses

Now that all eight of the commonly used present and past tenses have been reviewed, studied, practised and analysed, in the style of first-person statements, the following two weeks of the English for Communication class involve a closer look at the formation of questions using the eight tenses. As mentioned in section 1, the interrogative form can be particularly useful for uncertainty reduction when communicating in a foreign language.

In addition, it is natural for many speakers of foreign languages to find that, until a certain degree of proficiency and fluency is achieved, listening as the passive participant in a conversation is less demanding than trying to speak at great length for yourself. In a conversation where one person is a native speaker and the other party is a learner of the language, it is therefore a useful skill for a language learner to be always ready with a fresh question to ask which keeps the native speaker continually talking and supplying new information.

Table 2 summarizes the advice given to the students about the different ways in which the interrogative form of the eight tenses can be remembered as being useful in conversational situations.

Tense	Advice	Example
1. Simple present	Very simple questions for starting conversations.	Do you like pizza?
2. Present continuous	Useful for starting a mobile phone conversation.	What are you doing?
3. Present perfect	Useful for asking about life experiences.	Have you ever been to Nara?
4. Present perfect continuous	Useful for asking how long someone has been doing something.	How long have you been studying Japanese?
5. Simple past	Simple questions about things which have been completed.	Did you watch Doraemon yesterday?
6. Past continuous	Useful for asking what someone was doing at a specific time.	What were you doing at 2:30 yesterday afternoon?
7. Past perfect	Not so useful, but sometimes necessary for checking what had happened before another point in time.	Had you eaten sushi before you came to Japan?
8. Past perfect continuous	Very long questions usually used for asking how long something had been continuing before another point of time in the past.	How long had you been drinking five cups of coffee a day before you decided to cut down?

Table 2: Questions formed using the eight tenses studied

Although the examples shown in table 2 are a mix of both open questions (question-word questions) and closed questions (yes/no questions), in the two classes dedicated to forming questions using the eight tenses, students are expected to practise making both open and closed questions in each tense, thereby making a total of sixteen interrogative patterns for which

familiarity has been increased. In addition to practising asking and answering questions in pairs and groups, the homework task for this section of the English for Communication class is to submit sixteen questions (eight open questions with one question using each tense, and eight closed questions, also with one question using each tense) which the students would like to ask the class teacher.

The final class activity before the final test is to play a game called “Are you telling the truth?” as a whole-class activity. In advance of the class in which the game will be played the students submit to the teacher three examples of interesting, or slightly unusual things which have happened to them in their lives, but which their classmates do not know about. For example, a student might submit information saying that they went to school with someone who has since become famous, or they might inform the teacher that they were once so tired that they fell asleep while riding a bicycle.

The teacher prepares a PowerPoint presentation collating all the information received (providing that it is of a suitable nature) and preparing slips of paper onto which one of the statements has been written so that when it is time to play the game each student may draw at random one slip of paper out of a hat. When the first PowerPoint slide shows the first statement, the student who picked that statement out of the hat, must pretend that it was a statement that they themselves submitted. Their classmates then ask them questions about the statement, for example, “Why did you score zero in a maths test?”, “How old were you when you broke your nose?”, or “What did you do when you lost your student ID card?”

The student who is answering the questions must pretend that they are giving true information and must therefore invent suitable scenarios which will make their statement sound true. There are times when a student picks out of the hat one of the actual statements that they had submitted, and in such a case, the game continues in the same way, the only difference being that the student can supply the true details of the story without any necessity to tell any lies. After three questions have been asked the class decide whether they think the student has been telling the truth. The merit of playing this game is that it gives the students an opportunity to practise asking questions about a wide variety of topics and using the eight different tenses.

At the end of the semester there is a final test, which also focuses on the ability to ask questions. Among other tasks, in the final test students must use each of the eight tenses they have been studying to write both an open and a closed question to a classmate. Students also have to complete a number of conversations. In each conversation the reply to a question is

printed in the test paper and each student must write down an appropriate question which would have produced the answer shown. For example, if the answer to an unshown question were, “I’ve been playing basketball since I started going to junior high school”, the correct question which a student should write would be, “How long have you been playing basketball?” Students finish the class having had a great deal of practice in using different tenses in English and also in the practical application of using those tenses for asking questions with the end result being that they have improved their communicative competency in English.

3. Practical and Comprehensive English I

The following section of this paper describes in detail the Practical and Comprehensive English I class which is available to students in the second semester of their first year in the Faculty of Education at Yamaguchi University. The class focuses on the development of listening and speaking skills in general, but in particular it has a focus on training students to ask pertinent questions in order that a conversation will continue and further communication will result.

In order to achieve the aim of developing students’ question asking capabilities, the Practical and Comprehensive English I class contains a large amount of pair work. The class operates according to a fortnightly schedule, with one topic covering two weeks. In the first class of each two-week cycle, the students practice asking and answering questions by completing a worksheet prepared by the teacher. The class is designed so that students change their pair work partner after each question has been asked and answered. When a pair has asked each other the first question on the worksheet, and when they have also exchanged answers, and written them down on their worksheets, all students rotate to form new pairs for the next conversation. However, before each new pair asks each other the second question on the worksheet, they must first practice asking and answering the first question with their new partner. In each case, the general rule is to talk first, write second, because this encourages the students to have a conversation about the question before they turn their attention to writing their answer on their worksheets. This system means that students get to practice the first four or five questions on the worksheet with multiple different partners, developing fluency through repetition.

Once the worksheet has been completed, the students face a homework assignment which involves writing a short speech related to the topic for the conversation class. Topics for speeches include the following:

The story of how I met my best friend.

A story about my irrational fear or phobia.
A time when I found something in the street.

Therefore, when students come to class in the following week, they are all prepared to make a short speech to the class. In order that listening to a classmate's speech does not become a passive activity, the students who are listening are required to take notes while they listen to the speech. At the moment the speech finishes, students are told to start talking with their partner. Together, each pair must think of a question that they would like to ask about the speech. When they have thought of a question, they write it down on their worksheets. At this stage, the teacher checks the questions that the students have written on their worksheets and there is the opportunity to ask the student who made the speech any questions which may give the class interesting information.

The process of listening to a speech and then immediately asking a question about it may seem a little unnatural to the students at first. However, the students are instructed to pretend that they are not listening to a speech, but rather, that they are listening to a single individual telling them a story. When someone reaches the end of a story, it is natural to expect that the other party in the conversation will react so that the conversation continues. Students are instructed that the easiest way to continue the conversation is to ask a question.

After each speech has been finished, and appropriate questions have been considered, the students are paired with a new partner before they listen to the next speech. When considering questions to ask, students are encouraged to listen carefully for important details which the speaker has not mentioned. For example, if a speaker mentions a friend, a sibling, or a teacher at their school, from an English point of view it is natural to want to know that person's name and to ask about it. In another situation, if a speaker mentions a visit to a foreign country, but only mentions the country by name, for example, "when I went to Canada", or "I did a homestay in Germany", then it would be natural to ask the speaker for unsupplied information such as, "Which part of Canada did you go to?", or "Where did you stay in Germany?"

Students are also taught to have a memory bank of useful questions which can be used in a wide variety of situations. Examples of this type of question include questions about emotions, "How did you feel ...?", and questions about events following the situation described in the speech, "What happened after ...?" The general idea of this training is to provide practical support for future real-world situations in which the students will find it necessary to rely on their own English skills in a situation where communication is required.

The class continues in this style with a conversation week followed by a speech/question-preparation week until the end of the semester. The test for the class is a simple confirmation that the students have attained the objectives for the class. In the test, the class teacher reads his own personal speech for four of the topics which the students have spoken about themselves. For example, the teacher makes a speech relating the story of how he had met his best friend, and a speech providing details of his own irrational fear or phobia. As has been practised in class every other week, when the teacher reaches the end of the speech, the students must write down on their test answer sheet an appropriate question to ask the teacher about the speech. In the case of the test, students are not allowed to confer with each other before writing down the question they want to ask. Students are given two minutes to write a question about the speech. The script of the speech is then distributed to the students and they are given five minutes to read through the speech and to think of a second question to ask the teacher.

In terms of evaluating students' test answers, the criteria for marking the questions submitted by students are as follows. In the case of the first question the students submit, for which spontaneity and an immediate response is desired, the students are informed that anything will be awarded a high grade providing that it satisfies the conditions of comprehensibility and having some connection with the subject matter. In other words, a student's question will be evaluated fairly even if it is asking about information which, in fact, was included in the speech, but which the student failed to catch clearly, misheard, overlooked, or could not understand. However, for the second question, after the students have had the opportunity to read through the speech script and have been able to check the content for themselves, students are informed that they must strive to ask a deeper question rather than simply asking for further details. For the second question, questions in the memory bank category of useful questions for any situation are awarded a grade but are not evaluated highly.

4. Practical and Comprehensive English II

Practical and Comprehensive English II can be seen as an extension of the Practical and Comprehensive English I class outlined in Section 3 of this study. Practical and Comprehensive English II is typically taken by students in the first semester of their second year of study. Although completion of Practical and Comprehensive English I is not a requirement for taking Practical and Comprehensive English II, it is normal for over 90 percent of the students taking the class to have done so.

Practical and Comprehensive English II follows the same

fortnightly pattern as Practical and Comprehensive English I, so students spend the first week in the cycle conversing with multiple partners about a fresh topic. The students prepare a speech about that topic for homework, and in the second week of the cycle, students listen to their classmates' speeches and then prepare questions with a partner. The semester finishes with a test prepared in the same style as that for Practical and Comprehensive English I.

4. Discussion

This section identifies some areas for the continuous improvement of the two Practical and Comprehensive English classes which will further improve their effectiveness. After a speech has been finished, the students' speed of thinking of questions has often been somewhat slow because the process of thinking about an appropriate question has been a pair work exercise. In contrast, the test at the end of the semester was necessarily an individual effort. In the test, speed of thinking is given priority over originality because it is important for the students to respond quickly to what they have heard.

On the other hand, when questions are prepared as a pair work exercise in class time, those students who are able to think of a question quickly often use standard examples from the question memory bank at the expense of originality. During class time, originality is often overlooked by those students who aim to do the minimum level of participation required.

To counter this trend, and to further improve the Practical and Comprehensive English classes, the teacher plans to introduce a two-step process, similar to the format used for the end of semester test, in the bi-weekly speech classes. Therefore, when a speech by a classmate reaches its conclusion, students will now be given two minutes to write a question quickly, for the purpose of continuing the "conversation" with the student who made the speech. Any question will be valid, but speed will be prioritized over content.

Following, those two minutes, each student will have the opportunity to discuss their question with their partner, and each pair will then have time to work together to prepare a highly original question that they would like to ask the speaker. It is hoped that this method will increase both students' ability to think of questions quickly and with an increased degree of originality.

5. Conclusion

Students who complete the three classes outlined in this paper finish the classes having had a thorough drilling in the practical use of asking questions in English. In each class, the main reason for asking a question is not necessarily that of obtaining

information. Questions asking for information such as, "What time does the post office open?", or "Who is your English teacher?", have been studied by the students since junior high school English classes. In the three classes under consideration in this paper, the aim of asking a question is twofold. Firstly, the aim of asking a question is to continue a conversation, and secondly, it is to reduce uncertainty in intercultural communication thereby contributing to greater communicational success.

References

- [1] Rader, D. (2018). *Teaching and Learning for Intercultural Understanding: Engaging Young Hearts and Minds*. Abingdon. Routledge.
- [2] Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some Explorations in Initial Interaction and Beyond: Toward a Developmental Theory of Interpersonal Communication. *Human Communication Research*, 99-112.
- [3] Neuliep, J. W. (2015). *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*. California. SAGE Publications Inc.
- [4] Goscinny, R., & Uderzo, A. (1975). *Asterix and the Great Crossing*. London. Orion Books.
- [5] Lord, P., Miller, C. (2014). *The Lego Movie*. Dialogue retrieved on 24/9/2024 from: https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Lego_Movie
- [6] Spencer-Oatey, H., & Kadar, D. Z. (2021). *Intercultural Politeness*. Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Bennett, M. T. (2013). *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication: Paradigms, Principles, & Practices*. Boston. Intercultural Press.

概要

豊かなコミュニケーションのための質問力の育成

SENNECK Andrew

不確実性減少理論によると会話の中で質問する頻度を増やすと異文化コミュニケーションにおける不確実性が減少する。そのため、質問力を育てることが異文化コミュニケーションにとって重要である。本論文では、筆者が実践した質問力を育てる授業を紹介する。

キーワード：不確実性減少理論、異文化コミュニケーション、質問力