

Motivation and Learner Training Through Oral Quizzing

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The oral quiz is an easily implemented style of communicative testing, designed to create positive washback, both in learner motivation and habits.

What is the Oral Quiz?

The oral quiz is a revamping of the traditional practice of calling on students to give short responses to factual questions. The critical factor in doing the oral quiz is to create different types of questions that the students are aware of before the test. I usually introduce each quiz type as a practice activity during class that is performed in pairs. Later, after the students have practiced and know exactly what is expected of them, I inform them that a quiz will occur the following week.

In this testing style students answer in real-time. This can be done either by calling on individuals or by having all students write their answers. This type of testing forces students to listen carefully and to respond quickly as they must do in authentic conversations. Traditional written tests give students much more time to think before answering and allow students to utilize reading and test-taking skills. Those skills are important if, for example, your students need to prepare for a standardized test like the TOEFL, however, if the class objective goal is to improve students conversational ability, it makes sense to test them in ways which require conversational skills such as listening, para-linguistics, clarification, and quick thinking.

Here are some examples of typical exchanges in class:

Quiz A: Actions and Past Tense (What did I do?)

Teacher: (Gestures) What did I do?

Student: You raised your hand.

Teacher: Good!

Quiz B: Actions and Conversational Skills (Please...)

Teacher: Please use a rejoinder and ask me a follow up question. I went out to eat last night

Student: Oh yeah? Where did you go?

Teacher: I went to the Hard Rock Cafe. Good question!

Teacher: (Please respond.) How's it going?

Student: Pretty good. How about you?

Teacher: Good. Thanks. (Remember to make eye contact)

Quiz C: Questions (Listen to the answer and tell me the question.)

Teacher: The answer is twice a week. Tell me the question.

Student 1: Sorry I don't know.

Teacher: No problem. Okay, same question.

Student 2: How often do you ... ?

Teacher: Right!

Teacher: (Travel questions) It's really exciting. There are lots of shops and cafes around.

Student: What's the area like?

Teacher: Good! (Remember to put the stress on "What's" and "area.")

Quiz D: Grammar Patterns (Listen to the key words and make a sentence.)

Teacher: (Make an opinion.) Being active...important.

Student: I think being active is important.

Teacher: Perfect!

Quiz E: Vocabulary (Listen to the meaning and tell me the word.)

Teacher: This is something that happens to you. It means you don't know where you are.

Student: Sorry. Could you say that again?

Teacher: Sure. I said, this is something...

Student: Do you mean get lost?

Teacher: Yeah, that's it!

Quiz F: Vocabulary (Use the word in a sentence.)

Teacher: Scared.

Student: I scared of ghosts.

Teacher: That's close. There's a small mistake.

Student: I am scared of ghosts.

Teacher: Great!!

Why do the Oral Quiz?

Creating a Positive Washback

As mentioned earlier, students are aware of the question style of the quiz before they are tested. Each lesson I introduce and practice some of the quiz types as part of the class and then test them in the same way that they have been practicing. The students do not know the exact content of the quiz but they do know the type of question. By introducing the quiz types in this way, my hope is to create a positive washback in the class. Since the students know exactly how and what to study, it is easier for them to review the material in a productive way. I often give them time in class to review and let them decide with their partners what areas they need to focus on. This kind of freedom fosters autonomy in students and gives them responsibility for their own learning. As a teacher, I am not trying to trick them with my test but rather set the standard so that they know how to succeed.

Creating Good Habits

In addition, through these quizzes, I can implement aspects of learner training to instill positive habits that mirror the actions of good language learners. For example, in Quiz B students need to listen carefully to an utterance so they can ask a follow-up question just as they would in a real conversation. Likewise, in Quiz F, students learn that they need to be able to use a word in a sentence and not just translate it into L1. Additionally, when students do not know an answer they can say "Sorry, I don't know" and still receive get 60% for the question. This simple point teaches students that they need to respond when spoken to and that silence conveys a certain level of rudeness in many English speaking cultures. This socio-pragmatic issue is often difficult to convey, however the oral quiz addresses this problem through clear modeling and comprehensible results of students actions. At the same time, students see through the grading system that it is better to try, make a mistake, and learn from than to opt out. In this way, I hope to validate risk-taking as students try to communicate their ideas.

In brief, the oral quiz requires students to define, explain, ask questions, give examples, and answer questions in ways similar to what they may encounter when speaking and listening to English in the real world. Aside from replicating authentic conversations and having a clear purpose to the students, the quiz questions actually train students in positive conversational habits. The questions are flexible and I expect that other teachers will be able to expand on the basic types presented here and adapt this approach to target their course objectives. Another important benefit of creating the quiz types – and allowing students to know the general content in advance - is to bridge the gap between what I want my students to be able to do and what they think they need to do to succeed in the class.

Motivation

Students are fully aware of the quiz content. There is no mystery and no hidden tricks. This means that the responsibility is placed on the students to be ready for the quiz and to review. I generally start the class with some warm up activity or free conversation and then do the quiz. Active review through quiz style questions between students makes students more ready to use the language as opposed to just having a passive understanding of it. Students often reveal to me in their course evaluations that they realized how much they learned, and that they would not have studied regularly without the quiz.

Adapting to Different Learning Paces

I have found that the constant review of class material over the course of the semester allows students the time to learn things that they might have otherwise given up on. I have often seen students during review time having "ah hah" experiences with each other over material we had covered weeks before. As an educator, this was a very important lesson that exemplified how people learn when they are truly ready to learn.

Ongoing Assessment

The quiz is also a way to quickly gauge student progress – or lack of - and it gives both teacher and student some very necessary instant feedback. The teacher can take notes during in-class pair work review time and the actual quiz can provide a warning for any problematic areas. At this point, some of these trouble spots can be recycled into future lessons or as a quiz by itself. As an assessment measurement, the oral quiz often serves to raise student interest in a weak point and has the empowerment factor to let students work on their speaking skills as the semester continues.

Grading Students

When I first introduce the quiz, I write the following scale on the board.

90 - 100% = Perfect

(Students give quick communicative answer with little or no errors in pronunciation or grammar.)

70 -89% = Small mistake(s) (Close!)

(Understandable, but with some small errors in pronunciation or grammar.)

61 -69% = Big mistake(s) (Nice try!)

(Way off but made the attempt trying based on what he/she thought was correct.)

60% "Sorry, I don't know.

0% = If you say nothing

(I give students five seconds to say something.)

Obviously, each teacher will need to adjust the scale according to his/her own situation and beliefs; however, I encourage teachers to share their criteria with their students. Part of the power of this style of testing is that students actually become able to grade each other, which they begin to naturally do during review sessions.

Procedural Considerations

I usually make a point of mixing in quiz questions from the entire semester and not just the last lesson. When students ask me about the content of the day's quiz, I simply reply ... everything. This approach forces students to continually review and aids in long-term memory. Although the oral quiz is an integral part of their learning, it is important that it not take up too much time. If it is too long, it takes time away from the lesson and it risks becoming a boring exercise for the students.

Following the quiz, I usually give students time to review in class with a partner. During this time students should be actively testing each other with one student taking the role of the teacher and the other taking the role of the student. This provides me an opportunity to monitor and help individual students as they peer teach each other. In this way, students are also receiving training in how to study. The actual quiz questions offer many more possibilities for review than simple translation which unfortunately is what students often revert to when reviewing.

When calling on students during the quiz, I always say the question first, let it linger for a moment, and then call out a student's name. In this way, I try to encourage all of the students to answer all of the questions. Students also need to listen to each other's answers because if one student makes a mistake, I will ask the same question to another student. The teacher can also offer questions and have students volunteer answers. The latter is especially useful for creating or encouraging a sense of enthusiasm among the students in a game-like atmosphere.

The oral quiz can be done with large groups of students provided that the teacher knows their names or has a good seating chart. I use a sheet with their names and pictures on it. It usually takes only 15 –30 seconds for each student, which means that the teacher can quiz ten to fifteen students very quickly. There is no grading at home since the teacher marks the score upon hearing the student response. Students get immediate feedback on their response, which exploits the learning opportunity. This opportunity is so often missed in testing, since students often lose interest when they don't get feedback right away.

Another option is to have students write their answers to a set of questions you ask. When I do this I usually have students exchange papers and do peer correction. This option is a big time saver for the teacher and helps students learn the material more thoroughly. In this case, the scale I use is as follows:

Each answer is worth 3 points.

3 points: perfect!

2 points: some small mistake(s), but the meaning is clear.

1 point: a big mistake. Nice try, but the meaning is not clear (or is wrong).

1/2 point: "Sorry, I don't know."

Some Extra Tips for Making the Quiz Go Smoothly

- **Prepare quiz questions in advance.** With some practice, the teacher will become quite adept at making quiz questions on the spot just looking at what the class has studied, however it's crucial that the questions come in rapid succession, otherwise the students can get bored or distracted.
- **Speak naturally.** It's okay to speak slowly, but use normal intonation, stress and connected speech patterns. It forces students to get used to spoken English and to use all their L2 coping strategies.
- **Try to set up a playful game-like atmosphere.** If a student does not answer correctly or says he/she does not know, just move on without any kind of judgment or facial reaction. Do not condemn students' performance verbally or otherwise. For similar reasons, do not pressure students to answer if they have said they do not know. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule (such as when you heard the student answer the same thing during review time), but in general I have found that "Sorry, I don't know, is the escape route for students and that THEY are the ones who need to decide when that should happen.
- **Offer bonus questions.** This can be useful especially if a student has given an incorrect or incomplete answer. Offer the same question as a bonus. The morale of the class changes dramatically if the teacher is always the one who gives the right answer as opposed to another student.
- **Give examples of quiz questions when possible, especially when changing question types.** If a student does not understand the question type, it is usually very difficult to explain it to them once you have asked the question. If communication really breaks down, be ready to say, "I'm sorry, bad question. I will come back to you later.

Conclusion

I have often heard the line: "It is the students who must do the learning." I believe this speaks to the fact that no matter how well we as teachers set up engaging activities it is the students who must actively make efforts to study, remember and use the new language and skills. I believe the oral quiz helps teachers support students in that endeavor by guiding them toward clear goals and positive learning habits.

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. IX, No. 8, August 2003

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