

Graded Interviews for Communicative Practice

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Do you have difficulty in getting your learners to talk? Here's a simple way to give speaking practice and to help your learners pick up some useful skills on the way. This article describes how the interview activity can be used for language learning. It gives examples of several interview exercises and shows how these can be used to practice simple communication strategies and to provide graded practice in making and answering questions.

In an interview one person is usually asked questions by an interviewer or several interviewers. The interview may be conducted for one of several reasons. The person interviewed might be applying for a job, and the interview is conducted as a way of determining his suitability for the job. Or the applicant may be under consideration for a scholarship to study overseas, and the interview is a means of measuring his oral proficiency in English. Interviews may also be used to discover people's attitudes towards things as far apart as governments and literacy.

The material described here has been used as preparation for adult learners of English who were to have an interview as part of the screening process for a scholarship. However, with a few changes the interview activity can be used with younger learners also.

Preparation

The teacher can prepare the learners for an interview in the following ways:

1. The teacher acts as the interviewer and interviews the whole class. That is, he asks a question and one of the learners answers it. Then another learner answers the next question. The learner should give a short answer to the question and then add extra information. This extra information can be (1) an extra fact, (2) a reason, or (3) the applicant's feelings. Here are some examples of an interview for a scholarship.

(I= Interviewer, A= Applicant)

I: How long have you been in your present job?

A: About three years. I started working there just after I graduated. (Here the extra information is an extra fact.)

I: Do you use English much in your work?

A: Not much at all, because we don't deal with English speakers, and all our data is in Thai. (Here the extra information is a reason.)

I: When you come back to Thailand will you have the same job?

A: Yes, I will. I like my job a lot and want to continue doing it. (Here the extra information is a feeling.)

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So, the applicant hears a question (Q), gives a short answer (SA), and adds some extra information (EI). $Q \rightarrow SA + EI$.



During the activity the teacher should give the learners the following advice:

- a. When you say names or technical words, say them *slowly* and *clearly*. These are the most difficult words for the interviewer to hear. Technical words include the name of your job, the place where you work, the subject you are going to study, and the place where you will study.
- b. If you do not understand a question, ask the interviewer to repeat the question. It is better to do this than to give an unsuitable answer. (At this point the teacher can check that the learners know how to ask someone to repeat what he has just said.)
- c. If you have to pause before you answer, say something like "Let me think" or "That's a difficult question" to show the interviewer that you have understood his question.

2. The learners as a group interview the teacher. This type of preparation gives the learners practice in making and asking questions. If the learners have difficulty in making questions, the teacher can give them the sheets for the interview a few days before they practice the interview in class. The learners then prepare written questions which the teacher checks. During the interview exercise, however, the learners look at the interview sheets and not at their prepared questions. The learners should not just ask the questions on their sheets one after the other, but should ask a question and then try to base the next question on the extra information the teacher gives. Here is an example:

I: How long have you been in your present job?

A: About three years. I like my job a lot.

I: What do you like most about it?

The strategies described above (providing extra information, showing that you have understood or not understood, and basing the next topic of discussion on what has just been said) are simple strategies to keep any type of conversation going. Learners can usually do this in their mother tongue but experience difficulty when they try to do it in a

foreign language. The interview, then, is a useful way of learning and practicing these strategies.

After the learners have been prepared, they can work in pairs. One member becomes the interviewer and the other becomes the applicant. When the interview is completed, the learners in each pair change their roles: the interviewer becomes the applicant, and the applicant becomes the interviewer.

Some sample interviews

Interview exercises can be graded in order of difficulty. The easiest type is that in which the interviewer is supplied with a list of questions. The learners can prepare answers to the questions at home, making sure that they include extra information. A useful exercise for the learners is to prepare three different kinds of extra information (a fact, a reason, and a feeling) for each question.

AN INTERVIEW FOR A SCHOLARSHIP

Which part of Thailand do you come from?

Where is that?

Are you married?

Why do you want to go overseas?

Where are you going to study?

What course do you want to do?

Have you been overseas before?

Why do you want to do further study?

What's your job?

Do you like your present job?

How long have you been working?

Do you have any projects that you are responsible for?

Do you live far from your work?

What do you do when you arrive at the office?

If you worked for a private firm, do you think you would get more money?

After you come back to Thailand will you have a different job?

Do you use English much in your work?

Have you been taught by native speakers of English before?

Instead of questions, the learners can be given just headings and cue words. This requires the interviewer to frame his own questions, but it still allows the applicant to prepare a little for each question. However, the applicant cannot always anticipate exactly what the questions will be. For example, with the interview for a job given below, the interviewer, looking at the word *parents* under "Family Background," could ask any of the following questions:

Are your parents still alive?

What do your parents do?

Do you live with your parents?

AN INTERVIEW FOR A JOB

1. *Family Background*

- Where from?
- Age
- Married, engaged, single
- Children, ages
- Wife work?
- Parents

2. *Education*

- Where?
- How long?
- What certificates or degrees?
- Training after finishing school
- Foreign languages
- Military service

3. *Experience*

- Where worked previously?
- How long?
- What type of work?
- What pay?
- What special qualifications?
- Why leave previous job?

4. *This Job*

- Reasons for wanting the job
- What { salary expect?
- { working conditions?
- Willing to do overtime?

5. *Interests*

- Hobbies
- Sports
- Special interests or skills

During the preparation for this interview the teacher can check that the learners know polite phrases like *Do you mind telling me...* and *Could you tell me....*. These should be used in questions about sensitive areas such as age, marriage, salary, reasons for leaving the previous job, and so on, but they should not be overused. The interviewer can also introduce each section of the interview by saying things like this:

I'd like to ask you about your education.

Can we look at your previous experience in this type of work?

Can you tell me about your interests outside work?

Each of these statements is closely followed by a more detailed question: *Can you tell me about your interests outside work? Do you have any hobbies?* Another interview of this type could be a survey of reading habits or some other piece of social research.



A more difficult type of interview is one in which the interviewer is required to fill in a form or take notes during the interview. The interviewer must also prepare questions that will elicit the necessary information. The Job Interview Form shown on page 29 is an example of the material for this type of interview.

The learners should be told that the purpose of the interview is not just to fill in the form, but to get the applicant to speak about himself in order to judge his suitability for the job. The applicant should try to gain some control over the interview by occasionally giving long pieces of extra information when the interviewer asks a question that is particularly easy or interesting for the applicant to answer. So if the interviewer asks *What is your father's occupation?* the applicant can answer *He's retired now. He was head of the training section. He studied mathematics in America just after the Second World War.* This keeps the interview from becoming just a type of question-and-answer drill, and the applicant can try to lead the interview to interesting topics.

If interviews are difficult for the learners, the same interview (for example, a job interview) can be practiced in three stages at different times by providing (1) complete questions, then (2) cue words and headings, and finally (3) a form to fill in. More advanced learners can prepare their own interview outlines or forms. This can be done as an individual exercise or as a blackboard exercise in which the learners make suggestions that the teacher uses to build up a plan for an interview on the blackboard. This blackboard preparation is also good if the class is going to have a visitor to interview.

Other activities

Interview activities prepare learners for a variety of other spoken and written activities. Interviews are a type of role play and can take the learners even further into role play if the teacher wishes. The following topics for interviews involve a large amount of role play.

- a. The learners act out an interview between a newspaper reporter and a famous person.
- b. The learners prepare an interview between a history book writer and a famous person, such as Napoleon, Shakespeare, or Thomas Edison, who died a long time ago.

A JOB INTERVIEW FORM

JOB APPLIED FOR	DATE OF INTERVIEW NAME OF INTERVIEWER	
IDENTIFICATION		
Name:	Age:	Sex:
FAMILY BACKGROUND		Comment
Married or single:	Children, number and ages:	
Family occupations:	Wife's (or husband's):	
Father's: Other relatives': (as relevant)		
PRESENT EMPLOYMENT		Comment
Nature:	Organization:	
1.	Pay: Date:	
2.	Pay: Date:	
EDUCATION AND TRAINING		Comment
Schools:	Dates:	
School examinations passed: Since school	Other distinctions:	
Institutions:	Nature of training:	
Qualifications gained: Foreign languages:	Dates:	
JOB APPLIED FOR:		Comment
Reasons:		
Salary expected:		
Overtime:		
INTERESTS AND LEISURE		Comment
INTERVIEWER'S NOTES AND SUMMARY		Test Results APPEARANCE MANNER
KIND OF WORK FOR WHICH BEST SUITED		GRADING

c. A policeman interviews some people who have just seen or been in an accident.

Learners may also interview people outside class and report the findings of their interviews to the class. Interview activities can be used as a basis for written work such as writing a report, making a class newspaper, or doing a puzzle exercise. In the puzzle exercise the learners interview each other, and then, using the notes from the interview, each learner writes a short description of his partner without mentioning his name. His name and the name of the writer are, however, given at the top of the paper. The papers are collected, checked by the teacher, and distributed at random. Each learner in turn reads to the class the description that he has been given, without mentioning any names. After listening to the description the other members of the class try to guess the name of the person who was described.

The main value of the interview technique is its effectiveness in providing practice in spoken communication. An in-

terview is an example of a combining arrangement (Nation 1977). That is, information is divided among the participants, and this information must be combined to achieve a goal. One person knows the questions but not the answers; the other knows the answers but not the questions. In order to complete the activity, it is essential that the learners communicate with each other. In the process of doing this, the learners can practice simple communication strategies to keep the conversation going by giving extra information in response to questions, by indicating lack of understanding, and by using the extra information to make new questions. The teacher can also control the activity so as to give graded practice in making and answering questions.

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