

Successful speakers... ask questions

At Trinity College London, we have studied the scripts from hundreds of our speaking exams. We wanted to find out what makes some test takers more successful than others. One thing that test takers who perform better do is to ask questions.

There are three main ways that test takers ask questions:

a) Using direct questions

For example: *Have you ever been to South America? Do you often go out at the weekend? Why do you think that is?*

b) Using indirect questions

For example: *Could you explain to me what the problem is again? Can you tell me why she is unhappy with her job?*

c) Using rising intonation; indicating that they are asking a question by making their voices go up at the end of a sentence

For example: *You've never been to South America? ↗ You never go out at the weekend? ↗ You think that? ↗*

Here are two extracts from the corpus of the GESE Interactive task at B2 level.

Activity 1

Read the conversations between a test taker <TT> and an examiner <E> aloud. How many direct questions are there? Underline them. How many 'rising intonation' questions are there? Circle them.

Corpus extract

A From a discussion about where to go for a holiday

<TT> Ah, okay, so you like going to the mountains?

<E> Er, it might be nice to go to the mountains. Perhaps, it depends...

<TT> It can be cold. Do you like cold or hot places?

<E> I think I'd prefer to go somewhere warm.

B From a discussion about a problem someone has with his job

<E> He hasn't been paid so if his boss has no money...

<TT> Yeah

<E> The business will close.

<TT> Er, erm...

<E> He will have no job and...

<TT> He can't change the boss – his boss?

<E> Sorry, sorry

<TT> Erm, he can't change his boss?

<E> Erm...he's tried but erm...

<TT> It's difficult.

Trinity tip

Test takers who ask well-framed direct or indirect questions perform better in the exam. This is because it is clearer to the examiner that a question is being asked; there is less confusion and the conversation can continue more easily.

Which do you think is clearer, direct questions or 'rising intonation' questions?

Activity 2

Read the questions and write D (direct question), I (indirect question) or RI (rising intonation question).

- | | |
|---|--|
| a) Why didn't she want to go on holiday? | d) She works full time? |
| b) Could you explain what the problem is? | e) Can you tell me what the time is? |
| c) Does he still live with his parents? | f) He doesn't want to give the money back? |

Activity 3

Rewrite these 'rising intonation' questions into direct questions. There may be more than one way to do this.

- a) You've never been there? Example: Have you ever been there? Or Have you never been there?
- b) You don't like it?
- c) He can't change his job?
- d) There isn't a chance he could come?
- e) She's not sure?
- f) It's over there?

Activity 4

Read this conversation aloud. Is the test taker asking direct questions?

Now look at the test taker's responses. How can you improve them?

Corpus extract

- <E> My nephew's school has just announced that all the students might have to learn three foreign languages. I'm not sure this is a good idea.
- <TT> Your nephew likes learning languages?
- <E> Well, he likes Spanish, which he is doing now at school. But they said he will have to learn two more.
- <TT> I see. He can choose the other languages?
- <E> No, this is the other problem. It's compulsory; they've got no choice. They're suggesting Latin and Mandarin.
- <TT> Well, I think Latin is an ancient language and he can learn a lot about history. He likes history?
- <E> No, he doesn't. And he's had one or two Mandarin lessons and he found it very difficult.
- <TT> Your nephew is a good student?
- <E> Yes, he is but he prefers science and sport. He's thinking of changing his school because of this.
- <TT> But he will have to learn the languages at the other school too?
- <E> Erm, no, this is just at his school now.
- <TT> I see. I think it would be very difficult for him to change his school.

Activity 5

Where shall we go on holiday? In this activity you will prepare an Interactive task where two people are discussing a problem. Work in pairs. Student A: First, complete this chart with your own ideas.

	Example	Student A
Where do you want to go?	China	
Who is going on holiday with you?	My best friend and my grandma	
Imaginary problem	My grandma doesn't like flying	

Now tell student B about this imaginary situation.

I want to go to China on holiday and my grandma and my best friend want to come too. Which is okay, but my grandma doesn't like flying and she wants to travel overland.

Student B: Ask questions about what student A says. Try to find out more about the situation.

How much time do you have for your holiday? Would it be possible for you to have two different holidays; one with your friend and one with your grandma?