Quick Response Questions:
The Development of a Multipurpose Tool

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Abstract

This paper introduces a project to create and implement a collection of leveled question sets into the English-teaching curriculum at a university in Japan. First, the project is explained, and then its evolution is described along with its similarities to the oral proficiency interview (OPI). Finally, some of the applications of the collection are outlined.

The art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge.
― Thomas Berger

Introduction

This paper introduces a project: the creation and implementation of a collection of leveled question sets into the English-teaching curriculum at women's university in Tokyo, Japan. The collection of questions was developed by members of the Center for Language Education and International Programs (CLEIP), which is responsible for designing and administering an English language course that all students must take in order to graduate. Members of CLEIP recently revamped its mandatory English course, selecting new textbooks, changing the assessment criteria and eliminating a single, high-stakes exam in favor of a series of smaller quizzes. In the context of this restructuring of the course, CLEIP members discussed many ideas, one of which was a list of questions ― dubbed quick response questions, or QRQs, at the time. Such a compilation, it was thought, might include items like, "What do you like to do in your free time?" and "What do you like most about your hometown?" In short, these are questions on topics close to the life of a typical university student.

The idea behind the QRQs was that instructors could have students practice with them frequently throughout the semester, as warm-up or cool-down activities, for example. Instructors would be encouraged to be imaginative with the questions, creating new activities, games, and homework assignments — anything to increase students' exposure to and familiarity and confidence with the questions. The set was to be a simple list of twenty to thirty questions. The project evolved, however. The director of CLEIP is an advocate of and expert on oral proficiency interviews (OPI). The project took two evolutionary leaps inspired by OPI philosophy and techniques.

Here is a brief description of OPI from the American Counsel on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) *Oral Proficiency Interview Familiarization Manual* (2012):

> The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is a valid and reliable testing method that measures how well a person speaks a language. It uses a standardized procedure for the global assessment of functional speaking ability, i.e., it measures language production holistically by determining patterns of strengths and weaknesses. The ACTFL OPI is interactive and adaptive, adjusting to the interests, experiences, and the linguistic abilities of the test takers.

> The OPI assesses language proficiency in terms of a speaker's ability to use the language effectively and appropriately in real-life situations. It does not address when, where, why, or the way in which a speaker has acquired his/her language. The OPI is not an achievement test assessing a speaker's acquisition of specific aspects of course and curriculum content, nor is it tied to any specific method of instruction. The OPI does not compare one individual's performance to others, but each individual performance to the assessment criteria.

Discussions of OPI prompted CLEIP members to begin creating leveled sets of three questions for each topic rather than single-item questions. It was appealing to have novice, intermediate and advanced questions for each topic, so CLEIP members set about doing this. With this added component, the QRQs, it was thought, could be used for language assessment. The result was a collection of thirty-three question sets, each with three questions, for a total of ninety-nine questions.

Here are two examples of a three-level set:

A. What part of Japan are you from?

B. What is a good point about your hometown?

C. Could you describe your hometown?

A. How many hours in a week do you watch TV?

B. When do you usually watch TV?

C. Would you describe a TV program that you like to watch?

In these examples, "A" is the novice level; "B" and "C" are intermediate and advanced, respectively. The basic rule for creating questions was that question "A" could be answered with a word or two; "B" would require a sentence or two; and "C" would require several sentences to answer effectively.

The next, and largest, evolutionary leap came when it was decided to merge the QRQ project with a project already completed by the director of CLEIP, a large collection of role-play scenarios, spanning an ambitious swath of the human experience, from food and drink to the stock market. In his collection, each topic includes fifteen scenarios, covering three perspectives and five levels each.

The next phase of the project involved fitting question sets into the preexisting topical framework created by the CLEIP director. Because of the large scale of the role-play project, it was possible to find a slot for each of the newly created sets; many slots remained unfilled. After this, question sets were written for those remaining topics not present in the original unstructured approach to question creation. All of this yielded a set of questions on one hundred topics organized in sixteen fields (see Table 1). The QRQs were printed in the form of a nineteen-page booklet and distributed to all instructors teaching CLEIP classes.

Table 1   16 fields and 100 topics

Field	Topic
1. Culture	1.1 Food, 1.2 Alcohol, 1.3 Clothing, 1.4 Travel, 1.5 Sports, 1.6 Housing, 1.7 Language, 1.8 Literature and Publications, 1.9 Season and Events, 1.10 Culture in General
2. Life	2.1 City Life, 2.2 Hometown, 2.3 Transportation, 2.4 Daily Life, 2.5 Home Electronics, 2.6 Housework, 2.7 Parties, 2.8 Moving, 2.9 Procedure, 2.10 Love, 2.11 Marriage, 2.12 Childbirth and childcare, 2.13 Memories, 2.14 Dreams and Goals, 2.15 Worries, 2.16 Death
3. Human Relations	3.1 Family, 3.2 Friendship, 3.3 Personality, 3.4 Feelings, 3.5 Appearance, 3.6 Personal Relationships, 3.7 Disagreements and Arguments, 3.8 Customs and Manners
4. School & Study	4.1 School, 4.2 University, 4.3 Grades, 4.4 Tests, 4.5 Extracurricular Activities, 4.6 Research and development
5. Art & Hobbies	5.1 Music, 5.2 Visual Art, 5.3 Crafts, 5.4 Photography, 5.5 Movies and Television, 5.6 Skills Acquisition, 5.7 Art in General, 5.8 Hobbies, 5.9 Collections, 5.10 DIY, 5.11 Handicraft, 5.12 Gambling, 5.13 Games
6. Religion & Festivals	6.1 Religion, 6.2 Festivals
7. History	7.1 History
8. Media	8.1 Media, 8.2 Show Business
9. Telecommunications & Computers	9.1 Telecommunications, 9.2 Computers
10. Economy & Consumption	10.1 Shopping and Family Finance, 10.2 Work, 10.3 Job Hunting, 10.4 Business, 10.5 Stocks, 10.6 Economy and Finance, 10.7 International Finance, 10.8 Taxes
11. Industry	11.1 Industry in General, 11.2 Automobile Industry, 11.3 Heavy Industry, 11.4 Light Industry, 11.5 Construction and Engineering, 11.6 Energy, 11.7 Agriculture and Forestry, 11.8 Fisheries
12. Society	12.1 Accidents, 12.2 Discrimination, 12.3 Aging Society and Falling Birthrate, 12.4 Social security and Welfare
13. Political Affairs	13.1 Politics, 13.2 Law, 13.3 Social Movements, 13.4 Election, 13.5 Diplomacy, 13.6 War, 13.7 Conferences and meetings
14. Mankind & Creatures	14.1 Human body, 14.2 Medical Treatment, 14.3 Health and Beauty, 14.4 Animals, 14.5 Plants
15. Nature	15.1 Weather, 15.2 Nature and Geographical Features, 15.3 Disaster, 15.4 The Environment, 15.5 Space
16. Science	16.1 Mathematics, 16.2 Science, 16.3 Technology

Applications of QRQs

Natural conversation, to a large extent, is driven by questions. *How was your weekend? What's new? How was the movie?* Without questions, what happens in a conversation? The QRQs comprise a stable list of questions, many of which are likely to occur in real conversations outside the classroom. Instructors can incorporate QRQs into their language classes in a number of simple ways, such as assigning a few as warm-up or cool-down activities.

It is important to note that, while sharing some similarities with question banks, such as the extensive collection at *The Internet TESL Journal* (http://iteslj.org/questions/), the QRQs are distinguished by their leveled organization. It is on this point that the usefulness of the QRQ collection as an assessment tool becomes clear.

QRQs as Assessment Tool

The QRQs have proved useful as a means of assessing students' levels of proficiency in English. Members of CLEIP selected five sets of questions to be used in interviewing students wishing to study abroad. It was determined that each of the three interviewers would pose the same questions to the students interviewed. In this way, consistency could be maintained and results, when compared among the interviewers would be meaningful. This approach is quite similar to that of OPI:

> [OPI is a] procedure for the elicitation of oral language, used in conjunction with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for the assessment of oral language skills. The test consists of a structured interview which leads candidates through activities requiring progressively higher levels of proficiency. The phases are characteristically a warm-up, a probe, a level check and a wind down. The performance on each of the phases is evaluated against definitions for each band level. (Davies, 1999, p. 136)

For the purpose of assessing students' proficiency, the breadth of the topics covered and the fact that these topics are clearly indexed in the QRQ collection are particularly valuable points. Instructors wishing to assess students can think about the subject areas that would be most relevant to their purpose and select QRQ sets appropriately.

Linking to Fields of Study

Given the wide range of topics covered in the QRQs, it became apparent that it would be possible for instructors and students to focus on those sections of the QRQs most closely to students' majors. Each first-year English class is made up of students in the same department, so, for instance, all of the students in a given class might be in the department of Japanese Literature, English Literature, or Health and Nutrition. This provides instructors the opportunity to tailor classes based on students' academic interests. The table below presents some examples of question sets that align with different departments at the university.

Art History	N: Have you ever seen a very impressive painting? I: What's a good place to see paintings? A: Could you describe the best picture you've ever drawn or painted?
Health & Nutrition	N: What's your favorite sweet? I: When do you like to eat snacks? A: How would you describe a healthy diet?
Japanese Literature	N: What do you think is the prettiest foreign language? I: What is one difficult point about learning Japanese for a foreigner? A: Would you explain some differences between Japanese and English?

By means of these discipline-specific question sets, it may be easier to instill the notion that English language skills are valuable when students see the connection to their own lives. In choosing a speaking-listening textbook for the first-year English program, CLEIP members targeted what was seen as the lowest common denominator: international travel. It was felt that even students with little interest in English per se might very well plan to travel to an English speaking country. With the QRQs, rather than targeting the lowest common denominator, it is possible to provide materials for a specific segment of the student community. In this way, it is hoped that English will be seen as more practical for those students who might otherwise claim to have little or no interest.

A Useful Metaphor: Jazz Standards and QRQs

While discussing the QRQs, CLEIP members noted a parallel between their ideas about role the QRQs could play at the university and jazz standards, pieces of music that are commonly played by jazz musicians. Examples include *Summertime*,

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, and *Someone to Watch Over Me*. Here is a bit of history (Crawford & Magee, 1992):

> So-called "jazz standards" — the term is used by musicians and fans alike–are tunes accepted and shared so widely that jazz musicians who have never played them together can be expected, on the spot and without notation, to be able to perform them. (p. *v*)

It is this last line that captures the real significance for the QRQ project. Imagine a class of thirty-five students working with a core group of QRQ question sets. This core group is their list of "jazz standards," the tunes that everyone knows and can play on the spot. Even two students who have never met can come together and have a meaningful exchange using the core QRQs for that class–rather like a group of jazz musicians who have never met playing *Summertime*.

Here is a story, told by jazz musician and author Ted Gioia (2012), that captures the critical importance of knowing jazz standards and being ready to play them at a moment's notice:

> In fact, I soon learned that knowledge of the repertoire was even more important to a jazz musician than to a classical artist. The classical performer at least knows what compositions will be played before the concert begins. This is not always the case with jazz. I recall the lament of a friend who was enlisted to back up the poll-winning horn player at a jazz festival–only to discover that he wouldn't be told what songs would be played until the musicians were already on stage in front of 6000 people. (p. *xiii*)

One of the factors that led to the existence of jazz standards was the need for a common language among musicians from different locations coming together to play. Having standards gave them a common framework in which they could express their unique style.

The most appealing aspect of the jazz standard metaphor is that it nigh lights the need for a combination of fixed knowledge and improvisation. It is hoped that QRQs can function as a set of standards that students can come together and "play." Consider this description of jazz improvisation from the book *Jazz in American Culture* (Townsend, 2000):

> The repertoire [of jazz standards] provides the framework for improvisation. But the use of this material does not in itself make jazz. Jazz improvisation has a character that differs from that of other improvisatory musics, and this has more to do with the manner in which improvisation is produced and

performed than with the repertoire itself. In principle, the goal of improvisation is to respond creatively to the musical environment in which the improvisation is taking place. This means responding to the ways in which the other musicians are playing, to mood, to levels of energy, but primarily to the specific musical context generated by the source material. The musical choices made by improvisers in most jazz are made against the background of a particular set of harmonies and improvisers are obliged to take account of them even if, temporarily, the choice is made to override them or to clash with them.（p.14）

The phrase "framework for improvisation" captures a point essential both to the QRQ project and to foreign-language teaching focused on speaking, a balance between existing knowledge–a jazz standard–and the freedom to express something new–improvisation.

The benefit of this balance between preparedness and improvisation is clear: the student, having worked with some of the QRQs in a variety of ways can develop familiarity, competence and confidence with those questions. She creates a standard response that is more or less stable in each encounter with a particular QRQ. By using this standard response as a starting point, she can improvise based on her feelings that day, new insights, recently acquired vocabulary, or her partner's follow-up questions. In this way, through improvisation, students can explore — in the language of OPI testing — their "ceiling."

Conclusion

This paper has described the creation of a collection of leveled-question sets, categorized by a wide range of topics and explained the hope that these questions become an integral part of the first-year English program. Moreover, some applications of the QRQs have been presented. Finally, a metaphor has been put forward to give an indication of the spirit in which the QRQs will be used. It was suggested that the QRQs be viewed as a collection of jazz standards. In this metaphor, student "musicians" come together to play tunes they all know, a selection of QRQs. Because of her familiarity with the questions, each student can join in with confidence.

References

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