

# Don't Your Students Have Question Blues, Do They?

*Bruno Kamps, University of Oregon*

“Aren't you drinking coffee?”  
 “Uh... yes, I'm not. I mean, no, I am!”  
 “So, you're drinking coffee, aren't you?”  
 “Uh, no... I mean yes. What?”

Negative and tag questions never cease to confuse my students, especially the ones coming from Asian countries. After all, isn't it logical to give an answer using grammar similar to the question? To a Japanese student who is not drinking coffee, the question, “Aren't you drinking coffee?” might elicit the answer, “Yes, I'm not.” If the student is drinking coffee, however, he or she might logically answer, “No, I am!”

In this instance, English is actually simpler than our students realize. No matter how we ask the question, the answer remains the same:

“Are you drinking coffee?” “Yes, I am.”  
 “Aren't you drinking coffee?” “Yes, I am.”  
 “You are drinking coffee, aren't you?” “Yes, I am.”  
 “You aren't drinking coffee, are you?” “Yes, I am.”

My job was then to convince my students that if they could concentrate on just the subject, verb and object of the question they would easily figure out the correct answer, if all they did was answer frankly. I then pointed out that each question contained the same basic parts, as shown by the following bold words: “Are **you drinking coffee?**” “Aren't **you drinking coffee?**” “**You are drinking coffee,** aren't you?” “**You aren't drinking coffee,** are you?”

To illustrate my point I asked the four questions in rapid succession to several students, who each practiced answering the

same way each time: “Yes, I am.” Ah, the excitement on my students' faces when they realized that the answer was the same each time. Good-bye to having to listen to confusing details and wondering how to answer with the appropriate affirmative or negative. Just answer honestly!

“So, teacher,” they quickly asked, “Why are there so many ways to ask the question?” I then explained that the form of the question represented the questioner's feeling. In order to explain this more clearly, I came up with the following template (see Figure 1) showing students how this works in all tenses.

First, I show that the answers remain the same. Then, after they see this filled-in template, they fill in the remaining tenses. As in the following example, one question and answer clue is given for each tense.

## Simple Past

You don't know:  
**Did you drink coffee?** (Yes, I did./No, I didn't.)  
 You think so (1):  
 \_\_\_\_\_? (\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_)  
 You think so (2):  
 \_\_\_\_\_? (\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_)  
 You don't think so:  
 \_\_\_\_\_? (\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_)

Questions	Answers
If you <i>don't know</i> , you ask: <b>Are you drinking coffee?</b>	Yes, I am. No, I'm not.
If you think the answer is <i>yes</i> , you ask: <b>You're drinking coffee, aren't you?</b> or: <b>Aren't you drinking coffee?</b>	Yes, I am. No, I'm not. Yes, I am. No, I'm not.
If you think the answer is <i>no</i> , you ask: <b>You're not drinking coffee, are you?</b>	Yes, I am. No, I'm not.

*Figure 1. Question template*

Students can be given a sheet with all relevant tenses, including modals and perfect tenses. After some written practice, it is the students' turn to ask the questions. To make sure the students understand the question nuances, the teacher tells the students what they think (You don't know, you think so, etc.) before they have them ask their classmates each question. Your students will thank you for helping them untangle a great English mystery with such ease!

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# MP3 Players Rating Project: An Online Literacy Activity for EAP

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LangQuests: an MP3 Players Rating Project is an online literacy activity aimed at young adult EAP students. It is designed to improve their English and higher-order thinking skills through task-based activities based on the following scenario:

The Computer Science Department at a university is planning to purchase MP3 players for podcasting projects. The department has narrowed its choice to three MP3 players: iPod, Zune, and Sansa. For their final decision, the faculty wants to hear from a committee of students about their preferences and reasons. The department wants the committee, which consists of members of your group, to make a formal presentation on the players before it makes a decision.

This scenario can be modified as needed to suit instructor preferences and class needs. (See "Suggestions for Alternatives" below.) Instructors can download all the materials from the

Teacher's Page at <http://sites.google.com/site/mashupprojectmkang/teacher-s-page/>. This page also provides practical guidance and pedagogical background information.

## Project Objectives

By the end of the activity, students should have done the following:

- Gathered information about three MP3 players from the Internet and from conversations with peers and sales personnel.
- Compared the players.
- Rated the players according to a template.
- Presented their conclusion and reasoning in a way that would be acceptable to an academic audience. For this presentation, they use PowerPoint or similar software.

## Preparation

Before the project starts, the instructor should do the following:

1. Download the project's purpose, scenario, tasks, "Timeline Table," and "Project