Section 20  indirect speech

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The little conversation is simply provided for students to read, to help familiarise them with the use of tenses in indirect speech. No exercise is necessary.

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language notes
The explanations and exercises here are provided for students who really need them. However, for many learners indirect speech is unproblematic. In particular, tenses in indirect speech have nothing special about them: they are nearly always the tenses that are natural for the situation. Compare ‘She was tired because she had been working late’ and ‘She said she was tired because she had been working late’. Both sentences use ‘was’ and ‘had been working’ – adding ‘She said’ makes no difference. The main exception is when we report present-tense statements and questions: here we may use past tenses to talk about things that are still true:

‘How old are you?’ ‘What?’ ‘I asked how old you were.’

But in general, there is no need to teach complicated rules about tense changes to most students, and exercises in which students change direct to indirect speech may be unnecessary, as well as being unnatural – that isn’t how native speakers construct indirect speech sentences.

However, in some languages indirect speech does have special grammar, so some students may have problems:

*I told her that I don’t understand her problem.
*I thought that I would have been late, so I hurried.

And some languages do not have a separate indirect speech structure like those in European languages, so speakers of these languages may mix direct and indirect structures:

*They told us you must come back tomorrow, but we couldn’t.

possible further activities

Memory test  Get each student to tell the class one true thing and one untrue thing about him/herself using a present tense. (‘I’ve got three brothers.’ ‘I speak Arabic.’) In the next lesson, see if students can remember what each one said.

‘Natalie said she had three brothers.’
‘Franz said he spoke Arabic, but it isn’t true.’

Old beliefs  Ask students if they can think of things that people used to believe. Help with vocabulary as necessary.

‘People believed that the earth was flat.’

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language notes
In casual speech, indirect questions may sometimes have the same structure as ordinary questions.

They asked me what was my name.

Students may meet examples, but it’s better not to teach this at this level.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use. ⇒ Section 20 continues
possible further activities

Personalisation  Ask students to write one or two sentences about questions that they have been asked at interviews, or on forms. Tell them about some you have been asked:
‘They asked me if I had a place to live.’
‘They asked me where I went to school.’

Memory test  Ask each student a question:
‘How many languages can you speak?’
‘Do you play tennis?’
In the next lesson, ask students to remember what you asked:
‘You asked Maria how many languages she spoke.’
‘You asked Pablo if he played tennis.’

Internet  Ask students if they can find some interesting sentences on the internet beginning “The policeman asked me …”

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possible further activities

Extending Exercise 3  Ask students to write, say, five more sentences beginning ‘I don’t know’, ‘I don’t want to know’, ‘I don’t care’ and/or ‘I don’t remember.’

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language notes

Some students’ languages may use the equivalent of this in cases where English uses that:
*He told me he wasn't happy in this job, so he changed it.

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language notes

Some students may tend to drop to from the infinitive after how, where etc.
*I didn't know how explain.

possible further activities

Personalisation  Get students to write one or two sentences about advice or instructions they have been given, for example by teachers or parents, using ‘… told me/us (not) to …’. Alternatively, get younger students to say what advice they will give to their children, using ‘I’ll tell them (not) to …’.