

# Key questions

**Chris Payne** suggests practical solutions to surmount examination stumbling blocks.

There are 130 countries in which around four million candidates sit Cambridge English examinations each year.

Thousands of those candidates take the Key English Test, also referred to as KET. This is at a pre-intermediate level of English, corresponding to A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): two levels below the well-known First Certificate exam.

KET consists of three papers: *Reading and Writing*, *Listening* and *Speaking*. It can be taken in two versions:

- Key for Schools – which has content and topics targeted at school-age learners.
- Key – which is more suited to adult candidates.

A large number of candidates produce questions in their speaking test such as:

*Is he play sport?*

*What she teach?*

*Is the lessons on Friday?*

*She wear a uniform?*

This article considers specifically the ability to ask questions, which is tested in Part Two of the KET Speaking paper. I will attempt to pinpoint which types of questions cause learners the most problems, and I suggest four fun activities for practising question formation in the classroom.

## The KET Speaking paper

The Speaking test is taken in pairs and comprises two parts:

- In Part One, each candidate answers questions of a personal nature that are asked by the *examiner*, known as the interlocutor.
- In Part Two – our area of interest here – the candidates interact with *each other*, using prompt cards to ask and answer questions of a non-personal kind.

The candidates are assessed on their ability to communicate clearly, and are not expected to produce completely accurate language. In fact, they only lose marks if their inaccuracies cloud the meaning of their utterances. But naturally, candidates would perform better in the test if they could ask questions correctly.

## Forming questions

Although our students do not have to ask perfectly-formed questions to ensure exam success in KET, the ability to form correct questions will also improve their *real-life* communication skills. I believe we are duty-bound to strive to help our learners become more competent communicators – by pursuing the elusive goal of accuracy.

So let us now look at what learners need to do in order to ask correct questions. For reasons of space, we will

focus only on present tense object questions, as they tend to be the kind that candidates are mostly expected to ask. The prompt cards usually require *Yes/No* questions and *Wh*-questions.

### Yes/No questions:

Sometimes called ‘polar questions’, these are formed by placing a form of an auxiliary verb – eg *be* or *can* – before the subject. This is normally referred to as ‘inversion’. For example:

*Is the shop expensive?*  
*Can you speak Italian?*

In the absence of an auxiliary verb, we place the dummy operator *do/does* before the subject and the main verb in its base form. For example:

*Do you like chocolate?*  
*Does she play the piano?*

### Wh-questions:

To form *Wh*-questions, the students follow the same procedure as above, but place the question word before the auxiliary or dummy operator. For example:

*When is your birthday?*  
*Where does he live?*

### Prompt cards

The cards which are used in KET to stimulate questions typically include prompts similar to those on the made-up example shown here:

#### SCHOOL SHOP

- Where?
- Expensive?
- Sell/sandwiches?
- When/close?
- Phone number?

There is often a variety of acceptable questions which may be produced using the prompt cards. Suggestions for this one are:

*Where is the shop?*  
*Is it expensive?*  
*Does it sell sandwiches?*  
*When does the shop close?*  
*What is the phone number?*

### Some research

In order to help our learners to perfect their question formation, it would be useful to know where the potential

problems lie. Why does a seemingly simple change in the order of the subject and the auxiliary or use of the *do/does* operator prove so difficult for students to apply in real-time communication?

- Is it because meaning is so easily conveyed without accuracy that it renders correct forms redundant?
- Are certain kinds of questions more challenging than others? For instance, are *do/does* questions harder to master than *is/are* questions, which use inversion?
- Are we to expect a *Wh*-question, which places two words before the subject, to be harder to form than a *Yes/No* question, which places one? For example: *Where does she play tennis?* and *Does she play tennis?*

My quest for answers to these questions prompted me to carry out some small-scale research on 36 students, with an average age of 12. The aim was to ascertain how they performed under test conditions.

So, armed with some KET Part Two prompt cards, I conducted mock oral exams with the students, during which I transcribed the exact questions that they asked.

### Findings

Clearly, a small-scale experiment such as mine is at best exploratory, and the results of the mock speaking tests cannot provide us with any conclusive findings. That said, not all classroom research needs to involve statistical analysis of large amounts of data in order to give us a valuable insight into the learning process.

On the whole, the students managed to communicate their intended meaning, albeit with varying degrees of accuracy.

Let us start by showing which types of questions were produced most accurately. The percentage of grammatically correct questions is given in brackets.

**Wh-questions**, which we would expect to be formed using the auxiliary *is/are*, were the easiest for the students to produce. Here are four examples:

- 1 *What is the phone number?* (100%)
- 2 *What is his name?* (94%)

Presumably, 1 and 2 posed few problems because of their chunk-like status.

- 3 *Where is he from?* (50%)

Considering this is also a common chunk, it is perhaps surprising that just half the questions were accurate. Although 72% of the students knew they had to place the auxiliary before the subject, the subject–verb agreement (concord) was wrong. For example: *Where are he from?*

#### 4 *Where are the lessons?* (61%)

Concord was again the source of most errors.

Earlier in this article, I asked whether *do/does* questions are more of a challenge than questions that require *is/are* inversion. This study indicates that they are not – unless they are used with *Wh*-words. The highest percentage of accuracy for all *Yes/No* questions was 50%. Here are two examples for each type:

- 1 *Does he play sport?* (50%)
- 2 *Do you wear special clothes?* (33%)

*Is/are* questions fared worse:

- 1 *Are the/there lessons on Friday?* (27.5%)
- 2 *Are the horses nice?* (22%)

Concord was a persistent problem for *is/are* questions. For example: *Is the lessons expensive?*

For *do/does* questions, *is* was a frequent ‘intruder’, as in *Is he play sport?* Here, it is safe to say that confusion probably arises because present continuous questions are formed using *is/are*. For example: *Is he playing tennis?*

Although these results are disappointing if accuracy is our goal, we can take heart from one particular observation. In all the *Yes/No* questions that were tested, the students often succeeded in placing the auxiliary *is/are/ can* or *do/does* before the subject. This shows evidence of learning, but accuracy was affected by lack of subject–verb agreement.

Finally, the hardest questions to produce correctly were those with *Wh*-questions that need *do/does*. Here are two more examples:

- 1 *What does he teach?* (27.5%)

A common mistake was, again, to use *is* or omit *does* altogether. For example: *What is he teach?* and *What he teach?*

The most problematic questions of the whole experiment were those with *When*.

- 2 *When does he start?* (0%)

This question yielded no correct production at all! The main problem

# Key questions

here was the complete omission of *does*. For example: *When he start?*

We know from studies (eg by William O'Grady) on the developmental order for *Wh*-words that *when* is one of the last question words to be acquired by native-speaker children. This raises the question of whether it is also one of the last *Wh*-words to be learnt and used correctly by L2 students of English.

## A question of practice

Learners generally understand the rules of question formation, but fail to apply them during communication, in which *meaning* takes precedence over *form*. This common scenario may frustrate teachers and learners alike if they are in pursuit of accuracy. A more Panglossian view is that learners can still communicate without accuracy. Nonetheless, they can undoubtedly benefit from plentiful practice of question forms, as it raises their awareness and can lead to more sustained accuracy.

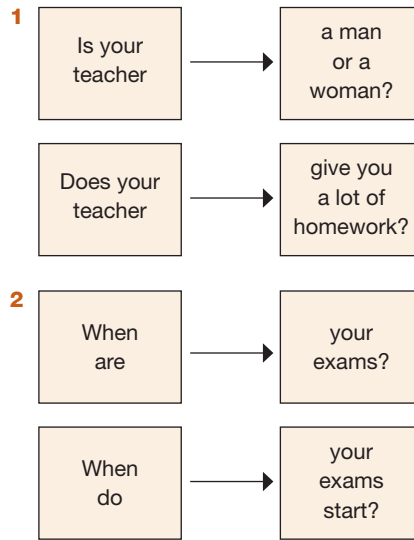
In keeping with the widely-held tenet that comprehension precedes production, my first practice activity is a receptive one in which the learners need to understand language *without* having to produce it.

The other three are productive and are done as pairwork activities in order to maximise the practice opportunities for each learner. They become progressively less controlled, so that the learners need to think more about correct forms and gradually have to produce more language.

### 1 Question pelmanism

In the traditional game of pelmanism, cards are laid face down on a table or on the floor, and the object of the game is to remember where matching pairs are and turn them over. If you turn over a pair you keep it, and the winner is the player who has the most pairs at the end.

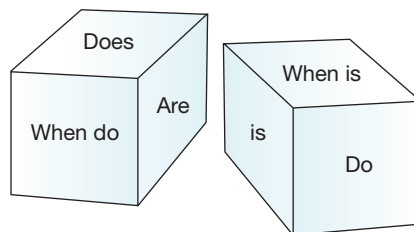
This game can be adapted for question practice by designing pairs of cards with question heads that are similar. In this way, the learners have to think about and understand the grammar of questions in order to find a correct match. Here are some examples:



If the learners turn over 'Is your teacher' and 'give you a lot of homework?' they ought to notice that it is not a correct match.

### 2 Dice race

The learners produce *Yes/No* questions and *Wh*-questions. On a number of blank dice (you will need one for each pair of students) write on four of the faces *Is, Are, Do* or *Does* (use an initial capital letter) and on the other two faces, write a question word with either *do* or *does* and *is* or *are*. This example activity uses *When* with *do?* and *When* with *is?*



Each pair of learners is given a question dice (see above) and a sheet of paper which includes the tail of different questions (I usually use 12 for each student).

The object of the game is to roll the dice and use the word(s) shown to complete the questions. The winner is

the learner who completes and answers their questions first.

This game is fun, and because it combines knowledge with luck of the dice, strong students won't always win easily.

### 3 Board game

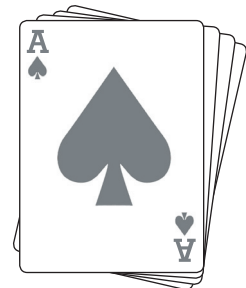
This game (see page 19) uses question prompts and topics, and is played in pairs or threes. The learners will need a counter each, and one dice per pair or group of three. There is a photocopyable template on page 20 for you to make your own game.

The learners place their counters on 'Start' and roll the dice:

- If they get a 5 or a 6 at the start, they can't move.
- If they get a 2, they move to 'expensive?' and use this word to ask a question about the topic (school trip) shown at the top of the column of question prompts. For example: *Is the school trip expensive?*

The game proceeds like this, with the questions that the players have to ask being decided by the throw of the dice. If a wrong answer is given, they move back to the previous circle. The first player to reach the 'Finish' circle is the winner. (This game is adapted from an idea at [onestopenglish.com](http://onestopenglish.com).)

### 4 Ace fun



This final activity generates a lot of fun practice with questions. All you need is a deck or decks of playing cards and a selection of flashcards showing different

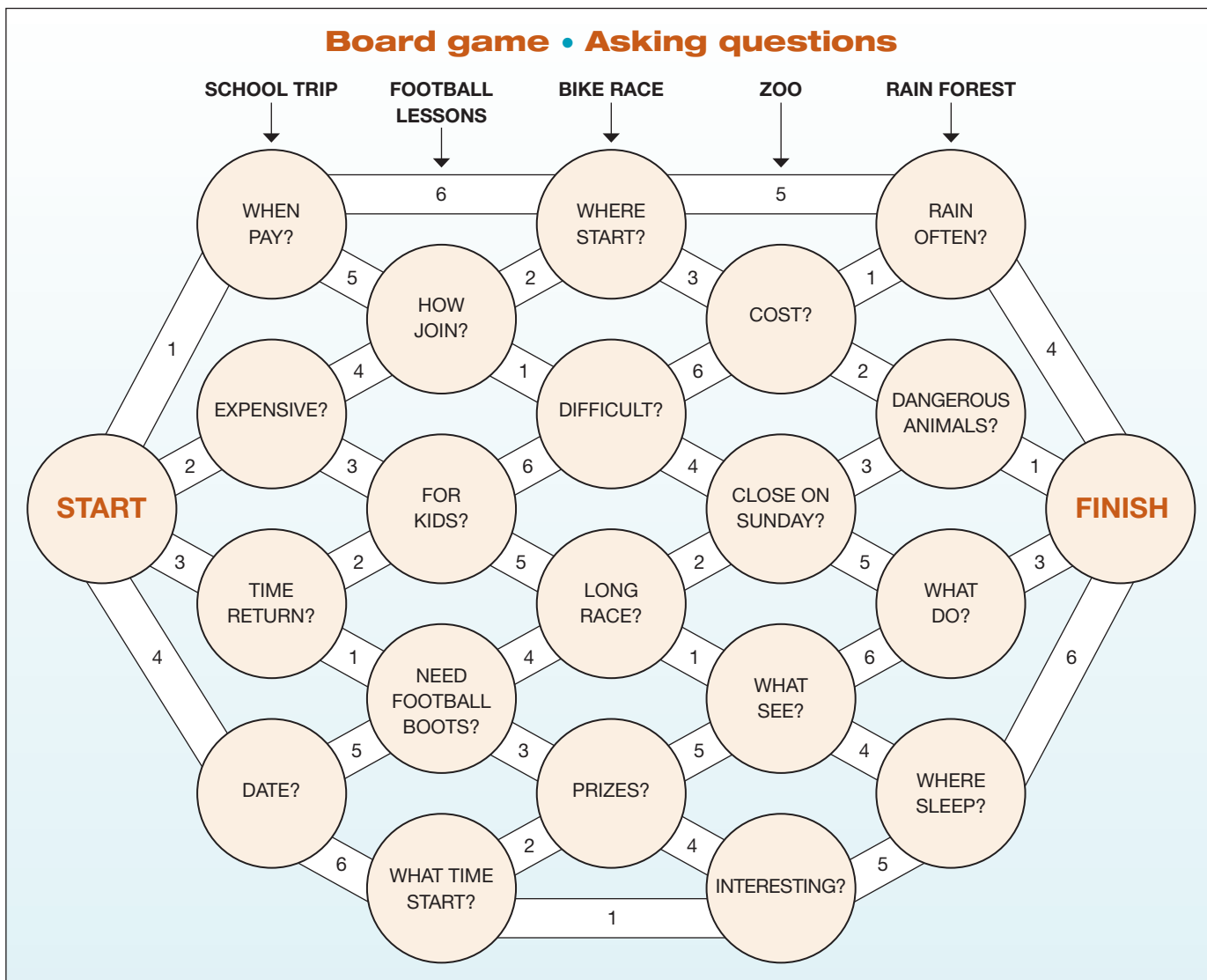
#### Student A

- \_\_\_\_\_ your parents speak French?
- \_\_\_\_\_ your birthday?
- \_\_\_\_\_ your mother afraid of spiders?
- \_\_\_\_\_ you ever late for school?
- \_\_\_\_\_ your father drink coffee?

#### Student B

- \_\_\_\_\_ your exams start?
- \_\_\_\_\_ you left-handed?
- \_\_\_\_\_ your mother listen to music?
- \_\_\_\_\_ your father tall?
- \_\_\_\_\_ you ever wear glasses?

## Board game • Asking questions



lexical sets, such as *animals, transport, food, clothes*, etc.

Pairs of learners are given a pile of flashcards with a mixture of pictures from each chosen lexical set, and six playing cards for each learner.

The object of the game is to get rid of all your cards first or hold fewer cards than your partner at the end. Write the rules on the board for the learners to refer to as they play:

- Red card = *Do/Does*
- Black card = *Is/Are/Can*
- Ace, King, Queen, Jack = Question word

Student A plays a card (eg the ace of spades) and turns over a flashcard (eg an elephant), which Student B will use to form a question.


Student B has to ask a question that is related to elephants, using *is/are/can* because the card is black, and a question

word because it is an ace. For example, the student says: *Why elephants are very big?*

The question is wrong, so Student B picks up and keeps the ace of spades.

Now it is Student B's turn to play a card for Student A to ask the question. If Student B plays the four of hearts, this requires a question with *Do/Does*, because it is a red card. Suppose the next flashcard is of a bus, and Student A asks *Do you catch the bus to school?* The question is correct, so the card stays on the desk, and the game proceeds until you have a winner.



All these activities have been trialled successfully with children. However, they can also be adapted for use with adult learners. If we aim to unlock our students' potential to become more effective communicators, questions are key. 

O'Grady, W *How Children Learn Language* CUP 2005  
 Speaking Test Preparation Pack for Key English Test CUP 2009  
 Cambridge English Key for Schools Handbook Cambridge English



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