

The Skill of Questioning as a Marker of Second-Language Proficiency among Indian Engineering Learners

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ABSTRACT

Questioning is a mental process that surfaces as a communicative act which involves inquiry and subsequent construction of knowledge. In the language classroom, the capacity to frame meaningful questions is central to communicative competence, yet many learners in multilingual settings in India struggle to produce questions in English that are grammatically accurate and cognitively specific. This paper observes first-year engineering students in India, drawn from three first-language backgrounds — Telugu and Urdu/Hindi — in order to describe the syntactic structure of the questions they produce in English, to compare those structures with the corresponding forms in their first languages, and to analyse the difficulties that arise from mother-tongue interference. These questions are categorised by type according to their cognitive depth, mapped onto the proficiency descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and attempt has been made to evolve a set of pedagogical strategies for teaching effective questioning. The paper argues that systematic training in question-formation can measurably strengthen learners' linguistic proficiency and their readiness for academic communication

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Introduction

Questioning is an active communicative process that draws on several components of the language system simultaneously. Unlike receptive skills such as reading and listening, forming a question is a productive act, it requires syntactic accuracy and contextual judgement in real time. Krashen (1985) argues that acquisition proceeds most effectively when learners are engaged in meaningful communication, and questioning is one of the most direct routes into such engagement. The importance of questioning as a communicative act that promotes meaningful interaction in a second language can be set out as follows:

- Questioning enables learners to be active participants in communication rather than as passive recipients of it.
- It allows them to seek clarification, obtain new information, and sustain genuine dialogue.

- Without the ability to ask, learners cannot fully interact, and their exposure to authentic input is correspondingly reduced.
- Questioning leads to academic and professional success in second-language settings, students must ask in order to clarify concepts, join discussions, and demonstrate critical thinking, while professionals rely on questioning to collaborate, solve problems, and reach decisions.
- Poorly formed or contextually inappropriate questions, by contrast, invite misunderstanding, weaken credibility, and stall communication.

Theoretical Background

Within second-language learning, questioning is a central mechanism for negotiating meaning and eliciting comprehensible input. When a learner asks,

“Could you explain that again?” or “What do you mean by this term?”, they are not only using the language but actively acquiring language. The ability to produce well-formed, appropriate questions is an indication of a relatively high level of competence, because it depends on several abilities working together for linguistic competence.

Grammatical restructuring. Turning a statement such as “You are going to the store” into “Are you going to the store?” requires the learner to reorganise the clause. Still more complex forms, such as the embedded question “Can you tell me where he is?”, call for still greater grammatical and linguistic command.

Complex grammatical transformation. Structurally, English questions involve a set of interacting operations. As Ellis (2003) observes, the capacity to manipulate grammatical structures in real-time production is a key marker of second-language proficiency.

Pragmatic competence. Beyond accuracy, questioning reflects the ability to use language appropriately in social context. Hymes (1972) stresses that communicative competence extends beyond grammar to include knowing “when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner.”

Sensitivity to politeness and formality. Effective questioning is attuned to politeness norms, tone, and cultural expectation. In formal settings an indirect form such as “Would you mind telling me...?” is generally preferred to a bare imperative such as “Tell me...”. Learners who miss these distinctions may seem abrupt or impolite even when their grammar is faultless.

Interactional competence. Questioning is also central to managing conversation and keeping it going. Through it, learners show engagement, open topics, and maintain conversational flow. Long (1996) holds that interaction — and in particular the negotiation of meaning — is essential to language development, since the conversational adjustments that questions prompt make input more comprehensible. Clarification questions (“Do you mean...?”) and confirmation checks

(“Is this correct?”) let learners process input more effectively and reduce misunderstanding.

Vygotsky (1978) relates learning within the “zone of proximal development,” where interaction with others is decisive. Questioning is one way learners bridge gaps in understanding and move toward higher competence. In English, forming interrogatives depends on control of auxiliary verbs, subject–verb inversion, tense agreement, and word order.

3. Methodology

The study is based on informal observations as a teacher of English of Engineering students in their first year, students who studied English as a second language and were entirely educated in English medium schools, data was gathered through systematic classroom observation across one academic semester in an English Language Laboratory. The number of students were roughly 180. The participants were both male and female students and were first-language speakers of Telugu, Urdu and Hindi. Questions produced during authentic classroom interaction were recorded and examined for grammatical accuracy. The analysis focused on the syntax of English interrogatives — word order, subject–auxiliary inversion, tense, auxiliary selection, and interrogative form — and the resulting patterns were then considered in relation to the possible influence of the learners' first languages on their English question-formation.

4. Questioning in Language-Assessment Frameworks

The value of questioning is recognised in assessment frameworks such as the CEFR. At the lower levels (A1–A2), learners rely largely on memorised or formulaic questions — “What is your name?”, “Where do you live?” As proficiency grows (B1–C2), they will be able to ask spontaneous, flexible, and contextually appropriate questions, and at the highest levels they can handle nuanced forms such as rhetorical questions, indirect enquiries, and culturally sensitive phrasing. Questioning ability, in short, develops in step with overall language competence.

No.	CEFR Level	Question Type	Answer Depth	Example Questions
1	A1	Yes/No questions	Very short	Do you go to college by bus every day? Is your mother at home now? Can you cook rice?
2	A1–A2	Choice questions	Short	Do you drink tea or coffee in the morning? Is your bag on the table or under the chair? Do you study in the morning or at night?

No.	CEFR Level	Question Type	Answer Depth	Example Questions
3	A2	Basic WH-questions	Short sentence	What do you usually do after college? Where did you keep your mobile phone? Why are you late today?
4	B1	Descriptive questions	Explanation	Describe how you prepare for an examination. Explain what you usually do when you visit a supermarket. Describe your daily morning routine before leaving home.
5	B2	Probing questions	Detailed	Why do many students find it difficult to manage their time effectively? How has online shopping changed the way people buy everyday items? What problems can arise when people depend too much on mobile phones?
6	C1	Analytical questions	Reasoned answer	Why do some people prefer public transport even when they own a private vehicle? How does social media influence the way people communicate with family and friends? Why is maintaining a healthy work–life balance becoming more difficult today?
7	C1–C2	Evaluative questions	Argument	Do you agree that online learning can completely replace classroom teaching? Why or why not? Should colleges make community service compulsory for students? Give reasons. Is it better to save money regularly or spend it on experiences? Justify your answer.
8	C2	Hypothetical questions	Complex reasoning	If you could change one thing about your daily routine, what would it be and why? Suppose you had to live without the internet for one month. How would your life change? If everyone worked from home permanently, what effects would it have on society?
9	C2 (beyond)	Reflective questions	Deep analysis	How have your daily habits changed over the past five years, and what has influenced those changes? What life lesson have you learned from a mistake in an everyday situation? In what ways do small daily decisions shape a person's future over time?

Note. The final band is labelled “beyond C2” rather than “C2+”, since C2 is the highest level defined in the CEFR and no official band sits above it

The scale below moves from beginner to highly proficient speakers, giving for each type the associated proficiency level, its characteristics, examples, and the extent of response it typically requires.

1. Yes/No questions — Beginner (A1). Short and simple, built on a basic auxiliary verb and minimal vocabulary. Examples: “Do you like coffee?”, “Is this your book?”, “Are you coming today?” The answer is very short (yes/no); the structure is easy and the grammatical demand low.

2. Choice (alternative) questions — Elementary (A1–A2). Offer two or more options and need only simple vocabulary. Examples: “Do you want tea or coffee?”, “Shall we meet today or tomorrow?” The answer is a short phrase involving basic sentence formation.

3. Basic WH-questions — Elementary–Intermediate (A2). Use a WH-word and demand more grammatical control. Examples: “Where do you live?”, “When is the meeting?”, “What is your major?” These are the first genuinely information-seeking questions learners master.

4. Descriptive / information-seeking questions — Intermediate (B1). Ask for explanation or description and require broader vocabulary. Examples: “How does modular construction speed up a project?”, “Why did the project fail?” The answer runs to several sentences and involves understanding cause and explanation.

5. Probing questions — Upper-intermediate (B2). Follow-up questions that seek clarification or deeper detail. Examples: “Could you explain that in more detail?”, “What factors influenced that decision?” They call for a detailed answer and reflect active listening and curiosity.

6. Analytical questions — Advanced (C1). Require reasoning and analysis and are common in academic or professional settings. Examples: “What factors contributed to the delay in this project?”, “How does modular construction affect cost and efficiency?” The answer is paragraph-length and draws on critical thinking and more complex grammar.

7. Evaluative questions — Advanced (C1–C2). Ask for judgement or assessment and often compare alternatives. Examples: “Which project-management method is more effective, Agile or Waterfall?”, “Do smart cities improve sustainability?” The answer is a reasoned, justified argument.

8. Hypothetical questions — Highly proficient (C2). Use conditional grammar to explore imaginary or theoretical scenarios. Examples: “What would happen if projects used only modular systems?”, “If you were the project manager, how would you handle this conflict?” They demand advanced grammar and abstract thinking.

9. Reflective / metacognitive questions — Expert / academic (beyond C2). Invite reflection on experience or ideas and appear in research and intellectual discussion. Examples: “How has your approach to project management evolved over time?”, “What lessons did you learn from that failure?” The answer is a deep personal or conceptual analysis.

Major Types of Questions in English

Questions may be classified by how much information they solicit of the respondent. Some require only a very

short answer; others call for extended explanation or evaluation. In linguistics and education this is usually described in terms of levels of questioning, and two broad categories are commonly distinguished: closed questions and open-ended questions.

Closed questions. These typically elicit a yes/no answer or a single fixed item. They can direct learners toward particular details or time frames, but the range of response is fixed by the question itself. Common sub-types include yes/no questions, questions without a question word (using *be* or *have*), WH-questions built on *have*, subject questions, and object questions.

Open-ended questions. These allow the widest range of responses and encourage learners to extend their thinking and build on what they already understand. Because they leave room for the learner to explore, they stimulate curiosity and raise motivation. Teachers can use deliberate questioning and discussion techniques to prepare learners to pose thought-provoking questions and pursue their own answers. In classrooms that foreground questioning, learners share responsibility for their learning, and both their questions and their responses contribute to deeper understanding. Because a learner's first language and its grammatical structures shape how they write and speak — especially in question-formation — teachers must design their questioning deliberately.

Learners of English sometimes assume that any sentence containing *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, *how*, or *which* must be a question. In English, however, it is the position of the verb relative to the interrogative word that distinguishes a question from a statement. In a question the underlying subject–verb–object order is preserved, but the auxiliary verb (or the main verb *be*) moves in front of the subject, and any interrogative word is placed at the start of the clause. The structure of English questions differs sharply from that of many Indian languages — such as Telugu, Hindi, and Urdu — chiefly in word order and in the use of auxiliary verbs.

Questions made by the students that were being observed

CEFR Level	Original Standard English	Telugu-influenced English	Hindi-influenced English	Urdu-influenced English
A1	Do you go to college by bus every day?	Daily you go to college by bus, ah?	You go to college by bus every day, no?	You go college by bus every day, na?
	Is your mother at home now?	Your mother is there at home now?	Your mother is at home now, no?	Your mother is at home now, na?
	Can you cook rice?	Rice you know how to cook?	You know how to make rice?	You can make rice?
A1-A2	Do you drink tea or coffee in the morning?	Morning you drink tea or coffee?	In morning you take tea or coffee?	In the morning you take tea or coffee?
	Is your bag on the table or under the chair?	Your bag is on table or below the chair?	Your bag is on the table or below the chair?	Your bag is on the table or under the chair?

	Do you study in the morning or at night?	You study in morning or night?	You study in the morning or in the night?	You study in morning or at night?
A3	What do you usually do after college?	After college what you will do usually?	After college what do you normally do?	What you usually do after college?
	Where did you keep your mobile phone?	Where you kept your mobile?	Where have you kept your mobile?	Where did you keep the mobile?
	Why are you late today?	Today why you are late?	Why you are late today?	Today why are you late?
B1	Describe how you prepare for an examination.	Tell how you will prepare for exam.	Tell how you prepare for the exam.	Explain how you do preparation for examination.
	Explain what you usually do when you visit a supermarket.	When you go supermarket, what all you will do?	When you go to supermarket, what all do you do?	When you go to the supermarket, what things you do there?
	Describe your daily morning routine before leaving home.	Tell your morning routine before going from home.	Tell what all you do in morning before leaving home.	Tell your morning routine before you leave the house.
B2	Why do many students find it difficult to manage their time effectively?	Why many students are not able to manage time properly?	Why many students cannot manage their time properly?	Why students are not able to manage their time properly?
	How has online shopping changed the way people buy everyday items?	Online shopping how it changed people's buying?	How online shopping has changed the way people purchase daily things?	How has online shopping changed people's way of buying daily-use things?
	What problems can arise when people depend too much on mobile phones?	If people depend more on mobiles, what problems will come?	What problems can happen if people depend too much on mobiles?	What problems can come when people depend too much on mobile phones?
C1	Why do some people prefer public transport even when they own a private vehicle?	Having own vehicle also, why some people prefer public transport?	Even after having their own vehicle, why do people prefer public transport?	Despite having their own vehicle, why some people prefer public transport?
	How does social media influence the way people communicate with family and friends?	Social media how it is affecting communication with family and friends?	How social media affects the way people talk with family and friends?	How social media is affecting communication with family and friends?
	Why is maintaining a healthy work-life balance becoming more difficult today?	Nowadays why maintaining work-life balance is becoming difficult?	Why nowadays it is difficult to maintain work-life balance?	Why is it becoming difficult nowadays to maintain balance between work and life?
C1-C2	Do you agree that online learning can completely replace classroom teaching? Why or why not?	You agree online learning can fully replace classroom teaching or not? Why?	Do you agree online learning can completely replace classroom teaching or not?	Do you agree that online learning can totally replace classroom teaching or not? Give reason.
	Should colleges make community service compulsory for students? Give reasons.	Colleges should make community service compulsory for students or not? Tell reasons.	Should colleges make community service compulsory? Give the reason.	Should community service be compulsory in colleges? Give reasons for your answer.
	Is it better to save money regularly or spend it on experiences? Justify your answer.	Saving money regularly is better or spending for experiences is better? Explain.	What is better—saving money regularly or spending money on experiences? Give reason.	Is saving money better or spending it on experiences? Give justification.
C2	If you could change one thing about your daily routine, what would it be and why?	If you can change one thing in your daily routine, what you will change and why?	If you could change one thing in your daily routine, what would you change?	If you get a chance to change one thing in your routine, what would you change and why?
	Suppose you had to live without the internet for one month. How would your life change?	Suppose one month internet is not there, how your life will change?	Suppose you have to live without internet for one month, then how will your life change?	Suppose there is no internet for one month, how would your life be affected?
	If everyone worked from home permanently, what	If everybody permanently works from home, what	If everyone works from home permanently, what	If everybody starts working from home permanently,

	effects would it have on society?	effects will come on society?	effect will it have on society?	what effects would it have on society?
C2 beyond	How have your daily habits changed over the past five years, and what has influenced those changes?	In last five years how your daily habits changed, and because of what?	In the last five years, how your habits have changed and what influenced them?	How your daily habits have changed in the last five years, and what caused these changes?
	What life lesson have you learned from a mistake in an everyday situation?	From any mistake in daily life, what lesson you learned?	What lesson did you learn from any mistake in your daily life?	What life lesson have you learnt from a mistake that happened in daily life?
	In what ways do small daily decisions shape a person's future over time?	Small small decisions we take daily, how they will affect our future?	How small decisions taken every day affect a person's future?	How do small everyday decisions make a difference in a person's future?

Key structural differences between English and Indian languages

Feature	English	Many Indian languages
Auxiliary verbs	Required	Often not required
Word order	Changes (inversion)	Usually stays the same
Question markers	Usually none	Particles such as <i>అ</i> (Telugu) or <i>क्या</i> (Hindi)
WH-movement	Moves to the front	Often stays in place (in situ)
Intonation	Important	Also important

Indian learners struggle with English questions mainly because of:

- The SOV versus SVO word-order difference
- The role of auxiliary verbs in English
- Subject–auxiliary inversion
- WH-word movement to the front of the clause
- Mother-tongue interference
- A tendency to translate directly from the first language
- Limited speaking practice

Common mistakes Indian learners make in questioning

Rule	Examples
When there is an auxiliary or helping verb (be, have, can, will, and so on), it is placed before the subject.	Is anybody in the office? Have you ever visited London? What time will they be here?
When there is no auxiliary, do, does, or did is placed before the subject.	Do you know my older brother? Did he come in time?
WH-words (when, where, why, who, how, and so on) come at the beginning of the question.	How long have you been waiting for me? Where is their office? Which colour do you like best?
Do, does, and did are not used when what, which, who, or whose is the subject.	What happened to you? (not: What did happen?) Who told you about it? (not: Who did tell you?)

Despite its importance, many second-language learners find questioning difficult, producing incorrect word order, omitting auxiliary verbs, and showing limited pragmatic awareness. These recurring problems point to the need for targeted teaching. Instruction should therefore include activities that build questioning skills — role-plays, interactive discussions, and question-formation exercises — and should encourage learners to generate their own questions rather than only responding to those of others, since doing so strengthens communicative competence considerably. Indian learners frequently find question-formation in English demanding because English interrogative

grammar differs markedly from that of most Indian languages, including Telugu, Hindi, and Urdu. The difficulty is largely one of structural interference from the first language.

6. Conclusion

Questioning serves as a comprehensive indicator of second-language proficiency, drawing together the grammatical, pragmatic, and interactional dimensions of language use. It both reflects a learner's competence and acts as a tool for acquiring further competence. As learners come to ask questions that are accurate, appropriate, and meaningful, they demonstrate

command of the language and readiness for authentic communication. The theoretical evidence suggests that questioning ability develops along a broadly ordered path:

Confirmation → Information → Explanation → Analysis → Evaluation → Reflection

Fostering effective questioning should therefore be a central objective of second-language teaching and learning.

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