Study Speaking
A course in spoken English for academic purposes

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INFORMATION TASK: DEPARTMENTAL ORGANISATION

Partner A

Your partner has an incomplete diagram showing the way teaching is organised in a university department. From the text below select the information that you think will help them to complete the diagram.

Departmental teaching is organised into three main areas: courses for undergraduates, courses for postgraduates, and supervision for research students. In the case of undergraduate teaching, the day-to-day running of courses is in the hands of a Director of Studies, who works with a number of tutors. Postgraduate taught courses such as Master's courses are the responsibility of a Course Director, assisted by staff in the role of tutors (teaching small groups) or supervisors (when advising students individually on course assignments). Postgraduate students doing a research degree work with a supervisor (or sometimes two), whose job it is to provide overall guidance rather than detailed instruction.

There are no strict divisions between academic staff in these three areas. The same person might, for example, both teach on undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and also supervise research students. The person with ultimate responsibility for all teaching areas is the Head of Department, and it is to them that you can go for help if you are dissatisfied with any of the teaching you receive.
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SCENARIO:    POSTPONING AN ESSAY

Group A: Student

You are working on an essay which has to be handed in by tomorrow, Friday. Although you are normally well-organised and have worked hard on this particular essay, you now realise that you will not get it finished on time.

Your main problem has been that you needed to use data on your home country, which is available only in one book. When you looked for it in the library, it was out on loan. You asked for the book to be recalled, but it came back only yesterday. You need time to analyse and report on the data, and you think it will take you at least another two days to complete the essay.

Unfortunately, your tutor is well-known for being very strict about deadlines. Also, you had to ask for an extension once before when you were ill, and you are embarrassed to ask again. How can you best ask for the deadline to be extended until Monday?

SEMINAR SKILLS: QUESTIONING

Speakers are expected to allow time at the end of their presentation for questions and discussion. Many people would say that this question-and-answer stage is at least as important as the initial presentation. However, questioning can be a problematic aspect of seminar performance. Often the speaker misunderstands a question (and not only when the questioner is a non-native speaker), because the point is lost in an over-long sentence.

A practical solution is to keep your question short. Don’t forget that the presenter may not be sure, when you start to speak, that you are asking a question – you might be wanting to disagree. So you need to make clear:

Example:

a) that it’s a question    ‘I have a question . . .
b) what the topic is      . . . about assessment on the course.
c) what the point is      What is the overall balance between the examinations and the project work?’

Discussion point 1

It is sometimes suggested that the speaker should repeat or summarise each question asked from the audience, before beginning to give an answer. Why is this advice given?
Discussion point 2
Questions and answers are not always straightforward. The speaker who is asked a question by a listener may understand the question but be unable (or unwilling) to give an answer, in which case, they may avoid giving a direct answer. Below are some examples. Can you think of others?

Avoiding an answer

(X) is important but it's too complex for us to deal with here.
I think we have to focus on (Y) rather than (X).
It's too early for us to say whether . . .
We don't have enough evidence to show that . . .
That's not something I've had time to deal with, but . . .

Discussion point 3
The listener may want to say that the answer they have received is inadequate:

Following up a question

That's not really what I was asking. My question was about . . .
Perhaps I didn't make my question clear. In fact what I asked was . . .
I think you've answered a slightly different question.
I've understood that but what I actually had in mind was . . .

These expressions are relatively polite and formal. What words could you omit from each example to make them more direct? What type of words are they?

Speaking

Stage 1: Preparation
The basis for the practice in questioning will be a five to ten minute talk on the organisation and methods of a university course that you have attended. You could select from: the type of teaching (lecture, seminar, tutorial); the way the course was structured (compulsory subjects, options, individual research); access to the teaching staff; the problems you encountered (which might range from the teaching style of specific lecturers to the scarcity of suitable library materials); and so on.

For the purpose of this talk, leave out any problems to do with the content of the course; concentrate on the structure and methods.

Stage 2: Presentation
Working with two partners, take turns in giving your talk and taking notes. As before, the listeners should ask questions at the end, but this time pay particular attention to the way that you ask the questions (listener) and answer them (speaker). You can refer back to the expressions given under the Discussion points.
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Stage 3: Evaluation

Listener  Did you understand the answers?
          Were they appropriate to the question you had asked?
          Were you satisfied with the answers?

Speaker  Did you understand the point of the questions?
          Did you have answers? If so, were you able to present them
          clearly?
          If not, did you admit you didn’t know, or did you manage to
          avoid an answer?

Summary
The question-and-answer stage is important but can be frustrating if the
questioner does not make clear the scope or point of their question. Speakers
can help themselves (and the audience) by summarising questions in order to
confirm or highlight the topic for the next part of the discussion.