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Think Tank

This Month's Think Tank Panel

Marc Helgesen

Curtis Kelly

Chris Hunt

Chuck Sandy

Dorothy Zemach

Peter Viney

June 2009

Topic: What are some things you do when you teach reading?

Marc Helgesen

Questioning Comprehension Questions

Not so long ago, I'm sure I would have used my whole space to sing the praises of extensive reading. So many English learners had only experienced reading as tedious grammar and test preparation. They hadn't experienced the pleasure of reading English for enjoyment. Traditional reading classes practice only work on accuracy. Students need a balance. Extensive reading provides the fluency work they need. But, compared with just a few years ago, extensive reading is exploding. There is a huge amount of interest.

The Extensive Reading (ER) pages will provide you with resources for setting up a program. You can join the ER discussion group on Yahoo.com to be part of the conversation (it's a great source of advice for people just starting out with ER.). The Extensive Reading Foundation gives out the annual Language Learner Literature Awards, recognizing the best new graded readers. In JALT, the Extensive Reading SIG is very popular. You can download copies of the their journal. In the most recent one I write about different types of oral and written student book reports. There is a huge amount of enthusiasm about and awareness of Extensive Reading. I hope you will become part of that.

Since so many people are already doing ER, I'll turn my attention to an issue that affects most of us as teachers but is rarely talked about. I think we need to be…

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questioning comprehension questions.

In most textbooks, reading tasks are limited to answering a few questions that come after the reading. And those questions often don't actually teach or test comprehension.

Try this. Read the sentence in the box. Then answer the questions under it.

The glorfs drebbled quarfly.

Q1. (grammar analysis)
a. Which word is the subject?
b. Which is the verb?
c. What part of speech is quarfly?
Q2. What did the glorfs do?
Q3. How did they do it?

(Scroll down to the bottom of my article to check your answers.)

Most teachers (and students) can get all the answers correct. Think about it. You answered all the questions right, a perfect score, about a sentence of nonsense words -- a sentence with no meaning. The problem, of course, is the nature of literal comprehension questions. Often, they can be answered without thinking; without even understanding the meaning.

There's a hierarchy of levels of comprehension questions. Unfortunately, literal comprehension questions, the most common type, tell us the least. If students get them right, we don't know if they really understood or just matched the words. If they get a question wrong, did they misunderstand the text or misunderstand the question? We can't know. Since the questions come at the end, maybe they didn't know what they were supposed to find out. Or maybe they understood it but didn't think it was important so forgot by the time they got to the question.

Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension

5. Appreciation
(Highest) Students give an emotional/affective response.

4. Evaluation
Students make judgments in light of the material.

3. Inference
Students respond to information implied but not directly stated.

2. Reorganization
Students organize or order the information a different way than it was presented.

1. Literal
(Lowest) Students identify information directly stated.

Does this mean "literal comprehension" is unimportant? Of course not. It's basic, both as a low-level test of understanding and because this is the most common type of question in texts and tests (whether we like those tests or not, they are a key to our students' future and we have to prepare them).

But let's look at some ways to actually check comprehension, at the various levels:

Literal These are the basic questions, and for all their limitations, these questions are important. They're the kind learners meet most often. At minimum, teach the students to read the questions before they read the passage. This is important since it increases reading speed and is an important test taking skill.

One good way to focus on literal meaning is to do a scanning quiz. Make copies of the questions and answers from the Teacher's Manual. Have learners work in groups of 4-6. They open their books to the reading (or, in the case of the junior or senior high textbooks which have readings that go on for several pages, the first page of the unit). They turn the book face down on the desk. Ask the first question twice (you want to make sure everyone understands the question). When you say, "Go!", students look at the text and scan for the correct answer. The first student to find it shows everyone where it is. S/he gets one point. Once learners understand the activity, have them do it in groups. One learner, the "quizmaster", gets the question/answer sheet. S/he asks and other students try to find the answers.

Reorganization Do a "jig-saw" reading. Before class, take the reading and cut the paragraphs apart. Put them on the copy machine in the wrong order. It helps to put a box next to each paragraph for learners to write the numbers. It is also easier if you tell them which paragraph is first. Learners read and try to put the paragraphs in order. The ability to find the order shows the students and you that they've not only understood the words, they also understand the organization and relationships between ideas.

Inference Much of reading is really "reading between the lines." Learners need to understand [what] the ideas behind the information in the text. Look for inference opportunities in the text. How does a given character feel about something? How do you know? Has that character ever been here or done this? How do you know. One good way to help them infer is to have the read part of the story. Stop them at a critical point and, in pairs have them predict what will

happen next. This helps students make the jump to inferencing.

Evaluation This label sounds more difficult than it is. It just means deciding fact/opinion, same/different, etc. Later, if you want, it can include higher level decisions like agree/disagree or good/bad. Students make some kind of decision. At an elementary level, it can be as simple as asking the learner, "What character is the most like you? Why?" At a somewhat more sophisticated level – this is a technique I use with my university students doing extensive reading – have them find elements in the story that do or don't parallel their own lives. They have to explain why. Some students do this at a deeper level than others. I recall one learner who said Gulliver's Travels was not like her life since she had never been around little people (What about kindergarten?). On the other hand, a student who read a biography of Princess Diana turned in a report that started, "Her life had tragedy. And so does mine. Last year my father died." Heavy stuff. It was clear she was processing the meaning at a deep level.

Appreciation This is my favorite, not because it's the most sophisticated (though it is). I love it for its simplicity. After a reading, simply ask the students, "Did you like this story or not? Why?" Being able to answer is a true test of understanding. One good way to get at this is to ask each learner to draw a picture of one scene from the story. Since our students are usually skilled at drawing, they take forever getting their pictures perfect, and it is helpful to forbid erasers and limit them to five minutes. This is English, not art class. With their pictures they turn to the person next to them and explain the pictures. I let them choose which language they want to explain it in. They have read it in English. That's the understanding I'm checking. They end with the sentence. "I liked/ didn't like the story because..."

One other thing about comprehension questions: As they say in the restaurant business, "Location, location, location." Most comprehension questions are in the wrong place. The questions are generally after the reading. That is sort of like saying, "Read this story. OK, now that you are finished, let me tell you why you read it." If the learners' task is to answer questions, they should know the questions before they read the piece. It helps their understanding. And that's what we are trying to accomplish.

Portions of this are from a piece previously published in Longman Teacher Link. I learned about Barrett's reading taxonomy from Jack Richards. The taxonomy is also cited in Reading in a Foreign Language by Alderson & Urquhart (Longman)

Answers: 1a. glorfs, 1b. drebbled, 1c. adverb, 2. They drebbled. 3. Quarfly

Marc Helgesen is professor at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University, Sendai and adjunct at Teachers College Columbia University MA TESOL Program - Tokyo. He is an author of over 100 articles, books, and textbooks including the English Firsthand series and has lead teacher development workshops on five continents. Marc also maintains the ELT and the Science of Happiness website to distribute ELT/Positive Psychology downloads and a website for various presentation handouts.

Curtis Kelly

What are some techniques for teaching reading?
Are my Japanese colleagues doing it wrong?

Hard question. I don't know much more about reading instruction than the next person. I've read the arguments for and against Krashen's input theory, I've heard a number of talks on the glories of extensive reading, and I even took a TESOL Summer Institute class on that topic, taught by the wonderful Richard Day. Still, my comments are pretty much from the pew rather than the pulpit.

I suspect, though, my concerns are pretty much the same as yours. In particular, I have strong doubts about the way my Japanese colleagues teach reading, especially those who majored in Literature. I wonder what "approach" they are following by giving low-level learners classical literary works to read in the raw, i.e, read the original texts. Incomprehensible input? It doesn't help that they tend to specialize in authors who died at least a hundred years ago.

I wonder what "approach" they are following by giving low-level learners classical literary works to read in the raw, i.e, read the original texts. Incomprehensible input?

Then, one morning, I was lying in bed half awake, when a hypnogogic reverie came to me. I'll try to pass it on as accurately as possible: I was in a murky, candlelit room addressing an