



**Unit**

**10**

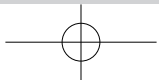
# ***Discussion Sessions (I): Asking Questions***

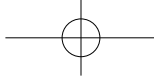
Asking and answering questions play a dominant role in academic speeches, specialized discussions, and dissertation defenses. In this unit we will discuss issues of asking questions, specifically the features of question-raisers, the features of questions, and the classification of questions.

## **Unit Objectives**

**After completing this unit, you should be able to:**

- 1** Understand the functions of asking questions in Q & A sessions
- 2** Become familiar with the features of question-raisers
- 3** Learn about the features of on-the-spot questions
- 4** Classify on-the-spot questions





## Functions of Asking Questions in Q & A Sessions

Asking questions can serve a lot of functions. For example, you may raise questions to:

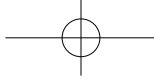
- Obtain an answer; gain an insight or increase your knowledge; gather relevant information
- Gain possible solutions to a problem
- Open a dialog; engage in a conversation
- Show interest
- Signal your presence; gain exposure in the event; demonstrate knowledge
- Encourage someone else to express themselves; verify others' capabilities; check each other's work
- Make someone think or respond in a particular way; guide audience's attention in a preferred direction
- Obtain the corresponding action implied
- Trigger a debate; challenge your peers; confirm what you know or challenge what you suspect

### Exercises and Practice

#### **1 Work in pairs and discuss the following questions.**

- 1) What other functions do you think asking questions would fulfill?
- 2) Do you like raising questions at a meeting? Why or why not?

#### **2 Suppose you were chairing a meeting, how would you encourage the listeners to raise questions? Pay attention to the functions of asking questions you have learned in this section.**



## Features of Question-raisers

### Insiders of the Profession / Field

Question-raisers in a discussion session (sometimes called a Q & A session) are often experts of a particular field with great attainments and rich experience. Even the undergraduate or graduate students in an ordinary lecture are of a certain specialty and have had careful thinking and preparation before raising their questions. In this sense, question-raisers can be considered as insiders in the particular field.

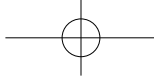
### Familiarity with the Presentation Content

Since questioners are usually those who have attended the speech session of a speaker, they are usually familiar with the presentation content of the speaker. In other words, the questioners have obtained a rather comprehensive understanding of the content, major concepts, basic ideas, specific description, and key conclusions. Therefore, questions raised by such questioners are usually in-depth, of wide range, and difficult.

### Intention of Fault-finding

Experience of many conference-goers shows that question-raisers usually tend to find the mistakes made by the presenter either in his / her manuscript or in his / her speech. This feature of question-raisers may be due to the formality of oral defense (particularly of heated discussions). In other words, questioners may specially mention the existing weak points, errors, omissions, or controversies, for example, unclear ideas, insufficient supporting materials, the confusing logic, inappropriate wording, obscure descriptions, etc.

These features give the reason why most people feel it difficult to conduct an oral defense. Answering questions, especially responding to objections before professionals can be a frightening experience. Many conference-goers feel threatened when they are made to do so.



## Features of On-the-spot Questions

### Extensiveness

When a presenter delivers a speech, he / she will definitely have a theme. However, when a presenter answers questions from a listener, he / she will find the “theme” of the questions quite extensive and diverse. Since the audience is interested in different aspects, the questions raised may cover a wide range, for example, from general scientific deliberations to the precision of a parameter, from the background of a research study to its actual applications in a specific field, etc. Obviously, questions in a discussion session are characterized by extensiveness.

### Unpredictability

Not only are questions raised by the audience extensive, but also unpredictable. Questions raised by different listeners, in most cases, are not directly related to one another. The first question asked by one person in the audience may be entirely different from or even have nothing to do with the second question raised by another person. And questions posed by different people are usually not arranged in a systematic and logical way. Therefore, the train of thought of the presenter has to follow that of the audience. This, apparently, adds difficulties to answering questions.

### Timeliness

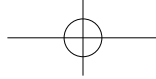
Unlike giving a memorized speech that can be repeatedly prepared beforehand, a presenter will have to answer questions raised by the audience on the spot. In this case, there will be no time to think it over and over again, and high pressure could be felt at any moment during an oral defense. That is why the very “moments” are usually considered rather pressing and not easy to deal with.

## Exercises and Practice

### 1 Work in pairs and discuss the following questions.

- 1) Are questions for a presentation predictable? Why or why not?
- 2) Apart from fault-finding questions, are there other kinds of questions that would give challenges to the presenter?

### 2 Work in groups and share your experience in raising or answering a question in an academic conference.



## Types of Questions in Q & A Sessions

During the process of a discussion session (or an oral defense), the audience may raise various kinds of questions, which, according to their motivation, purposes, and requirements, could be classified into the following types.

### Questions for Clarifying Problems

The discussion session provides the audience with an opportunity to clarify the points that they have not quite understood or that have not been fully demonstrated, to ask for some statistical information, etc. For example,

#### Ex. 10-1

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to ask Mr. ... what he refers to by getting a peak value.

#### Ex. 10-2

I don't quite understand what you really mean by saying "all these phenomena are interrelated". Can you explain it again?

#### Ex. 10-3

I would like to ask you a question, or rather, make a request. Is it possible for you to show me again your last slide?

#### Ex. 10-4

Could you please tell me how many research projects in your institute are financially supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China?

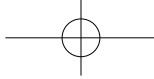
These questions, as listed above, could be labeled as "ordinary questions". In the discussion session at a conference, these ordinary questions usually make up the greatest proportion.

### Questions for Showing Special Interest

The listeners also ask questions in order to learn more details about a particular aspect, or to have a deeper understanding of a project close to their own research. This type of question requires a more detailed answer. For example,

#### Clarifying problems

- Mr. Chairman, I'd like to ask Mr. ... what...?
- I don't quite understand what you really mean by saying... Can you explain it again?
- I would like to ask you a question, or rather, make a request. Is it possible...?
- Could you please tell me how many...?



### Showing special interest

- I'm very keen on...
- I'm very much interested in... Would you please say a few more words about...?

#### Ex. 10-5

I'm **very keen on** what you say about the distance from the highest to the lowest place on the earth. **How is it** being carried out in your laboratory?

#### Ex. 10-6

I'm **very much interested in** hearing your presentation today on the Scientific Assumptions since the work we're going to start has some connections with yours. Now, **would you please say a few more words** about the tentative assumption? Particularly at its preliminary stage?

#### Ex. 10-7

We have learned from your presentation that you're going to use paraffin coatings in your newly manufactured maser. Personally, I do believe the experimental deliberation is well grounded theoretically. But **I am interested in** knowing how you have dealt with the short-term stability.

#### Ex. 10-8

It is said that your company has got in touch with the Oriental Paper Mill. Did you go to the mill first, or vice versa? **And considering** the delivery date of the said instrument, which do you prefer, September or October?

Questions of this type differ from the first category in that the purpose of the first category of question-raisers is mainly to have a few points clarified, whereas the second category is to satisfy certain special interest.

## Questions for Raising Different Opinions

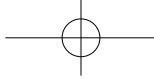
Scientific research tends to lead to different conclusions, opinions or viewpoints. Therefore, it is quite natural to find different opinions in professional discussion sessions.

#### Ex. 10-9

The last point you mentioned is something related to the subject we've been studying. I'd say **I've got some insights from your views**. **But as to your saying about...** I'm afraid that **at least** the following case seems to have been overlooked. The first point... The second point... And the last point... **Can I have your comments on that?**

#### Ex. 10-10

Perhaps we're looking at the problem from different viewpoints. **To the best of my knowledge, what you say seems to be** theoretically unclear in... For example, ... **Could you give us further explanation on that aspect?**



### Ex. 10-11

I'm of the opinion that the subject is well set forth, and the approaches to solving the problem are also reasonable. **But so far as... is concerned, I'm afraid I can't say that I go along with you on that. And I would like to hear your explanation about that.** I'm all ears.

### Ex. 10-12

If I am not mistaken, you said the higher the compression ratio was, the higher the video quality would be. **As far as I know, however,** generally the video quality should be in inverse proportion to the compression ratio. **Would you please give us some explanation about this?**

### Ex. 10-13

... I don't pretend to know much about the subject. **But I'm afraid there are other problems connected with the subject,** which have not been mentioned in your presentation. Here are some relevant examples... **And I don't know if you think so?**

### Ex. 10-14

Mr. ... **I'm very interested in** hearing your presentation on the positive analysis of efficient market hypothesis. **But to the best of my knowledge, your viewpoint** that different benchmarks (标准) will lead to different conclusions **seems to be unreasonable.** **I'm afraid that** the benchmark ought to be consistent in the whole studding horizon. **Could you give us your further explanation on that aspect?**

The above questions are raised when someone in the audience disagrees with the opinions, ideas, description, and explanation made by the presenters. These questions are normally raised in a polite and roundabout way. The questioners adopt appropriate tone and words so as to avoid unpleasant feelings.

## Questions for Comprehensive Examinations

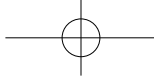
Sometimes in the discussion sessions, several questions are raised by one person that move step by step for further investigation and have internal relationships. Such questions could usually be seen in the oral defense of theses or interviews.

### Ex. 10-15

Professor: In which year did Lenin write his *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*? And what was the main idea?  
 Student: (Omitted)  
 Professor: In which year was Einstein's special theory of relativity proposed? And what

## Raising different opinions

- I've got some insights from your views. But as to your saying about... I'm afraid that at least... Can I have your comments on that?
- Perhaps we're looking at the problem from different viewpoints. To the best of my knowledge, what you say seems to be... Could you give us further explanation on that aspect?
- I'm of the opinion that... But so far as... is concerned, I'm afraid I can't say that I go along with you on that. And I would like to hear your explanation about that.
- If I am not mistaken, you said... As far as I know, however,... Would you please give us some explanation about this?
- ... I don't pretend to know much about the subject. But I'm afraid there are other problems connected with the subject, ... I don't know if you think so?
- I'm very interested in... But to the best of my knowledge, your viewpoint... seems to be unreasonable. I'm afraid that... Could you give us your further explanation on that aspect?



was the basic concept?

Student: (Omitted)

Professor: The special theory of relativity came earlier than *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* by Lenin. The findings of the former had verified one concept that was originally unscientific, and Lenin adopted more than once Einstein's idea in his *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. Why?

#### Ex. 10-16

A: In your experiment, what is the most important factor; the temperature, the pressure, the frequency or other factors?

B: (Omitted)

A: If the temperature is the most important factor, what measures will you adopt to better your system?

B: (Omitted)

A: If you are given another year to perform your experiment, which measures that you mentioned can be materialized? And which cannot? Please give us your estimation and reasons.

B: (Omitted)

#### Ex. 10-17

Thank you very much for your detailed explanation. But I still have a few more questions. Do you think this process can be industrialized? If so, when will it be industrialized? Do you think this method can completely take the place of other pollutant treatment methods?

#### Ex. 10-18

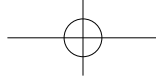
Why did you put forward that plan? How did you think of the idea? Were there any difficulties in performing the resolution? And how did you overcome the difficulties, if any?

A series of questions are raised in order to make a full investigation of all the aspects, to obtain a systematic description of the topic, and to lead the speaker to the desired answer step by step. By way of asking a series of questions related to the subject, the presenter's comprehension and ability can be comprehensively examined. That's why such questions are often heard in the oral defense of theses, dissertations or interviews.

### Questions for Information-hunting

As is known to all, an international academic conference serves both as a place for displaying research accomplishments, and as a place for exchanging information. Therefore, at a professional meeting, especially at a scientific and technological conference, there naturally exists the problem of how to completely lay bare the latest knowledge on the one hand and appropriately avoid disclosing the sensitive information on the other hand. Therefore, some of the audience might raise questions with the purpose of collecting information about detailed data, specimens, examples, specific technologies, etc.





### Ex. 10-19

Thank you very much for your patient explanation in response to my question. But I have one more question, or rather a request—**can I have a copy of your report on the gyroscope (陀螺仪)?** I'm interested in its industrial applications.

### Ex. 10-20

I have heard about your study on atmospheric propagation. **I'd like to know how many** ground stations there are in your country and in your city as well.

### Ex. 10-21

As you mentioned in your talk, you're conducting the experiments on... I'm not specialized in the subject, but I'm sure it will involve a rather complicated technological process. **Would you mind telling us more about that?**

### Ex. 10-22

We have been talking about the quality of the auto-control meters. **Well, shall we move on to** the date of the delivery?

### Ex. 10-23

**By the way, do you happen to know about** the controversial subject of genetics, which was presented at the previous session?

### Questions for information-hunting

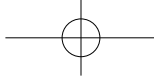
- Can I have a copy of your report on...?
- I'd like to know how many...
- Would you mind telling us more about that?
- Well, shall we move on to...?
- By the way, do you happen to know about...?

## Questions Raised Due to Other Reasons

In addition, there might be other types of questions that are not as frequently asked. For example, questions are raised to express the hope that the speaker will say something about his / her personal information; to ask for the differences between the presented paper and someone else's paper (indicating the possibility of plagiarism); to require testimony; to attract the attention of the audience to some other topics with questions; and even to nit-pick (挑剔), or to satirize, etc. These questions might be for various purposes, such as attracting attention, misleading the audience, depreciating the speaker, complicating issues, raising obstacles, etc. Obviously, the speakers should be very careful in answering this type of questions. For example,

### Ex. 10-24

You did give us a good presentation. But can you tell us the differences between the paper published in *Journal of Catalyst*, Vol. 157, pp. 87-96, 1995 and yours?



### Ex. 10-25

You have pointed out that English pervaded through the Internet. Did you think that because of the Chinese language, China could not play an important role in the network?

### Ex. 10-26

Since many companies including IBM and Microsoft are developing new versions of Data Conference tools, do you think what you do is completely useless?

Sometimes, when answering such questions, it is best to avoid answering very directly. The following are some possible answers to the questions above:

(Ex. 10-24) “I am not familiar with the paper you have mentioned. Thank you for giving me the reference. I would be happy to read it and get back to you later.”

(Ex. 10-25) “That is a good question. However, the topic of the Chinese language is very vast. I’m afraid that it is outside the limited scope of my presentation.”

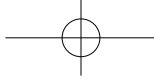
(Ex. 10-26) “Thank you for your question. Certainly IBM and Microsoft are our strongest competitors. But competition is a good thing, don’t you think so?”

## Exercises and Practice

### 1 Work in pairs and answer the following questions.

- 1) What kinds of questions are usually raised?
- 2) What kinds of questions are easy to answer? What questions are difficult to answer?
- 3) What will you do if you cannot answer the questions raised?

### 2 Work in pairs. List the questions you were asked during your presentations in the past, categorize them according to the types listed in this section and share you experience with your partner.



## Unit Summary

### [讨论环节(1): 提问]

国际学术会议中宣读专业论文和学术讨论中的提问，与日常社交或一般交谈中的提问有所不同。这里的提问具有即席答辩的性质，因为提问者具有“内行”、“知情”、“吹毛求疵”的特征。提问者的目的和动机往往因人而异，或为澄清问题，或因特殊兴趣，或为表示异议，或旨在综合考察，亦或为获取资料等。不同的发问目的和动机，形成了不同类型的提问；而不同类型的提问又具有不同的交际功能。

提问在学术演讲、专题讨论和即席答辩的交流互动中起着主导作用。提问又与讨论交流的场景、对象、内容等因素密切相关。因此，了解和熟悉专业演讲和学术讨论中提问者的基本特征，判断和区别不同类型的相关提问，把握和应用提问的语言策略和技巧，对于主动的专业交流和成功的学术答辩来说，无疑是十分重要的。

## More About Conferences

### A Closing Speech (1)

President Marion Boers, Madame Tang Wensheng, Mr. Zhu Yinghuang, Professor Martin Montgomery, distinguished guests, friends from the media, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning!

On behalf of the Federation of Translators and Interpreters of Macao (FTIM) I am honored and privileged to make the concluding speech. I have but only seven letters to share with you.

**M**

“M” stands for Macao, which has been a multilingual and multicultural space, a fabulous bridge between the East and the West.

“M” also stands for “messenger”: Translators and

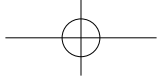
interpreters are linguistic and cultural messengers.

Last night, we crossed the new Sai Wan Bridge on our way to the banquet inside the Macao Tower, and we saw the twin MM arch. In my idiosyncratic interpretation of the arch, “MM” stands for Professor Martin Montgomery and Meifang in Macao. And this convinces me that “M” also stands for the marvelous team of the FIT Six ATF organizing committee, which has done a magnificent job, with great support from the FIT Council led by Marion but little help from Mao of FTIM.

**E**

“E” stands for “expertise” and “experience” of translation scholars and interpreters.

“E” also means exchange of views and ideas on



translation and intercultural communication. We have had an energizing forum with two exciting salons. I particularly enjoyed the interesting stories and narratives by Madame Tang and Mr. Zhu.

We also had an extremely entertaining banquet: wonderful food, wonderful wine, wonderful singing, and wonderful dancing led by Professor Martin Montgomery. Now we know the secret why professors at UMAC are such FIT people. Peter, you are still as FIT as ever.

#### I

"I" stands for informative keynote speeches and parallel sessions with insightful, interesting, and even inspiring notions, ideas, and arguments that we can all take home with us.

#### F

"F" means "fun": We are here for serious academic exchange but also for fun. I hope you have had fun both in and outside the conference rooms.

"F" refers to "fantastic venues and facilities".

"F" surely means "friendship": We have met our old friends and made new ones. Hope you have not only collected a big pile of papers and name cards but also a huge suitcase of friendship to take home, but please make sure you take your heart with you. I don't want you to go home heartless.

Needless to say that we have had great food: tea breaks, lunches, and banquet. It is once again proved that in Macao you may lose money but Macao is no place to lose weight.

#### A

"A" is for Asia: This Asian Translators' Forum has attracted over three hundred participants. I would like to once again thank all our guests, speakers, and participants from Asia, America, Africa, and other parts of the globe.

It also stands for "amazement": Over the last two days, we've had an amazing variety of topics on and approaches to translation and intercultural communication as well as agreements and differences on many of these issues.

#### N

"N" means "new": new friends, new ideas for a

new start.

It also stands for "next": At the forum, we have been talking about the past, present and future of intercultural communication. We came with ideas and expectations, we saw friendly and professional debates, and we conquered our fear of being inadequate as a translator and interpreter. Indeed, we came, we saw, we conquered. Now we need to think about "What's next?" "Where do we go from here?" "What do we expect to achieve in the coming three years before our next conference in Malaysia?" And "What specific measures do we need to take in order to reach our objectives?" To act or not to act, that's not the question.

#### G

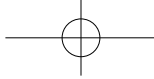
"G" implies "graft": Macao is a hybrid space in terms of language, culture, and identity. The metaphor of hybridity originates from gardening. A skillful gardener can graft one part of a plant onto another plant, creating new varieties, such as a differently-colored rose, or a fruit that has the characteristics of both an apple and a pear. Macao is like such a rose or an apple-pear. All the parts of its make-up, which have been grafted into its cultural blend, become embraced as integral parts of a new whole which we call "Macao". Macao's core identity is like the seed from which the whole flower blooms or the whole new fruit grows. It is the product of hybridity which is the most significant part of the whole because it contains the potential for future growth.

Finally "G" stands for "gratitude", gratitude to you all: (1) gratitude to guests of honor, keynote speakers, presenters, participants, for a job well done; (2) gratitude to Macao Foundation for its much needed financial support; (3) gratitude to the University of Macau, teachers and students; and (4) gratitude to fellows of FTIM.

**M-E-I-F-A-N-G means MEIFANG ("美芳")**

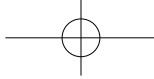
Therefore my special thanks go to (Prof. Zhang) Meifang and her colleagues. "Mei" means "beautiful", and "fang" means "fragrant". I hope you have had a beautiful forum and a nice dose of fragrant Macao.

Ladies and gentlemen, have a memorable cultural tour this afternoon, and see you in Malaysia in 2013.



## Reflections and Further Study

- 1** Work in groups of four or five. First, each of you chooses one topic and spends a few minutes thinking about it. Then, suppose all of you have just finished a presentation on the chosen topic and now are expecting questions. Student A tells the group about his / her topic and the rest of the group may ask questions regarding the topic. When Student A finishes answering the questions, Student B does the same. So do the rest of the group. Try to raise questions for different purposes discussed in this unit.
- 2** Interview a veteran participant of international conferences or press conferences or other formal professional discussions. Find whether he / she has been asked any rebuking questions or sensitive questions. And if the answer is yes, how did he / she deal with them?



## Simulated Conference Preparation

### Q & A Contest (1)

Work in groups. Read the following speech.

... In fact, men are the weaker sex. The female of almost any species is stronger than the male. Dr. James Hamilton, a physician, shows that from worms to humans the male is less able to tolerate life's everyday stresses. "There can be little doubt that the male had a higher death rate in almost all forms of animal life studied." Even during the first week of life, the death rate for infant males is 32 percent greater than that of females. Later on in life the society puts strain on the man to compete, produce, and succeed; this also affects the survival rate. True, many women do experience some discomfort each month during menstruation; some even are quite ill for a day or two. But most women do not suffer with any reactions. Federal surveys in every job category show that women take off the same amount of time from work as men. Although crying is often another "proof" of a woman's difference from man, United States Public Health data show that females have a much lower suicide rate—less than half that of males. Isn't it better to cry? And there are no sex differences in regard to IQ (intelligence quotient). On all forms of intelligence tests the female's IQ is not significantly different from the male's. Women are, in my opinion, biologically superior to men.

Women are actually superior in the most fundamental qualities. Of course, men are more muscular, but both the actuarial statistics and the accounts of extended hardship show that women have more physical endurance. Pictures of women runners at the end of marathons show them still in a good shape while the men are collapsing, though both have given their best. The men have run faster, but the women have outlasted the men just as they will in the race of life. Women are also immune to a number of sex-linked diseases, which, like hemophilia (血友病), they carry while the men succumb. Women have achieved less in the arts and sciences, but actually their brains are bigger in proportion to their weight. Clearly, they have had less time and motivation to compete.

Try to raise at least five questions with different purposes or reasons and give your possible answers. Your group leader will chair the meeting. Student A raises his / her first question (now he / she is supposed to be a listener of the speech) to Student B in your group, Student B (now he / she is supposed to be a speaker of the speech) gives his / her answer to Student A's question. After Student B finishes answering the question, it is Student B's turn to raise his / her question to Student C. So do the rest of the group. Choose at least five more professional and tactful questions and answers for the contest. Use the questioning techniques you have learned in this unit.