



The Question Ladder: Cumulative Speaking Practice in EFL Classrooms

Lusine Issayan

AVC Language Academy, Yerevan, Armenia

Corresponding Author Email: lusine.issayan@avcacademy.com

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Abstract

Some learners who can answer brief questions in English hesitate when asked to sustain a longer turn. The Question Ladder is a cumulative speaking technique in which each prompt retains the meaning of the learner's previous response and adds one new communicative element. This article defines the technique, distinguishes it from independent questioning, build-up drills, and conventional task repetition, and reports an exploratory practitioner account of approximately six months of classroom use with about 23 learners at a private language centre in Yerevan, Armenia. Classroom observations showed different routes into participation: some learners needed modelling or additional support, some began requesting ladders on self-selected topics after two or three sessions, and basic ladders appeared insufficiently challenging for more advanced learners. For teaching, the technique is best treated as adjustable support that can be simplified, extended, and gradually faded toward less prompted speaking. Its contribution is a clearly specified cumulative design that combines learner-generated content, incremental extension, and planned withdrawal of support. As the inquiry used no comparison condition, validated anxiety measure, or systematic speech analysis, these observations do not establish effectiveness or language gains; transfer to independent speaking remains a question for further research.

1. Introduction

A learner may know enough English to answer a short question and still find an invitation to speak at length difficult. The challenge involves more than retrieving vocabulary. The learner must decide what to say, organise it, formulate sentences, and continue speaking while anticipating a listener's response. When these demands arrive together, a task intended to encourage communication can become an occasion for silence.

This difficulty informed my development of the Question Ladder. In my teaching, I wanted a way for learners to begin with language they could already produce and extend it without having to construct an entire response at once. The resulting activity uses a sequence of cumulative prompts. A learner first gives a brief response, then repeats its content with one addition, and continues in this way through a short sequence. The earlier response provides material for the next turn.

The technique responds to a problem of task design rather than to an inherent weakness in discussion, role play, or presentation. Such activities can be accessible when teachers prepare learners appropriately. The question is how to provide that preparation when even a short speaking turn is difficult. The Question Ladder offers one possible intermediate step between a brief answer and an extended contribution.

Its intended benefits are both linguistic and affective. Repeated use of familiar language may leave more attention available for the next addition, while a predictable sequence may

make participation feel more manageable. These are proposed explanations for the design, and they require investigation.

Research Gap and Contribution

Existing work provides strong accounts of scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976; Gibbons, 2015), classroom questioning (Long & Sato, 1983; Lee, 2006), and oral task repetition (Suzuki, 2021; Kobayashi, 2022; Hunter, 2024). However, these strands do not by themselves specify a compact speaking routine in which learner-generated content is retained and extended one communicative element at a time. Scaffolding explains how support can be adjusted, questioning research examines what questions do in interaction, and task-repetition research commonly examines repeated performance of complete tasks. Build-up drills can accumulate language, but the text is supplied for reproduction rather than generated by the learner (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). The gap addressed here is therefore practical and design-oriented: a clearly specified cumulative prompt structure that combines learner-generated meaning, minimal incremental extension, repetition within an expanding message, and planned fading toward less-supported speaking. The defining feature is the combination of these elements within one routine. This article does not claim historical priority or superiority for that configuration; it makes the design explicit enough for teachers to adapt and for researchers to test.

Against this background, this article has two aims: first, to specify the Question Ladder and its distinguishing design features precisely enough for teachers to adapt and researchers to test; and second, to provide an exploratory account of its use in general English classes at a private language centre in Yerevan, Armenia. The account draws on classroom observations, informal learner comments, and teaching reflections gathered over approximately six months. The discussion centres on how learners entered the activity, how they began to influence its content, and how responses differed across proficiency levels. The evidence supports a description of practice and the development of research questions; it does not support an estimate of effectiveness.

Research Questions

RQ1. What patterns of learner participation, topic choice, and level-related engagement became apparent during classroom implementation of the Question Ladder?

RQ2. How did these observations inform subsequent adaptations of the technique and identify priorities for further research?

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Foundations

Speaking Anxiety and the Conditions of Participation

Horwitz et al. (1986) describe foreign language classroom anxiety as a form of anxiety associated with language learning, involving concerns about communication, evaluation, and performance. Their account helps explain why a learner's difficulty speaking cannot always be inferred from what that learner knows about the language. Young's (1991) review similarly directs attention to classroom practices and interpersonal conditions that can make language use uncomfortable.

For the present technique, the relevant implication is that the organisation of a speaking task deserves attention alongside its linguistic content. A first turn that is short and familiar may be easier to attempt than a request for a complete account. However, brevity does not guarantee comfort. A learner may find even a simple prompt difficult when speaking publicly, responding to an unfamiliar teacher, or discussing personal information.

The ladders presented here use direct questions, beginning with a manageable question such as "What is your name?" Support comes from the cumulative sequence and its delivery rather than from a prescribed opening phrase. Tone, topic, wait time, correction practices, and the learner's relationship with the audience can affect how a question is received. The question

wording is a revision of the original classroom prompts; its effects have not been evaluated separately from the implementation described below.

Recent research reinforces the need to treat affective participation as contextual and dynamic rather than to infer a stable state from a single classroom behaviour. Alamri and Qasem (2024), for example, report multiple perceived causes of foreign language speaking anxiety in an EFL setting, while Sun et al. (2025), in a systematic review of longitudinal research, conclude that foreign language anxiety can vary across time and is studied most adequately when repeated measurements capture that variability. Related work on willingness to communicate also shows marked within-task fluctuation associated with linguistic, motivational, affective, interlocutor, topic, and group-atmosphere factors (Li et al., 2024). These findings support a cautious interpretation of the present classroom observations: hesitation, participation, and apparent comfort may be informative for teaching decisions, but none can serve by itself as a measure of anxiety.

Scaffolding and Contingent Support

Vygotsky's (1978) distinction between independent and assisted performance provides a useful starting point for considering the ladder. Wood et al. (1976) described how tutoring can support a learner in managing a task that would otherwise exceed the learner's unaided capacity. In classroom language teaching, Gibbons (2015) examines how support can connect learners' current resources with more demanding participation.

The ladder places part of that support in the sequence itself. Earlier content remains available as the learner attempts an addition. Yet a sequence is not appropriately scaffolded simply because it has small steps. Its value depends on whether those steps respond to the particular learner. A prompt that adds one item on paper may require several unfamiliar decisions in speech.

Teacher judgement therefore remains central. A learner may need more time, a word supplied, an example, or a shorter sequence. Another may be ready to move beyond the ladder. The structure becomes useful support when it is adjusted in response to performance and reduced when it is no longer needed. Completing progressively longer responses within the activity is evidence of assisted performance; independent speaking must be examined separately.

Contemporary research likewise illustrates that scaffolded speaking does not produce a single, uniform developmental outcome. Li and Zhang (2023), following learners across a semester of online scaffolding, found different trajectories for speaking accuracy, fluency, and self-efficacy. Although their context and intervention differ substantially from the Question Ladder, the study is useful methodologically: it shows why improvements in one dimension of supported performance should not be assumed to generalise automatically to other dimensions. For the ladder, this reinforces the importance of separating immediate task completion from later independent performance.

Output and Repeated Practice

Swain's (1985) account of comprehensible output gives language production a role in learning. Producing a response can require learners to work out how to express meanings that they might understand without being able to formulate themselves. A ladder provides repeated occasions for this work: learners reuse an existing response while deciding how to incorporate another meaning.

The literature on second language practice collected in DeKeyser (2007) also offers a rationale for examining repeated production. As familiar language becomes easier to retrieve, attention may become available for other aspects of a task. Whether this occurs during ladder practice, and whether it persists afterwards, cannot be determined from impressions of smoother participation alone.

Cognitive load theory provides a further reason to consider the amount of new processing required at each step (Sweller, 1988). Retaining familiar content may reduce some demands

associated with planning a response afresh. At the same time, the growing response must be remembered and coordinated. A long ladder could therefore become increasingly burdensome. Adding one element at a time is a design constraint, not a guarantee that cognitive demand remains low.

These distinctions matter when interpreting spoken output. A response can become longer through the addition of simple clauses without becoming more syntactically complex. Likewise, fluent repetition of a familiar sequence does not establish fluency in a new conversation. The technique creates opportunities for extended production; the quality and transfer of that production are empirical questions.

Recent task-repetition research provides a more specific empirical context for this proposal. Studies have found that repeating oral tasks can support aspects of fluency, but outcomes depend on repetition schedule, the degree to which content is repeated, and whether gains transfer beyond the practised task (Suzuki, 2021; Kobayashi, 2022; Suzuki et al., 2022; Hunter, 2024). Hunter (2024), for instance, found fluency changes during same-task rather than parallel-task repetition in a classroom speaking activity, while Suzuki et al. (2022) linked reuse of linguistic constructions during task repetition to aspects of fluency development. The Question Ladder is not equivalent to conventional task repetition: the learner does not simply perform the same complete task again, but carries forward earlier meanings while extending the message. The repetition literature therefore provides a rationale for examining the design, not evidence that the ladder will produce the same effects.

Questioning and Meaningful Content

Long and Sato's (1983) distinction between display and referential questions directs attention to whether the teacher already knows the requested information. Lee (2006) further demonstrates the importance of examining what questions accomplish within classroom interaction. Question form alone does not determine the quality of the exchange.

The Question Ladder's defining feature is the relationship between successive learner-generated responses. It differs from a sequence of independent questions because earlier meanings must be retained rather than left behind. It differs from a build-up drill, of the kind documented in accounts of audiolingual practice (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), because the accumulating content is generated by the learner rather than supplied for reproduction. It also differs from conventional task repetition because the learner does not repeat the same complete task; repetition occurs inside an expanding message as one new communicative demand is added at each rung. These distinctions identify the technique's design contribution, not historical priority or superiority. Cumulative elements occur in other practices, and comparative research would be needed to determine whether this particular configuration offers advantages over alternative forms of support.

The choice of content is equally consequential. Norton's (2000) work on identity and investment offers a way to consider why learners may want access to some topics and forms of participation more than others. A prompt can be linguistically accessible yet offer little the learner wants to say. Allowing learners to propose topics gives them some influence over the purpose of the activity. Personal relevance, however, should not be equated with personal disclosure: a shared interest or imagined situation may be more appropriate than autobiographical information.

3. The Question Ladder in Practice

The Cumulative Structure

Each ladder begins with a response the learner can reasonably attempt. The next prompt includes the earlier content and adds one new element. The learner then produces an expanded response. This process continues for as long as the additions remain useful and manageable.

Cumulative retention concerns meaning. Learners do not need to reproduce every word identically; they can alter phrasing, combine clauses, or use several sentences while preserving

the earlier information. Treating the activity as exact recitation would change its purpose and might direct attention away from communication.

The following sequence illustrates the basic design. It is an instructional example, not a transcript of participant speech. Although intended for beginner and elementary learners, its suitability depends on the language already available to a particular group.

1. What is your name?
2. What is your name, and how old are you?
3. What is your name, how old are you, and where are you from?
4. What is your name, how old are you, where are you from, and what do you like?
5. What is your name, how old are you, where are you from, what do you like, and what can you do?
6. What is your name, how old are you, where are you from, what do you like, what can you do, and what is something special about you?

The final response brings together several pieces of information that might otherwise have been elicited separately. It resembles part of a personal introduction, but the resemblance does not demonstrate transfer to an unfamiliar social situation. The last prompt is also substantially more open than the first. A teacher may need to replace it with a concrete addition, offer examples, or stop earlier. Learners should be able to omit sensitive details or use an invented profile.

Adjusting the Demands

The same cumulative structure can organise a more demanding topic. The following work-related sequence, proposed for learners around B2, illustrates possible adaptation. The level designation is a planning guide, not a validated difficulty rating. Each question retains all earlier elements and adds one new demand.

1. What is your job?
2. What is your job, and why did you choose it?
3. What is your job, why did you choose it, and what does a typical workday look like?
4. What is your job, why did you choose it, what does a typical workday look like, and what do you find most rewarding about it?
5. What is your job, why did you choose it, what does a typical workday look like, what do you find most rewarding about it, and what do you find most challenging?
6. What is your job, why did you choose it, what does a typical workday look like, what do you find most rewarding about it, what do you find most challenging, and what skills have you developed through it?
7. What is your job, why did you choose it, what does a typical workday look like, what do you find most rewarding about it, what do you find most challenging, what skills have you developed through it, and how has your understanding of good work changed since you started?
8. What is your job, why did you choose it, what does a typical workday look like, what do you find most rewarding about it, what do you find most challenging, what skills have you developed through it, how has your understanding of good work changed since you started, and what would you tell your younger self about choosing a career?

The later additions invite explanation, comparison over time, and hypothetical reflection. Their demands differ from adding a name or place. The increasingly long questions also place demands on listening and memory. Eight rungs may be excessive for some learners even when the individual topics are familiar; the example shows how content can develop, not a required endpoint. Teachers can stop earlier or provide written questions when appropriate.

Four Design Principles

Cumulative retention defines the activity. Each response preserves earlier meanings while incorporating the next addition. The teacher listens for that continuity without requiring a single prescribed formulation.

Minimal incremental extension limits each new prompt to one additional element. “One element” refers to a communicative addition, not to a uniform quantity of grammatical difficulty. Giving a reason may be harder than naming a preference. Teachers need to judge the demand in relation to what learners can already say.

Personal relevance guides the selection of topics. Learners may want to discuss interests, experiences, or possible futures, but relevance must be established with them. Technology, food, a fictional character, or a local place can provide meaningful content without requiring disclosure about family circumstances or personal identity.

Teacher responsiveness governs pace, assistance, and duration. A teacher can repeat a rung, supply limited support, change an addition, or end the sequence. The purpose is to sustain useful speaking practice. Finishing every prepared prompt is secondary to that purpose.

In the implementation described here, correction was generally deferred until after the sequence to preserve continuity. This was a teaching choice rather than a consequence that follows necessarily from anxiety theory. Learners may need immediate help when communication breaks down, and responses to correction vary. Brief, selective feedback after the task can provide an opportunity to reconsider recurring difficulties without turning every rung into an accuracy test.

Returning to a Familiar Ladder

A ladder can also be revisited after further work on its vocabulary or grammar. The first encounter provides supported practice; a later encounter allows learners to attempt the same meanings with the resources then available to them. Teachers can invite reflection on what feels easier and what remains difficult, drawing on the broader idea of metacognitive monitoring discussed by Flavell (1979).

This proposed use should be distinguished from an assessment of learning. A stronger second performance may reflect memory for the sequence, topic familiarity, intervening instruction, or several influences together. Comparison can support classroom reflection, but it cannot establish progress beyond the practised task without additional evidence. The present inquiry did not systematically evaluate this repeated-encounter approach.

4. Methodology

Research Design: An Exploratory Practitioner Account

I developed the Question Ladder through several years of classroom experimentation. The observations discussed here concern approximately six months of its use in regular general English courses at a private language centre in Yerevan, across classes enrolling approximately 23 learners in total. The classes included learners of different ages and proficiency levels, reflecting the centre’s ordinary enrolment rather than a sample selected for a planned study.

The inquiry shares the concern of classroom action research with examining and revising practice (Burns, 2010). Its origins were instructional, however, and it did not follow a fully specified research protocol. It is therefore presented as an exploratory practitioner account. The account asks what responses became apparent during implementation and how those responses informed subsequent teaching decisions.

My roles as designer, teacher, and observer provided close access to the activity but also shaped what I noticed. I had an interest in the technique’s usefulness and may have attended more readily to encouraging responses. Acknowledging this position, in keeping with qualitative attention to researcher perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), does not remove that influence. It helps define how the account should be read.

Implementation and Sources of Observation

One or more ladders were used as part of speaking practice across multiple class sessions. I selected or adapted the prompts according to lesson themes and my judgement of learners' readiness. Some adjustments occurred during the activity when a prompt proved difficult or a different direction seemed more appropriate.

The account draws on ongoing teaching observations, informal learner comments, and reflections recorded after sessions. Attention was given to hesitation, voluntary participation, responses to particular topics, and the support learners appeared to need. Spontaneous requests for new topics became especially relevant as the activity developed.

No standardised observation schedule, validated anxiety measure, or pre- and post-test procedure was used. The account does not provide a formal coding protocol or independent analysis. The observations below are organised around recurring concerns in the teaching reflections; they should not be read as categories established through a documented thematic analysis.

Ethical and Evidential Limits

The figure given above is an approximate count of enrolment in the classes concerned, not a research sample recruited for this account, and a detailed breakdown of ages and proficiency levels is not available. Formal research consent procedures were not in place when the activity was introduced. No personally identifiable learner data were recorded or retained, and the article presents general patterns rather than individual cases or attributed quotations.

These conditions limit the report. The absence of identifiable data does not resolve the ethical questions involved in publishing classroom observations, and this account makes no claim to prior ethical approval. Any subsequent study would require appropriate review and consent arrangements before research data collection, including provisions relevant to younger learners.

The evidence also lacks a comparison condition, systematic speech analysis, and follow-up beyond the implementation period. Changes observed during the period concerned could reflect ordinary course progression, growing familiarity with the teacher or peers, other classroom activities, or the novelty of the ladder. A six-month window makes ordinary course progression a particularly strong alternative explanation. The mixed enrolment makes patterns across learners harder to interpret, but it is the design as a whole that prevents causal attribution. The account cannot determine how much anxiety changed, whether language learning occurred, or whether the technique was more useful than another form of supported speaking.

5. Results and Discussion

Different Routes Into Participation

Initial responses varied. Some learners began readily and continued with apparent enthusiasm. Others gave minimal responses and watched their peers before participating more fully. Some remained hesitant and needed additional encouragement or individual support during the initial session.

The first rung offered a relatively limited speaking demand, but it did not make participation equally easy for everyone. For some learners, watching peers complete the sequence appeared to precede greater willingness to attempt it themselves. The observations cannot establish why this occurred. Familiarity with the procedure, access to a model, reassurance, or simple additional preparation time are all possible explanations.

The practical consequence was to allow more than one route into the activity. Immediate public participation was not a reliable indication of who could benefit, and hesitation could not be interpreted as a direct measure of anxiety. A learner's pace of entry needed to inform the support offered.

Learners Began Requesting Their Own Topics

After two or three sessions, learners began asking for ladders on subjects they wanted to discuss. Technology and social media were prominent among these requests. This was the clearest change in how learners approached the activity: they were beginning to influence its content rather than only responding to prompts I had prepared.

The requests suggested that at least some learners had recognised the structure as something they could use for their own communicative interests. Norton's (2000) account of investment provides one possible interpretation of this connection between desired content and participation. The behaviour itself, however, does not establish an increase in intrinsic motivation or a reduction in anxiety. Learners might have been expressing interest in the topics, asking for variety, or responding to the novelty of being able to shape an activity.

The importance of topic choice also has support in recent work on classroom willingness to communicate. Li et al. (2024) show that willingness to communicate can shift during a single group task and can be affected by topic, interlocutors, and the immediate classroom atmosphere. That evidence makes learner-selected content a plausible variable for future Question Ladder research, but it does not justify re-labelling the requests observed here as measured increases in willingness to communicate.

What the requests did establish within my teaching was a reason to consult learners more directly. Their preferred subjects were more informative than my assumptions about what would interest them. Subsequent prompt selection could therefore draw on an expressed wish to speak, while retaining the cumulative structure. The two- or three-session interval describes the observation in this setting; it should not become a prescribed schedule for learner involvement.

Basic Ladders Offered Less Challenge to Advanced Learners

More advanced learners generally completed the cumulative responses without difficulty, but their participation appeared less enthusiastic than that of learners for whom the basic sequence was more demanding. There was less spontaneous elaboration and less visible investment in extending the activity.

One interpretation is that the basic ladders offered insufficient challenge. Other explanations remain possible, including topic preference, discomfort with repetition, or differences in how enthusiasm was expressed. The observations do not establish an optimal proficiency range, and compliance should not be taken as evidence that learners experienced no frustration.

This pattern is better described as a possible mismatch between task demands and learner resources than as a measured ceiling effect. No assessment instrument was used that could establish such an effect. The instructional response is to reconsider the demands: a learner may need an addition requiring explanation or qualification, a shorter cumulative phase, or a move to a less structured task. Adding more rungs alone may increase repetition without creating a worthwhile challenge.

6. Implications for Teaching

Adapting by Proficiency Level

The Question Ladder is most useful when a learner can already produce a short response but needs support in extending it. The same cumulative principle can be used across proficiency levels, but the amount of support, the type of addition, and the speed at which support is withdrawn should change. The level labels below are planning guides rather than validated thresholds.

For beginner learners (approximately A1–A2), teachers can use three to five short rungs built around concrete, familiar content and high-frequency language. The full question sequence can remain visible, and the teacher can model the first response, provide a small word bank, allow brief rehearsal, or supply a word when communication breaks down. Additions

should usually ask for one manageable piece of information: a place, action, preference, or simple reason rather than an abstract explanation. If the cumulative question becomes difficult to follow, shortening the ladder is preferable to requiring completion.

For intermediate learners (approximately B1–B2), the ladder can shift from naming and describing toward explaining, comparing, justifying, and connecting events across time. Written prompts can be reduced to key phrases after the pattern is understood, and learners can work with partners who listen specifically for the new information added at each rung. At this level, four to six rungs may be sufficient; the aim is not to make the question longer for its own sake but to increase the communicative demand while keeping earlier meaning available.

For advanced learners (approximately C1 and above), a long cumulative sequence may become unnecessarily repetitive. A shorter ladder can instead prepare a more demanding task by adding qualification, counterargument, hypothetical alternatives, evidence, or synthesis. After two or three supported additions, the teacher can move quickly to an unscripted follow-up question, discussion, or mini-presentation. The classroom observation that basic ladders appeared less engaging for more advanced learners supports using the structure as a brief launch rather than as the whole speaking task for this group.

Fading Support Toward Independent Speaking

Across levels, the key progression is from supported performance toward independent speaking. One practical sequence is to complete the ladder first with full written questions and teacher support; then repeat or adapt it with only key words or shortened prompts visible; next, give prompts orally with minimal assistance; and finally ask for a short account on the same or a related topic without the cumulative sequence, preferably with a new partner or audience. Teachers can move forward, pause, or return to an earlier stage according to performance. This fading sequence is a pedagogical recommendation arising from the design rather than a procedure evaluated in the present inquiry.

Topic choice should be negotiated where possible. A learner's request for a particular subject can inform prompt design, while an option to use fictional or impersonal content protects choice about disclosure. A ladder that is personally meaningful for one learner may be unwelcome for another.

Listeners also need a reason to attend to repeated content. In pair or group work, one learner can listen for the new information added at each rung and respond to it after the sequence. This is a proposed classroom adaptation, not a procedure evaluated in the present inquiry; its purpose is to preserve attention to meaning when much of the language is already familiar.

7. Directions for Research

A subsequent study should document participants, instructional conditions, implementation frequency, and the assistance offered at each rung. It should also distinguish anxiety, willingness to participate, and observed speaking behaviour. These are related concerns, but one cannot serve automatically as a measure of another. A suitable anxiety instrument would need to fit the learners and the research question; the FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) addresses foreign language classroom anxiety more broadly than the experience of a single activity.

Recorded speech, gathered with appropriate consent, would allow separate examination of response length, syntactic complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Analysis should distinguish the final rung from an independent speaking task. Longer cumulative responses are expected by design; the more consequential question is whether learners gain resources they can use when the sequence is absent.

A useful comparison would hold topic, speaking time, and teacher attention as similar as practicable while comparing cumulative prompts with prompts that elicit independent responses. Another could compare the ladder with a different form of scaffolded speaking. Such designs would begin to examine the contribution of cumulative retention rather than treating every aspect of the classroom experience as an effect of the technique.

Learner accounts should have a place alongside performance measures. Interviews or brief reflections could investigate whether repetition feels supportive, tedious, or increasingly difficult, and how learners experience the wording and length of cumulative questions. Requests for personalised topics merit closer attention, including how participation changes after a requested topic is introduced.

Follow-up work is needed to examine transfer and the withdrawal of support. The staged progression proposed above—from full written ladders, to reduced cues, to minimally prompted production, and then to an independent speaking task—could be tested directly. Returning to an earlier ladder could also be examined as a reflective practice. Neither approach should be assumed to produce lasting gains on the basis of improved performance with familiar material.

8. Conclusion

The Question Ladder organises speaking around cumulative responses: learners retain what they have already expressed while incorporating a manageable addition. Its contribution is to specify a classroom design in which the accumulating content belongs to the learner, each new communicative demand is limited, and support can be deliberately faded. The technique therefore gives teachers a way to adjust the distance between an initial response and a longer turn while keeping transfer to independent speaking as a separate outcome to be examined.

In the setting described here, learners entered the activity at different rates, some began requesting their own topics, and basic sequences appeared to offer less to advanced learners. The emergence of topic requests was particularly useful because it gave learners a role in shaping what the structure enabled them to say.

The next step is to examine these possibilities with a design that can distinguish supported participation from learning. The central question is whether learners become better able, and more willing, to speak when the ladder is no longer there.

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