

# DRILLING ENGLISH AUXILIARY VERBS IN ESL CLASSES

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The effective mastery of the various auxiliary verbs is one of the major challenges faced by a speaker of another language while he is learning English. Few other languages of the world have anything quite like English auxiliary verbs, and none makes use of them in exactly the same way. Yet, they are one of the principal features of the structure of English and are called into play in nearly all transformations of verb phrases. Until they are mastered, the student will have considerable difficulty in all four basic skills in English: aural comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing.

The two most commonly used auxiliary verbs are "be" and "do": "Are you studying English? Do you like this book?" "Have" often functions as an auxiliary verb: "Have you finished the lesson?" Eight modal auxiliary verbs are also commonly used: "can," "could," "will," "would," "must," "should," "may," and "might."

All of these auxiliary verbs can be effectively taught by using specifically designed audio-lingual exercises. Students generally enjoy the practice exercises which are to be described step by step. Before they are begun, however, the instructor should help the students learn the most usual meanings of the auxiliary verbs in whatever way he deems most appropriate. In some cases, the attempt may be made to find the nearest equivalents in the mother tongue. It is extremely important that the students have sufficient command of basic English to understand the simple vocabulary to be used in the exercises as well as the most usual meaning of each of the auxiliary verbs to be practiced.

The first step in the drills is to ask the students, one by one, questions which begin with auxiliary verbs and which may logically be answered in the affirmative, using

short answers, as follows:

Can you see me? (Instructor's Question)  
-Yes, I can. (Students Answer)

Would you like to visit Florida? -Yes, I would.

Will you eat dinner today? -Yes, I will.

Since each question is phrased in the "you" form, each corresponding answer will consist of "yes, I . . ." plus the same auxiliary verb employed at the beginning of the question. This is an effective way to initiate the auxiliary verb drills because it (a) is relatively easy, (b) takes the form of a meaningful dialogue, and (c) emphasizes both the aural grasp and the oral production of the various auxiliary verbs. This type of drill should be done until each student can produce the oral replies freely and easily. At the same time the instructor should be sure that the meaning of each auxiliary verb is clearly understood.

The second step is to ask similarly phrased questions, but which evoke negative answers, as follows:

Can you speak English perfectly? No, I can't.

Would you like to be sick now? No, I wouldn't.

Could you write when you were a baby? No, I couldn't.

As each question uses the "you" form, each answer consists of "No, I . . ." plus the negative contraction of the same auxiliary verb used at the beginning of the question, except in those cases in which contractions are not commonly used as in "may not," "might not," and "am not." The contractions which may be drilled in this manner are: "isn't," "aren't," "wasn't," "weren't," "don't," "doesn't," "didn't," "haven't," "hasn't," "hadn't," "can't," "couldn't," "won't," "wouldn't," "mustn't," and "shouldn't." This step provides the same

three benefits as the first step plus the additional one of helping students become familiar with the use of negative forms of the auxiliary verbs. As a special case, the short answer with "am" should be contracted as "No, I'm not."

The first two steps, providing ample practice in the use of the affirmative and negative short answers, should be reviewed until the answers are supplied quickly and easily.

The third step consists of presenting the two types of questions in mixed order, as follows:

Can you see me? *-Yes, I can.*

Should you eat during the class? *-No, I shouldn't.*

Do you drink water every day? *-Yes, I do.*

Have you brought an apple to class? *-No I haven't.*

Could you write when you were two years old? *--No, I couldn't*

Will you leave this room after the class? *-Yes, I will.*

Would you like to speak English well? *Yes, I would.*

Must you sleep all day? *-No, I mustn't.*

Did you bring a pencil to class? *-Yes, I did.*

Will you visit your uncle tomorrow? *-No, I won't.*

Do you know every word in English? *-No, I don't.*

Had you seen some American movies last year? *-Yes, I had.*

Use of the mixed questions will confirm the ability of the students to comprehend the questions and to answer them correctly according to their individual meanings. This step should be repeated several times and on different occasions until the instructor feels that all or nearly all the students have mastered it.

The fourth step is to introduce pronoun subjects other than "you" in the questions. These should be used in the questions and repeated in the answers, as follows:

Do you want to speak English well? *-Yes, we do.*

Does she have black hair? (indicating another student) *No, she doesn't.*

May it rain today? *-Yes, it may.*

Should he study in order to learn? (indicating another student) *-Yes, he should.*

Would they like to speak English well? (indicating the other students) *Yes, they would.*

Should we sleep during the class? *-No, we shouldn't.*

Will it snow this afternoon? *-No, it won't.*

Is she listening to us? *-Yes, she is.*

Must we eat in order to live? *-Yes, we must.*

Did they bring hats to class? *-No, they didn't.*

Does he have a pencil? *-Yes, he does.*

May I speak to you in English? *-Yes, you may.*

Have we begun this lesson? *-Yes, we have.*

Once the use of varied pronouns is mastered together with the correct corresponding auxiliary verbs, the students are ready for step five, which consists of the use of common and proper nouns in the questions and of the corresponding pronouns in the short answers, as follows:

Is the sun shining now? *-Yes, it is.*

Have some Americans visited your country? *-Yes, they have.*

Does a horse run on four legs? *-Yes, it does.*

Should most children learn to read? *-Yes, they should.*

Did Marco Polo discover America? *-No, he didn't.*

Have the other students and you spoken English today? *-Yes, we have.*

Will an airmail letter go by boat? *-No, it won't.*

Would your brother like a new car? *-Yes, he would.*

Although this type of construction is very common in English dialogues, it requires a great deal of practice before it is mastered.

Step six begins the use of double questions eliciting complete sentences in the second answers, as follows:

Can you see me? *-Yes, I can.*

What can you do? *-I can see you.*

Will you eat dinner today? *--Yes, I will.*

What will you do? *-I'll eat dinner today.*

Has your brother learned German? *-No, he hasn't.*

What hasn't he done? *-He hasn't learned German.*

This is one of the most difficult steps of all because several complex factors are involved. The first challenge is to the memory since the student must recall the total wording of the original question. This may be especially difficult if the question is long:

Would you read a newspaper if you had one? *-Yes, I would.*

What would you do? *-I'd read a newspaper if I had one.*

Should you try to speak better English? *-Yes, I should.*

What should you do? *-I should try to speak better English.*

Must a student study in order to learn? *-Yes, he must.*

What must he do? *-He must study in order to learn.*

A second challenge involves the reduction or contraction of the auxiliary verb when it precedes the main verb in the complete sentence. Contractions which may be practiced in this way are: "I'm," "you're," "he's" (for "he is" and "he has"), "I've," "I'll," and "I'd" (for "I would" and "I had"). The auxiliaries "was," "were," "can," "could," "must," and "should" are not really contracted but are reduced in pronunciation and stress in the full sentence, as follows:

Can you read? *-yes, I can. (The vowel of "can" is full and receives heavy stress.)*

What can you do? *-I can read. (The vowel of "can" is reduced and receives weak stress.)*

Another challenge occurs when the commonly used "do," "does," and "did" are omitted and the corresponding verb forms are used in the complete sentences, as follows:

Do you like apples? *-Yes, I do.*

What do you do? *-I like apples.*

Does he speak English? *-Yes, he does.*

What does he do? *-He speaks English.*

Did you bring a pencil to class? *-Yes, I did.*

What did you do? *-I brought a pencil to class.*

It is generally advisable to begin the practice of eliciting complete sentences with the easier step one questions first and gradually progress on through steps two through five. Step five questions, the most challenging, will be presented as follows:

Should most children learn to read? *-Yes, they should.*

What should they do? *-They should learn to read.*

Does a horse run on four legs? *-Yes, it does.*

What does it do? *-It runs on four legs.*

Have the other students spoken French today? *-No, they haven't.*

What haven't they done? *-They haven't spoken French today.*

Are many people trying to learn English? *-Yes, they are.*

What are they doing? *-They're trying to learn English.*

The seventh and final step is to use the auxiliary verb drills in a variety of interesting ways. Questions of all the different types may be asked in mixed order so that students are challenged to respond with complete flexibility according to the meaning of the question and the appropriateness of the answer. The "chain technique" may be applied, whereby the teacher asks the first question of one student, who answers it. His neighbor then asks the "What...?" question of his neighbor on the other side, who answers it. Also, the students may do this by drawing slips of paper with questions and asking them aloud of one another. Students may also be encouraged to ask their own spontaneous questions of the instructor and of one another.

The exercises described above can be made enjoyable because they are easily adaptable to real-life situations. Students gradually feel that they are making effective use of the English language. Once they have learned to handle the auxiliary verbs with ease, they have overcome one of the greatest challenges in the process of mastering the English language.