

Short Answers Outside of the Spotlight

Our beginning and high-beginning textbooks are chock-full of short answers like these:

Q1: *Do you like cats?* A1: *Yes, I do.*
Q2: *Are you going home?* A2: *Yes, I am.*

But what about short answers like the following, where it's the subject, not the predicate, that contains new information:

Q3: *Does anyone need a pencil?* A3: *I do.*
Q4: *Who drew this?* A4: *I did.*

This sort of short answer, where the focus is on the subject, is very infrequently found in our textbooks.¹ This poster, in a nutshell, is just a call for more attention to short answers like A3 and A4.

Some terminology

Yes/No-sub-AUX = Yes or No + subject + auxiliary
examples: A1 and A2 above

SUB-aux = subject + auxiliary
examples: A3 and A4 above

I'm using all-caps in AUX and SUB to indicate that those parts of the responses are carrying new information and are therefore stressed.²

Why do SUB-aux short answers deserve attention?

- **They aren't stilted.** Try acting out the four dialogs at the start of this poster. If you're like most people, responses A3 and A4 will feel more natural than A1 and A2. This is because SUB-aux answers like A3 and A4 are a very common way to respond to questions like Q3 and Q4, but Yes/No-sub-AUX answers are not a very common way to respond to questions like Q1 and Q2. By boosting the number of SUB-aux answers in our lessons, we can maintain exposure to the important and distinctive SUBJECT + AUXILIARY structure while reducing exposure to the relatively stilted language of Yes/No-sub-AUX answers.
- **They're common and useful.** I have no corpus study to back this up, but I appeal to your intuition. Based on the examples on this poster (Q and A's 3, 4, 5, and 7, 8, 9, 10), wouldn't you say that SUB-aux answers seem common and useful?
- **They have distinctive intonation;** stress is on the subject...
Q5: *Who wants gum?* A5: **I** do.
...rather than on the auxiliary...
Q6: *Do you want some gum?* A6: Yes, **I do**.
Learners pick this up quickly, but it does take some practice.
- **They're grammatically OK.** No, I don't need to tell you that, but my experience has been that students on a steady diet of Yes/No-sub-AUX answers sometimes don't see *I do* without a *Yes* attached as acceptable English.

How can we activate SUB-aux answers?

- **Any interview activity involving yes/no questions** creates a perfect opportunity. Just follow up the interview with “who questions” or “anyone questions” directed to the whole class. It's a good, occasional alternative to the “Tell us something about your partner” type of follow-up. For example:

<u>Interview Qs</u>	<u>Whole-class follow-up Qs</u>	
<i>Do you like to dance?</i>	<i>Does anyone like to dance?</i>	<i>I do. I do. I do.</i>
<i>Do you like to swim?</i>	<i>Who likes to swim?</i>	<i>I do. I do. I do.</i>
	<i>Who doesn't like to swim?</i>	<i>I do. I don't. I don't.</i>

- **Classroom procedures** also create many natural opportunities for SUB-aux use. For example:

Q7: <i>Anyone need the handout from yesterday?</i>	A7: <i>I do.</i>
Q8: <i>Did anyone get a different answer?</i>	A8: <i>I did.</i>
Q9: <i>Was anyone absent yesterday?</i>	A9: <i>Yeah. I was.</i> ³
Q10: <i>Who wasn't here yesterday?</i>	A10: <i>I wasn't.</i> ⁴

Note: My claim that Yes/No-sub-AUX answers are stilted is an oversimplification. Studies by Richardson (1977) and Winn-Bell Olson (1980) came up with 10% and 8%, respectively, as frequencies with which yes/no questions are answered by Yes/No-sub-AUX responses.⁵ Winn-Bell Olson hypothesizes that such responses occur where there is high social distance or discomfort.⁶ In any case, there certainly are conditions under which a Yes/No-sub-AUX would be the natural choice for many native speakers. Those conditions, however, are certainly not those under which we usually find Yes/No-sub-AUX answers in our textbooks.

