



研究成果を英語で伝えるスキルに磨きをかけたい皆さんへ：このシリーズでは、東京大学のウッドワード先生が、あなたの今の英語能力を使って成果をより効果的に上手に伝えるためのアイデア、作戦、ヒントを紹介します。また、日本語でのプレゼンにも役立つ多くのアイデアも見つかるでしょう。

By Invitation of the Editor-in-Chief

English Scientific Communication Part 9—Dealing with questions

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In this series of articles, we discuss a wide range of aspects of presenting science in English. In the last two articles we have considered some ideas for what to do just before presenting and how to improve performance during a presentation. Today we reach the end of the presentation itself and take on the challenge of answering the audience's questions!

**Just when you thought
it was all over...**

Once you reach the end of your presentation, having acknowledged your co-workers and sponsors and thanked the audience, it feels like it should be time to sit down and relax. However, for many people, the toughest part of the presentation is still to come! Young scientists with not much experience of presenting are usually crossing their fingers at this point and hoping that no one will ask a question! For well-established scientists, they are probably feeling the opposite, because not having any questions might mean that nobody was interested in what they had to say! Regardless, in almost all cases, you will need to answer questions after your presentation, because the chairperson will work hard to ask you something, even if nobody else does!

For a non-native English speaker, answering questions at the end of a presentation poses 2 large challenges beyond those faced by a native speaker:

1) Understanding the question

As well as having to have a technical understanding of the question being asked, a perhaps even greater challenge is to try to understand the English of the person asking the question. This is made worse by the fact that at international meetings, the participants come from all over the world and their English accents and pronunciation can vary enormously. In addition, many people asking questions are too impatient to wait for a microphone or hold the microphone in such a way as to render it mostly useless, making it often difficult to hear them clearly.

2) Having to answer using unprepared English

For the entire presentation up to this point, it was possible to have complete control over the English language using many of the ideas presented in previous articles. Depending on how much planning and preparation the presenter is prepared to do, the entire presentation can be controlled on a word-by-word basis. As soon as the audience is able to ask questions, however, the presenter is on the spot and will have to answer without backup resources.

In reality, it is possible to do more preparation for answering questions than you might imagine. For the rest of this month's article, we discuss some ideas and tricks!

**Achieving mutual
understanding**

The first challenge, then, is to correctly

understand the question being asked. This is as important, if not more so, than proceeding to answer the question. The situation at international conferences where the presenter completely misunderstands the question being asked and therefore answers a completely different question is surprisingly common. As a presenter, it is important that you make every effort to correctly understand the question. The way to achieve this is through confirmation and agreement with the presenter. My experience from watching the question and answer process for many years is that in many cases, the presenter doesn't understand the language, while the person asking the question thinks that they do not understand the science. Naturally, there are some cases where the language is not a problem and the presenter really doesn't understand the question being asked, but I think that such cases are much less common.

In order to avoid this first problem, the presenter should work hard to be both honest and clear in response to the question. Unfortunately, most non-native speakers usually respond in this situation by saying, "I'm sorry" or something similar. If you do not understand the language of a question, make sure that you communicate this. You can say something like, "I'm sorry, I couldn't understand your English clearly, could you please repeat your question?" If a repeat of the question doesn't help, then you can then say something like, "I'm very sorry, I still couldn't understand your question, could you rephrase it

please?” This may still not solve the problem, but if the chairperson understands clearly that it is the language that you are struggling to understand, they may also be able to try and intervene and explain the question to you. The important point here is to be explicit, and therefore communicative about the reasons for your misunderstanding. If the person’s voice is too quiet for you to hear, then say so. If the question contains a word that you are not familiar with, then say so. If you simply say, “once more please” or “I don’t understand” then the person asking the question doesn’t know what to change to help you understand.

The next problem arises from presenters who think that they have understood the question, but actually have not. Again it is quite common to observe a presenter confidently answer a question that is completely different to the one asked. Avoiding this problem is also a question of communicating effectively. Whenever you are asked a question and think you understand it, then before answering the question it is a very good idea to confirm your understanding of the question with the speaker. To do so, you can say something like “Thank you for your question. If I understand you correctly, what you are asking is …” and then proceed to restate the question in your own words based on your what you have understood is being asked. The person asking the question can then either confirm that you have correctly understood or point out any areas of confusion.

Preparing in advance

On first thought, it seems that answering questions after presentations is a spontaneous process. However, this is not the case and a substantial amount of preparation can be done in advance. The most obvious starting point for this preparation is while practicing your presentation in front of an audience. Make sure to get your audience to ask as many questions as possible after the presentation and make a note of them. That way you can prepare good answers both in terms of science and English and make a note of any particular vocabulary or expressions you may need on

the notes section of your presentation software. Push your colleagues / supervisor to ask you difficult questions, as this will allow you to prepare further.

Once you have practiced in front of an audience and have a good idea of the kind of questions you may be asked, you can prepare additional slides to use during question time. As we discussed in previous articles, the time available for presentations is usually short compared to the amount of information you wish to convey. The question time is an opportunity to provide more detail about the parts of your work that the audience has identified as either confusing or interesting. Make sure that you have slides available at the end of the presentation that contain any additional data, graphs, images etc. that may be useful in providing further explanation.

Turning things to your advantage

It is possible to take things a little bit further by trying to use the question time to your own advantage. When politicians are interviewed on current affairs programs, they are really using their answers to say the things that they want to say. Although in this context it is not appropriate to take things this far, it can be useful to view the question time as an opportunity to highlight aspects of your work that you think are particularly important, draw attention to other related work you have done or discuss aspects that you did not have time to include in the main presentation. Having this objective in mind means that you can structure your main presentation with this in mind. Let us consider two common and useful tricks.

1) Using suggestion

A technique used by many experienced presenters is to “help” the audience during a presentation by suggesting possible questions to them! A typical statement made might be, “I don’t have any time to talk about this in any more detail now, but you may want to ask me more about it during the questions.” There are many variants on this and it is surprisingly effective - most of the time, these “suggested” questions get asked

at some point. In particular, it can make the chairperson very happy, as they will be trying to think of questions to ask in case no one in the audience asks anything.

2) Appending your answer

Another slightly advanced technique is to answer the question and add something to it that you want to highlight or maybe forgot to mention earlier. For difficult to answer questions, accomplished speakers will sometimes deliberately answer a slightly different question than the one asked that better suits what they want to say. You can decide for yourself if you think that this is appropriate or not, but often answering the question in this way benefits the audience better as a whole. Very often, answers of this kind are often followed by a statement of the kind “I’m not sure if I answered your question correctly, but I hope I did.” Next time you are at a conference, keep a lookout for speakers using this technique!

Be honest

Finally, it may be sometimes be the case that you have understood a question properly, but simply do not know the answer. One of the things that makes science so important and separates scientists from politicians is the ability of both science and scientists to say “I don’t know.” In fact, when you really don’t know the answer to a question, the best response is to be honest and say so. The person asking the question may have an idea, explanation or insight related to their question, which they might share with you. You might end up learning something important! It is also worth remembering that sometimes people ask questions because *they* want to say something, not because they want to ask you something.

With the question time complete, your presentation is over and you can sit down, relax and take a well-earned break. Or can you? Next month we move on to discuss what you should do once the presentation is over in order to make sure that your next presentation is even better!

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