

## How useful are Comprehension Questions?

You may well ask me "How useful is the question in this title?" After all to check what a student has understood after listening to or reading an L2 text seems plain common sense. If it were not felt to be a sensible procedure why would course book writers supply comprehension questions in large quantities?

Comprehension questions are a part of an EFL teacher's arsenal that few people would regard as controversial.

In ordinary conversation, in L1, it is quite normal to ask a comprehension question if you are unsure about what the other person has said. You might break into what they are saying and hypothesise: "Oh, so, do you mean that.....?"

So, clearly, comprehension questions are a normal part of discourse. The difference is that, in normal conversation, it is the listener who decides to ask the speaker for clarification when he fails to follow what the other is saying. In the EFL class it is an external authority ( course book/ teacher ) that initiates the comprehension checking. When you come to think of it this is a very bizarre procedure: how on earth does a course book writer in North Oxford know where the linguistic difficulties in a reading passage will lie for a 16year old in Cairo, a university student in Bangkok or a senior citizen in Hamburg?

One might reasonably expect that the undertow of Egyptian Arabic, Thai and German might affect the three learners differently in terms of their ability to comprehend the same passage.

My first suggestion is that comprehension questions are the business of the students and no one else. One good way of dealing with a reading passage in class is to ask the students to read the text twice and then write 7 questions, each one aimed at a different, named classmate. The students themselves know, better than the teacher does, which classmate is likely to be able to give them an adequate answer. Once each student has written at least four questions, ask them to move around the room asking their questions and listening to the answers.

This procedure is respectful of the students' right to find out what they feel they have not yet grasped. This procedure links the course book passage to real people in the room. This procedure reduces the teachers' preparation time ( if she is in the habit of creating her own comprehension questions.)

Yet there are other deeper reasons for doubting the usefulness of the comprehension question in second language reading and listening. The comprehension question is based on the notion that a listener or reader is a sort of CD rom that accurately holds the entire in-coming message.

This can never be the case. The normal act of listening or reading is always one of deletion, elaboration and transformation.

The listener/ reader will defocus from details that strike them as insignificant.

These details will be deleted from the listener/ reader's memory.

The listener/ reader will elaborate the text as it hits her auditory circuits of her brain - if she is listening to a story the elaboration will often be visual and the listener will create her own inner film. In some cases the listener/ reader will transform the text by framing it within previous experiences. For example, I once told a group a tale about a wall girdling a town and the theme of the story was FEAR. One listener perceived the whole story in the political framework of the Berlin Wall and its breaching. This person "heard" a much bigger story than I think I told.

Such deletions, elaborations and transformations are a part of the normal, everyday creativity of listening and reading. When I tell a story to 25 students my auditory text is replaced by 25 new texts in the students' minds. It seems to me very bizarre to go back in time and ask my students language questions about the now "dead" Mario text. Actually I would suggest that such questions are an insult to the students' inevitable creative elaborations of the original text.

So what can I do after telling the class a story? I can offer the students questions that help them explore each others' elaborations. I ask the students to go through the questions below and cross out the ones they do not relate to. Once this deletion is effected I pair them and ask them to use the questions they have retained to get an idea of their partner's elaborations. Here is a set of such questions:

1. In which sort of country did you imagine the story?
2. What kind of pictures did you get as you listened.
3. Did you create a sort of film from the story?
4. Were you ever actually in the same space as the character in the story?
5. What feelings did you have during the telling?
6. Did you become any of the characters?
7. What, for you, is the moral of the story?
8. Did this story remind you of other stories you know?
9. Did any of the characters seem like people you know?
10. Can you think of some one in this group who may have disliked the story?
11. Would your brother/ mother/ daughter/ father like this story? Why would they like it?
12. At which point in the story did you really start listening?
13. Which was the most vivid bit for you?

14. At which points in the story did you drift off and think of other things?

The list of questions could be much longer and more detailed, but you will notice they all focus on the students' elaborated text and on their reactions to the text. None are about details of the original text.

"*Very nice*" I can hear some readers saying " *but what if the students did not understand the language during the telling?*" My answer to this is that the teacher/ teller needs to make sure she gets her meaning across by using mime, drawing and L1 glosses on words or phrases that may be hard for students. It is the teller's job to ensure language comprehension as she tells, and I believe minimal, disciplined recourse to L1 is natural in this situation.

By the time you get to this point in your reading, the lines you have read will have undergone **deletion**, **elaboration** and **transformation** in your mind. As you get up to get yourself a coffee and think back over these lines, you carry in your head your own unique reading of this text. Thank God you are a normally creative reader and not a tape-recorder with the RECORD button down. **Do I really need to write comprehension questions on your behalf?**