
UNIT 8 MAKING ENQUIRIES/ASKING QUESTIONS

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Enquiries
 - 8.2.1 Personal Enquiries
 - 8.2.2 Condolence
 - 8.2.3 Dinner Talk
 - 8.2.4 Enquiries about Services
 - 8.2.5 Enquiries about Procedures
- 8.3 Attention in Listening
- 8.4 Pronunciation Practice
- 8.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to

- use politeness formulae while making enquiries or asking questions,
- seek clarifications if you find something difficult to understand,
- thank the respondent for the information you received, and
- pronounce words with the stress on the right syllable.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

All of us need to seek information from others to perform various functions in everyday life. To be successful in getting the information we require, it is necessary that we are clear and courteous in the way we ask questions. Curt and abrupt ways of asking questions may put off the person we are speaking to and not evoke the kind of response we wish to get.

Ways of expressing politeness differ from language to language. In English, modal verbs are used to introduce the politeness element in questions. Most often people are misunderstood as being rude because they ask direct questions.

In this unit we will examine pieces of conversation which illustrate politeness in making enquiries.

8.2 ENQUIRIES

We may have to enquire about people face-to-face or on telephone, services and procedures or events. We will discuss enquiries of different kinds in the following sections:

8.2.1 Personal Enquiries

We might often have to enquire about people. We might not know who we wish to meet and would like to confirm whether we are talking to the right person.

Read this piece of conversation between a visitor and an old man:

The visitor knows that the person is Captain Hagberd because he meets him at his residence, but he wishes to confirm this.

‘You must be Captain Hagberd,’

‘Yes, I am,’

‘You’ve been advertising for your son, I believe?’

‘My son Harry,...He’s coming home to-morrow.’

Instead of asking the direct question,

“Are you Captain Hagberd?” he couches it in the form of a conjecture. The next question gets a little more personal but is again not asked directly but in the form of a statement with the question tagged on in “I believe?”

Contrast this with the direct questions in the informal conversation below between a husband and wife:

‘What have you done, Laxman?’

‘I have shall we say, completed the jig-saw puzzle I was trying to put together so long.’

‘What puzzle?’

‘Ah, there you have me. I shouldn’t tell you really– but to hell with security– I will. Umi, the computer is working. It’s fantastic, decades ahead of the finest supercomputer on this planet. But having said that, I must shut up. And, Umi, keep it to yourself.’

- Direct questions begin with wh-words: what, where, when, why and how. This is the basic form of the question, but we do not always ask questions in this form. The questions are suitably toned down and modified according to the relationship between two speakers.

It is not quite polite to ask a person his or her name directly. We use modal verbs to frame polite questions:

Could I know your name please?

May I know your name please?

Your name please? – with a rise in the tone

If the person has been introduced to you already but you have missed the name, you could ask for it this way:

I’m afraid I didn’t get your name

If you want to be sure where the person is working, you could say:

Did you say you were working in ...?

Telephone Enquiries

Receiving a call

It is telephone courtesy to identify yourself when you pick up the receiver. An individual or a private residence might say:

“Jayaram here.” OR “Jayaram.” OR “Jayaram speaking.”

“Hello, Mr. Shorey’s residence.”!

A business establishment is expected to identify itself when it receives a call:

“Good Morning, India Travel Bureau. May I help you?”

“Hello, this is the Grindus Bank. How may we help you?”

Some of you may have heard an automated message, followed by music.

“Thank you for calling Global Consultants. Our operative will be with you in a minute. Please wait.”

“Thank you for calling Triumph Corporation. To proceed in English, dial 1 ...”

The personal counterpart of such a message is the answering machine. The owner of the machine records a friendly message on this machine, which the caller hears:

“Hi, I’m Geeta. Thank you for calling. I’m sorry I’m not able to respond to you right now. But if you would like to leave a message, please do so, after you hear a beep.”

Making a call

Sometimes the person whom you call does not identify himself or herself. They may wish to preserve their privacy, and want you to identify yourself first. If you are not sure you have the right number, you may say:

“Hello, is that 2776 5434, please? May I talk to Mr. Madhukar?”

In any case, persons who make a call are expected to identify themselves, and say who they wish to speak to, and why:

“Hi Geeta, this is Paddu, I’m here in Pune for a day, and ...” [speaking to an answering machine]

“Hello, may I speak to Mr. Anil Shorey, please? I’m calling from Jaipur. My name is Ravinder.”

“Good Morning. I’m Dr. Madhukar. Could you let me know the fare to ...”

“Good Afternoon. I’m a regular customer of your bank, and I have a problem with my statement ...”

“Good Morning. I’m calling from Friends’ Stationers. Could you please tell me ...”

Receiving a call again

But if the caller does not identify himself or herself, some of the ways you might ask about the identity of a person are:

May I know who I am speaking to?

Could you repeat your name please?

May I know who is calling?

Did you say you were speaking from Chennai?

If the person the caller wishes to speak to is unavailable, you may say so politely, and ask if the caller wishes to call back, or to leave a message: “I’m sorry Mr. Jayaram is out of town this week. Would you like me to give you his cell phone number?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Jayaram is in a meeting right now. Would you like to call again after 1 p.m.?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Jayaram cannot come to the phone right now. Would you like to leave a message for him?”

Bad manners on the telephone

Some common problems we notice with people who make or receive calls are the following:

- Failing to identify themselves
- Not making sure they have the right number, or have dialed the right number, and insisting on speaking to a person they think they have reached
- Speaking unclearly, or with pan or food in the mouth
- Speaking unnecessarily loudly

The last two points need particular attention. We have all heard people speaking in public on their cell phones so loudly that the people around them soon come to know all about their business. The telephone is designed to pick up your voice quite well even at a low volume, and if you speak clearly in a normal or soft voice, you are more likely to be heard and understood than if you shout without bothering to pronounce your words properly.

We shall give you some hints and exercises on voice control and articulation in this block, which will help you in face-to-face or public speaking as well as in speaking on the telephone.

8.2.2 Condolence

Enquiring about personal bereavement is a very sensitive matter. While it is customary to enquire about how a person died, the way we ask a bereaved person about the death has to be delicate.

Here is a situation:

Shraddha meets her classmate Vipin a few days after his father’s death:

Read the conversation between the two:

“Extremely sorry Vipin. I can understand how painful it must be.”

“mm”

“I heard it was all too sudden.”

“Yes. He was so active. Had gone to work that day. I just can’t believe he isn’t there.”

“It’s very difficult. Was it at home?”

“He complained of mild discomfort soon after dinner and we rushed him to the hospital, but even before we could reach there, ...”

“Your mother must be inconsolable.”

“Yes, this was the last thing she expected would happen.”

“I’ll come home with you today to see her.”

“Thanks Shraddha.”

- Notice how Shraddha makes a series of statements to evoke responses from Vipin. Direct questions sound very abrasive when talking to a person who is in need of comfort and consolation.

8.2.3 Dinner Talk

Saraf and Lee Wan are business colleagues. Saraf takes Lee Wan out to dinner after work. The two of them are relaxed.

Lee Wan: Nice place, this.

Saraf: Yes, I like the ambience. I often come here with my family.

Lee Wan: Kids in school?

Saraf: Just one. He is in the tenth.

Lee Wan: I’d like to know what schools are like here. I mean the system they follow.

Saraf: Well, we have three different examination boards and different schools choose the

Board they wish to get affiliated to.

Lee Wan: I suppose it’s ten years of school and then Junior College?

Saraf: Yes, That’s right. Is it the same in Singapore too?

Lee Wan: Yes after the 10th you can opt for JC or go to a polytechnic.

Saraf: We do have that choice too, here. Only, that nobody willingly goes to the Polytechnic. There’s a mad rush to get into the professional colleges.

Lee Wan: Is that easy, here? Not so back home.

Saraf: There are a large number of private colleges where you can get in for a fee.

Lee Wan: The Government allows that?

Saraf: Yes. But, of course, they are very expensive compared to the Government colleges. ... Here’s the menu. Make your choice.

Lee Wan: Aha! Thanks. Let’s see what they have.

- Notice that some of the questions are not direct. They may begin as statements but expect a response. Sometimes as in “Kids in School?”, the question is implied by the rising intonation.

There are one or two direct yes or no questions which seek information.

8.2.4 Enquiries about Services

We often need to enquire about services available and might ask friends to help us. Supposing you are interested in going abroad for studies and want to know where to get the details, you might ask your friends about it.

Read the conversation below:

Puneet: Shailesh, you are just the person I was looking for.

Shailesh: Why, what's the matter?

Puneet: Shailesh, you have so many of your relatives studying abroad. I thought you might be able to help me.

Shailesh: Do you want to go abroad?

Puneet: I think getting a postgraduate degree abroad would help me.

Shailesh: Where do you want to go?

Puneet: I'll be finishing BDS this May. I'd like to go for further studies to the US or Australia. I want to know how I can apply for scholarships.

Shailesh: Ketan Mishra studied abroad. He is now the study-abroad college counselor at MMK College in Baroda. He runs an online service. Write to him and he will help you.

Puneet: Thanks, what's the address?

Shailesh: counselor@educationtimes.com

Puneet and Shailesh are close friends. So their questions are quite direct.

Notice the phrase: "I want to know..." This is the basic form of an enquiry for information. This can be modified in the following ways:

- I'd like to know...
- I wish to know...
- Could you tell me ...
- Would you be able to tell me ...
- I'm looking for information regarding ...
- I wonder if you could help me in this ...

8.2.5 Enquiries about Procedures

Let us now look at questions regarding how things are done and the way in which we seek clarifications when someone explains things to us.

Vinita: That's a nice thing you have there. I've never seen anything like it before.

Sumi: Oh! This? This is what we call a terrarium.

Vinita: I've heard of an 'aquarium', **but a 'terrarium'?**

Sumi: Yeah, just as we keep fish in a glass bowl filled with water, we can keep plants in a terrarium.

Vinita: Why is it called a terrarium?

Sumi: Like we put in water in an aquarium, here we put in soil – we put soil into a glass case with little pebbles and stones, and put plants in it.

Vinita: That's nice. But the glass container is closed. **Don't the plants need air?**

Sumi: This is the way it works: The leaves of the plants release water vapour. This condenses on the glass, trickles into the soil in the container and rewaters the plants. If the container is airtight, this process can be left as it is.

Vinita: How do you make it? What are the things that we need?

Sumi: You need small river stones or gravel, some finely ground charcoal, some soil, some peat, some sand and some sticks.

Vinita: **We mix them all up and put them in the container?**

Sumi: No, no. First a layer of gravel, about an inch or so. This is for the drainage at the bottom of the container. Then a light layer of finely ground charcoal.

Vinita: What's that for?

Sumi: To keep away the bacteria.

Vinita: **Then the rest?**

Sumi: Two parts soil mixed with two parts peat and one part sand.

Vinita: **I'm sorry, but I don't know what peat is.**

Sumi: Peat is formed by decaying plants below the surface the soil.

Vinita: How thick should the soil layer be?

Sumi: Two to three inches deep. If you like, you can mound up soil higher in the centre to make it look like a natural landscape.

Vinita: **Then we put the plants in?** What kinds of plants would grow well?

Sumi: Common houseplants: ferns, prayer plants and moss. Avoid cactuses. You need to fix the roots firmly in the soil after removing excess soil from them.

Vinita: How do we maintain them?

Sumi: In the beginning, water lightly. If there is too much water vapour clouding the sides of the container, remove the lid for a day or two. Keep it in a slightly shaded spot. Don't let the leaves touch the sides of the container. Remove plants that are not doing well.

Vinita: Thanks that was very interesting. Next time you come home, you will see a terrarium. If I have any problems, I'll call you up.

Sumi: Sure. It will be a beautiful addition to your room.

That was an example of how we ask questions about procedures. Some of the questions are direct wh_ questions but there are also others which are highlighted in bold which are statements with a rising intonation which function as questions.

Notice the following:

- the preciseness with which every question is answered
- the attention with which the listener follows the procedure and seeks clarifications when in doubt
- the listener's anticipation of what the next step is and hazarding a guess which is either approved, if right, or explained, if not.

Also notice how the listener asks for the meaning of the word 'peat', just by stating that she has not understood it, prefacing it with "I'm sorry".

✓ Check Your Progress 1

Convert the following route description to Ganesh Himal and the Tibetan mountain range into a dialogue between a Nepali hotel executive and a French national on a sight-seeing tour:

If one has a few days of leisure when one feels like going for a short trek, then Lower Langtang could be the right choice. For foreigners, trekking permits and national Park entry tickets are required. These can be obtained at the immigration office. You can first take a bus to Dhunche. The 120km drive from Kathmandu to Dhunche is very picturesque. You can rest in one of the comfortable lodges in

Dhunche for the night. Rasuwa in Dhunche has a mix of modern buildings. The traditional Tamang village is just below the road. The next morning you can drive down or start your trek to Bharku six km away from Dhunche. From the road can be seen the spectacular Ganesh Himal and the Tibetan mountain range.

You could begin this way:

French tourist: Excuse me, I wonder if you could help me.

Tourist executive: Sure. Tell me what I can do for you. Are you here on a long visit?

8.3 ATTENTION IN LISTENING

When we listen to English spoken informally, we need to make reasonable *guesses* about what is being said. Our surroundings may be noisy. The speaker may be walking along with us, and his or her face may sometimes be turned away from us as (s)he speaks. In any case, informal speech is faster and less clear than speech on the radio or at a lecture. Look at the sentence below as it appears in writing. Then look at how this might sound to us in fast speech.

Mrs. Gandhi went to Parliament at once.

'ms Gandhwentu Parlɪmnatwuns'

Notice that in fast speech

1. Words are 'run together'
2. some sounds are left out, or unclear (these are the 'unstressed' sounds)

When we listen to a language we know our knowledge of the language helps us to guess what is being said. We know the words of the language, and we know how these words are put together to carry meaning. But when you listen to English, if your own English is not very strong, then you can use only your best guess about the context – the meaning that the speaker probably wants to convey – to help you understand.

Sometimes our guesses can be quite amusingly wrong. One speaker spoke the words "My friend Shanthi..." Perhaps the speaker mispronounced the name *Shanthi* a little.

The person listening said, "Your French aunty? I didn't know you had a French aunty!" A linguist called Victoria Fromkin has written an entire book about such mishearings, which she calls "slips of the ear", on the analogy of a "slip of the tongue" in speech.

Here is a sample of actual spoken English. Notice that some words, and some parts of words, are spoken louder and clearer than others. We have indicated this by using capital letters. Since the person is also thinking as they are speaking, there are pauses and 'hesitation markers' like *er* or *um*.

[Question: Are immigrants more law-abiding? Whya?]

Answer: "BeCAUSE i THINK theyhavether OWN – er – very STRONG – er – CULTural nd RELIGIOUS – er – they KEEP them SELVES very MUCH to themselves"

In general, all "content words" – nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs – are "stressed," spoken clearly. All the "little words" – the prepositions, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions, and so on – are "unstressed".

It is essential for you to start listening to English as it is ordinarily spoken – in unscripted interviews, for example – as soon as you can. Of course you will not be able to understand it completely. Begin by listening to short stretches of speech – just a couple of sentences, or for less than half a minute at a time. If you can record speech and listen to it again and again, do so. Otherwise just listen to the same speaker as much as you can, everyday, for a week. By the end of a week of listening you will find a difference in how much you can understand of what is being spoken. The easiest way to begin is to listen to the news headlines, where the content is predictable. Many of you are perhaps already listening to sports commentary. Weather bulletins are also easy to understand for beginners.

8.4 PRONUNCIATION PRACTICE

In the last unit we saw how certain syllables in a word were stressed. In this unit we will notice which words in a sentence are stressed.

Words like articles, prepositions and conjunctions are usually not pronounced in a sentence. Nouns and verbs are stressed.

In the following sentences, the underlined words are stressed:

1. A **show** has been **arranged**.
2. He **invited** us to **stay**.
3. He **drank** a **glass** of **milk**.
4. Don't **offend** the **judge**.
5. **Thank** you for the **money**.

Notice the stressed words in the following questions and say them aloud:

Have you seen the new **'post** office? Could you give me an **'earlier** appointment?
would you please get me a **'soup** spoon? Did you return the **'library** book?

Read this exchange of questions and answers between a teacher and his student:

"Imagine you are on a **hike** and you are facing **north**. Now, what is on your **right**?"

"East, sir"

"Correct. And what is on your **left**?"

"West, Sir".

"Correct again, and what is at your **back**?"

Um- my **school** bag sir."

Read this telephone conversation aloud with a friend:

Read this telephone conversation aloud with a friend:

"Is this Cohen, Cohen, Cohen and Cohen?"

"Yes, madam".

"May I speak to Mr. Cohen please? It is very important".

"I'm afraid Mr. Cohen is on vacation".

"O...may I speak to Cohen then? It's extremely urgent".

"I'm sorry Mr. Cohen is out sick".

"Oh dear ... what about Mr. Cohen then? It's a matter of life and death!"

"Mr. Cohen is in Brussels on business".

"Oh Lord, I'm desperate. Can I speak to Mr. Cohen then?"

"Speaking".

√ Check Your Progress 2

Underline the stressed words in the following sentences. Read them aloud:

1. How do we maintain them?
2. Thanks, what's the address?
3. Is it the same in Singapore too?
4. I'm sorry Mr. Jayaram is out of town this week.
5. Thank you for calling.

8.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you learnt some of the ways in which enquiries are made. The basic question forms are either questions beginning with wh- words or yes or no questions.

However, the degree of politeness that we wish to maintain suggests other forms in which questions may be asked. Polite forms of questioning usually are indirect and make use of modal verbs. Remember this when you ask questions.

Content words are pronounced. Words like 'an, a, the', 'but', 'and', 'in', 'on' etc. are not pronounced.

8.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 2

1. How do we **maintain** them?
2. **Thanks**, what's the **address**?
3. Is it the **same** in **Singapore** too?
4. I'm sorry Mr. **Jayaram** is out of **town** this **week**.
5. **Thank** you for **calling**.

Answers to Task 1 and a few more pronunciation practice exercises to be added.