

# Yes-No Questions and the

By Alice C. Pack

ESL students who have been taught yes/no questions with auxiliaries and modals frequently do not respond to disjunctive questions unless the questioner pauses before and after the *or*—an artificial intonation.

TESL teachers whom I have questioned almost unanimously agree that most students, even at advanced levels, answer yes or no when asked such ordinary questions as, "Do you want coffee or milk?" and "Are you going today or tomorrow?"

## Interviews

When no experimental data could be found to substantiate these assertions, questions were inserted in oral interviews with foreign students at the Church College of Hawaii. Originally eight questions, using two modals (can, should) and the auxiliaries (be, have, do) were included, but an artificial situation was created when more than four of these types of questions were used. Original questioning was done in midsemester after the questioners had become acquainted with the students—another drawback to the experiment.

Four questions were finally selected from the original eight for a new experiment—one using a modal, one using the auxiliary be, and two with the auxiliary do. One of the questions had a permitted substitution for students who might have just arrived on campus and were not yet employed. Questioners were ELI Instructors or mentors assigned by the foreign student counselor to assist these students with registration, orientation, etc. As a control the phrases preceding and following the *or* were to be reversed in every other interview. Intonation used by the questioner was to be the regular rising, falling pattern used in yes/no questions—the one considered normal for this type of questions.

## Results

It was difficult for the examiners who were used to working with foreign students to ask the questions in the prescribed

manner during regular orientation and placement interviewing sessions. The effort to communicate usually took precedence over testing objectivity so all the desired data was not obtained. However, the questions elicited some general conclusions.

The majority of new students answered yes to all the questions they were asked (regardless of order) and the questioners had to ask each part of the *or* question separately to determine which of the two choices was indicated by the student.

Some of the yes answers seemed to be the agreement yes which second language speakers often give to indicate understanding when a conversationalist pauses, (when they usually don't understand but would feel embarrassed if they admitted the fact).

An occasional intermediate student and a few advanced students gave the indicated English responses, but these were a minority group. They often answered yes, and then completed the statement with one of the *or* choices.

Another problem with this question experiment was that new students often brought junior or senior students who spoke their native tongue to help them with registration and then turned to them for information or for confirmation when they answered any question. Students, familiar with the college and the mentors, were almost the only ones who would ask for a repeat of a question. Others might occasionally say, "I don't understand."

## Written Assignments

College students' confusion in written work involving these disjunctive *or* questions is verified by an examination of their work in a text that requires the substitution of affirmative statements for questions using modals and auxiliaries (including do) in regular yes/no questions. Students were instructed to omit a yes or no and write long affirmative answers, which would result in a well written paragraph. Three different assignments had an *or* choice inserted without instructions to make a choice. Four out of five intermediate (Michigan written test scores 70-75) students wrote the

# Disjunctive Or

following sentences in their paragraphs and essays:

"I warmed up coffee or tea."

"I went to an inn or I slept outdoors."

"I stayed inside the Observation Tower or went outside on the eighty-sixth floor."

"The river grew deeper or more shallow the further Hudson went up the river."

College students on a beginning level (Michigan test 35-60) answered written question on a listening exercise in the following way: "Is it hard or soft?" "Yes, it's hard." "Is she in America, in Asia or in Europe?" "Yes, she's in Europe."

## Textbooks

All textbooks listed in the TENES report indicating use by five or more colleges were examined for the use of *or* in instructions, sentences, and questions for both student recognition and production. Many of the texts used *or* for instructions and had a few questions with *who* or *which* and an *or* choice, but most had no recognition or production coverage of questions using an auxiliary or modal and the disjunctive *or*. Those which did simply inserted these questions among other types without reference to the differences in structure.

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Only two of the books examined had any significant coverage. One was a section of Intensive Questioning that included a series of *Or* Questions with those on *Wh* Questions and Yes/No Questions. However, this book came late in a series (No. 4 of a series of 6 books covering beginning to advanced English as a Second Language) and the following book in the series, which gave an intensive review of the *Wh* and Yes/No questions (also introduced in earlier books), failed to list a single *Or* question.

One book had a lesson with a reading exercise describing the playing of a game. "What is the object?" Included were nine questions with "Is it" and an *or* choice. (Is

the object inside the room or outside? Is it in front of me or behind me? Is it large or small? etc.) Answers were given for the questions and 15 conversational questions followed the reading with "Is it... or ....?" This exercise did not include any questions with *do* or the modals and there was no review. When five of ten questions in a lesson on contractions included an *or* choice with "Would you rather have". After the *or* the word "than" was given in parenthesis (Would you rather have tea or (than) coffee?) as a help. Earlier instructions were given to answer some questions in the affirmative using complete sentences. Included was the question "Do you like to drink coffee or tea?"

## Daily Use

It is necessary to teach TESL students to recognize and reply correctly to these disjunctive questions because they are an integral part of everyday American English. One cannot order a meal without the inevitable "Do you want coffee or tea?" "Pie or cake?" Purchases in any department store immediately invoke "Is this purchase cash or charge?" or "Do you want to charge this item or pay cash?" When one travels the place selected may require a choice even though a ticket to a definite destination may have been requested. (In the following example--New York) "Do you want to go to Chicago or straight through to New York?" "Do you want to stop en route in Denver or Chicago?" Then comes the inevitable choice of first class, tourist, or economy flights on planes; roomette, pullman, or coach on trains; first class, second class, tourist, or deck on snips, etc.

Even dating can become a problem to the student when one is confused with such questions as "Shall we go to the show or bowling?" "Would you like to eat now or later?" "Do you like \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_?" (With a choice of activities, foods, movies, etc.)

Advanced students in English often lose all confidence in their ability to

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The English Language Institute of The Church College of Hawaii has added a new member to its faculty. She is Juanita N. Benioni, shown above with her husband, Patoa, and son, Terangi.

Mrs. Benioni attended the Kamehameha Schools, Honolulu, Hawaii and Venice High School, Los Angeles, California. She is a recent graduate of The Church College and received her degree in BATESL.

## Yes-No Questions

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communicate with native speakers because of the confusion that results from questions like these. Had they been taught these disjunctive *or* forms and then drilled as they were in other English structures, much of this confusion would not occur.

Because current texts have so largely ignored yes/no question and the disjunctive *or*, sample lesson plans are being written on this structure and will follow in a future edition of the TESL Reporter.

Please send answers to the textbook questionnaires to the editor immediately. The summer issue will carry a preliminary survey of TESL materials currently in use.

# TESL REPORTER

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