

Comprehension Checking: A Fundamental Skill for Teaching and Learning Vocabulary

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Abstract

This article discusses the skill of comprehension checking as it relates to vocabulary. It argues that this skill is insufficiently dealt with in training books and books written for the purpose of teaching vocabulary and that teachers often have difficulty checking vocabulary comprehension. The paper discusses comprehension checking as it applies in the literature, examines some of the problems associated with it, but more importantly, provides teachers with a variety of useful comprehension checks they can use each and every day in the classroom.

Introduction

Comprehension checking, by simple definition, is confirming a student's understanding or knowledge of a language item (very often lexical) without asking, "Do you understand?" Instead the teacher employs a variety of techniques, which force a student to produce evidence of this understanding. There are different reasons why a teacher would want to check comprehension, some of them being: a) the teacher wants to confirm whether or not the vocabulary just explained was actually understood b) the teacher wants to make sure he or she isn't going to waste valuable time pre-teaching *known*

words c) the teacher wants to review previously taught vocabulary d) a word has come up in class and the teacher wants to see if other students know it e) the teacher suspects a student misunderstands the meaning of a word. The relationship of comprehension checking and lexicon is tied to the notion that learning is impeded when lexical items are unclear or imprecise (Allen 1983). Its importance in language teaching cannot be understated as the following example demonstrates:

In this extract from a teacher training video a trainee is having a conversation with a low-intermediate level Japanese student as part of a warm up exercise¹. A teacher trainer is observing the conversation.

Trainee: Do you work out, Manabu?

Manabu: Yes, I do.

Trainee: Really? Do you like working out?

Manabu: Yes, I do.

Trainee: Do you work out often?

Manabu: Not so often... sometimes. Do you working out often?

Trainee: Hmm, I work out about twice a week.

Manabu: Great!

Trainee: So, what are your plans this weekend?

Manabu: I will ... (continues on this new topic).

After the warm up is concluded the trainer asks the trainee about the conversation he had with the student.

Trainer: What can you tell me about your conversation with Manabu?

Trainee: Well, he obviously has some grammar problems. He said,

“do you working out”? instead of “do you work out”?”.

Trainer: Anything else?

Trainee: Hmm, no. The conversation flowed quite smoothly.

Trainer: Do you think Manabu understands what working out means?

Trainee: Uh, huh. He was able to answer all my questions.

Trainer: Okay. Let's check (calling the student over to the table).

Where do you like working out, Manabu?

Manabu: At Maruyama Park. Sometimes I'm going there with my girlfriend.

Trainer: How far do you walk?

Manabu: About 1 or 2 kilometers.

Trainer: What do you do when you work out with your girlfriend?

Manabu: We talk and look at the nature.

The extract above is not intended to highlight the faults or weaknesses of an inexperienced trainee but rather is intended to draw attention to an area of language teaching often neglected by even seasoned language teachers. In fact, it has been my experience as a teacher-trainer that many teachers report difficulties with comprehension checking. Reasons for the difficulties vary but a majority of teachers questioned on the subject cite problems with insufficient training and/or ignorance of the skill (they had never heard of it).

Attitudes toward comprehension checking of lexical items

In his book, “Teach English”, Doff stresses the importance of checking comprehension. Teachers, after having presented vocabulary, are encouraged to “check to see if students have understood” or to “check that

[students] have understood the word by asking them to say it in their own language" (1988). The latter method (grammar-translation), he states, ensures that the students have understood. In one section of the book, "A Training Course For TEFL", the authors advise teachers to "extract certain [unknown] vocabulary items" and proceed to "pre-teach these items" (Hubbard, Jones, Thornton and Wheeler, 1983) before introducing a new structure. In another section of the same book, the authors emphasize the need to "consolidate and check" new lexical items, especially since many items are "open to ambiguities" (ibid.). They proceed to supply a short list of comprehension checking devices, and, as is often the case with training books, they ask the reader to come up with their own concept checking devices. In another book, one written solely for the purpose of teaching vocabulary, teachers are recommended to check comprehension of lexical items by way of informal and formal written tests (Allen, 1983).

Reasons why teachers may have trouble checking comprehension

The aforementioned recommendations bring to light problems many trainee books or books written for the explicit purpose of teaching vocabulary have. Although the checking of comprehension is advocated, many of the recommendations for checking understanding of lexical items found in these books are very often implicit. While stressing the need to check comprehension they often fail to supply teachers with clear-cut methods or strategies for obtaining the required information. In fact, of the three books mentioned above, only Allen dedicates a chapter solely to the area of comprehension checking. Unfortunately, this chapter focuses mainly on the testing of vocabulary and does not really address the issue of compre-

hension checking in less formal conditions (during discussions or other in-class activities). Second, a recommendation like that proposed by Doff where teachers are encouraged to check comprehension by means of grammar-translation, while useful in some cases, may fall short for those teachers who have elected to abstain from using the mother language (are committed to using the target language only). Furthermore, the grammar-translation method of checking comprehension may not be feasible in cases where teachers lack competency in the students' native language (i.e. one cannot be expected to rely on this method without a sufficient knowledge of the students' native language).

As language teachers we are often faced with the task of integrating vocabulary with structures, (Hubbard, Jones, Thornton and Wheeler, 1983). To help students cope with the introduction of a new structure teachers are sometimes advised "to extract certain vocabulary items... and pre-teach these items before moving on to the structure presentation" (ibid.). Again, this advice, while intended to help teachers in the classroom, may prove problematic. One would assume the teacher either knows exactly which students know which words or that he or she intends to find out which words students don't know. What's missing in the latter assumption is the process of discovering which words the students know or don't know. It's not inconceivable that the authors feel the finding out part is common sense and requires little or no explanation, thus, we are given relatively few insights in the book about how to determine which words need extracting. However, experience has taught me that this finding out process is no easy chore and that many teachers spend an excessive amount of time eliciting this information or refrain from doing it altogether. Another concern with the "extraction of certain vocabulary" lies in the assumption that the teaching of new structures is a planned-out affair. It is true teachers often

come to class with a plan to teach a set structure but in this day and age of communicative language teaching, the teaching of set structures is more often than not, an unplanned event. Consequently, teachers must be able to check comprehension in unprepared or unrehearsed ways. Unfortunately, without sufficient training and/or practice utilizing this skill, teachers may not be effective as the need arises.

Another possible reason why teachers may have trouble checking comprehension is tied to the notion that certain methods of checking comprehension (especially those used to check passive vocabulary) appear non-communicative. With the advent of the communicative approach to language teaching, many teachers have become so focused on getting students to use language in meaningful exchanges that they become reticent about checking words in a non-communicative manner. As Hubbard, Jones, Thornton, and Wheeler state, "We must try to encourage our students to put their newly acquired language into action" (*ibid.*). While I agree with the notion of getting students to put the newly acquired language to purposeful use, it isn't always the case that students will produce "newly acquired" vocabulary in class. In fact, as many teachers are aware, a lot of vocabulary that surfaces in a lesson is vocabulary learned outside the classroom (read: vocabulary not previously introduced by their teacher). This should neither be seen as unfortunate nor undesirable, but rather a natural tendency of the class where the teacher is seen as facilitator (Larsen-Freeman, 1986) or "co-communicator" (Littlewood, 1981) with students experimenting with the language in "learner-directed activities" (*ibid.*). In such an atmosphere, the teacher's role may be to offer advice or to monitor students' strengths and weaknesses or to provide clarity to enhance the learning situation. The checking of comprehension of lexicon to aid understanding (particularly that which appear spontaneously) falls

under these guidelines. Unfortunately, few textbooks supply methods for checking students' understanding of vocabulary that appear spontaneously, in thorough, yet economical ways. What we often find are methods (games, puzzles or fill-in charts) (Hubbard, Thornton, Jones and Wheeler, 1983) designed mainly for the purpose of working thoroughly through *active* vocabulary presented earlier or formal testing methods of comprehension checking, designed again, to test previously taught lexical items (Allen, 1983).

Q & A as a method of checking comprehension

In the example presented earlier between Manabu and the trainee, we saw how asking the wrong type of questions can cause misunderstanding. Though the teacher involved was inexperienced, the situation is one I have witnessed in many English language classes in Japan over the years. Sadly, more often than not, what we see in many classrooms are ineffective and often misleading attempts at confirming understanding through the use of meaningless questions. The most notorious of the bunch is of the following kind; "Do you understand?" Since a student produces absolutely no evidence of confirmation, teachers should avoid employing this strategy if possible. Other types of questions may also not produce the right kind of response due to poor design (for more insight into methods of asking questions effectively, see Bossaer, (2000) and Thompson (1997). As a case in point I offer the following example. In this extract from McCarthy's book, "Vocabulary" (123-124), we come across a Q&A comprehension-checking device. I've taken the liberty of underlining the device for the sake of simplicity.

T: Okay, it's a bread knife. Kitchen knives wouldn't be specific enough, they could be different shapes or sizes. Okay, there's a bread knife. Does anybody know another word for the bread knife? Do you know which is the bread knife?

S: Yes, yes.

T: The big one. Okay, what's another word that you could use for that? Anybody? You could also call it a carving, a carving knife. Do you know what carving means?

S: Carving means to cut.

T: Okay, yeah, if you have a turkey especially, um or a big piece of meat and someone is going to cut you could say 'would you please carve the turkey?' It means to cut into special pieces.

In the example we see a common method of checking comprehension. The teacher asks the student if he or she knows what carving means. When the student replies that it means to cut, the teacher supplies the items, turkey and big piece of meat. This is to no doubt to help the student distinguish carving from cutting. What we don't know from this extract is whether or not the student knew this distinction already? What if the teacher had posed this question to the student: "Do we carve a turkey, a pork chop or a piece of paper"? Or what if the teacher had drawn a word map on the blackboard and asked the question: "What are some things we carve"?



Figure 1

Depending on the student's prior contact with the word one might hear the answers; turkey, pumpkin, name on a tree, etc. The point is the teacher isn't going to find out if the student knew the word carve or in what context the student learned the word initially. It's very easy to get in the bad habit of filling in the blanks for students. What teachers need to be aware of is that there are a variety of methods for obtaining the information. Questions can be very useful, if they are designed properly, but they may not always suit our needs. Furthermore, the teacher's continual use of Q&A to check comprehension may start to look like a tedious affair, perhaps even appearing mechanical. When this happens students start to lose interest. What we need then is a variety of comprehension checking devices teachers can employ to get the job done. With this in mind, I present the following sixteen comprehension checking devices.

A list of comprehension checking devices

1. Simple Questions

work out Where do you work out? / What do you do when you work out?

spinach What color is spinach? What famous person eats spinach?

2. Play dumb tag questions

India India is a cold country, isn't it?

carrot Carrots are green, aren't they?

3. Play dumb visual

squash I love squash. You know squash, right? (Pretend to play volleyball)

No? This isn't squash? What is it?

hover So, the alien ship in your story hovered like this. (Teacher

gestures a spaceship taking off)

Note: When using either the play dumb tag question or the play dumb visual device, be sure to do it in a light-hearted manner. Students should not feel you are making fun of them. Make sure students see that it's meant to check understanding. A smile (not smirk) after employing these two techniques usually does the trick.

4. The teacher draws on the board

apple (The teacher draws two pears on the board) Okay, how many apples do I have?

chubby Which one of these men is chubby?



5. Students draw on the board

spacecraft Okay. Can you draw a spacecraft, Aki?

numbers/time/money Okay, Aki says there are 1,800,000 people in Sapporo. Can you write that number on the board, Emiko?

6. Antonyms

dangerous Teacher: What did you do yesterday, Akemi?

Akemi: I went rock climbing.

Teacher: Wow! Rock climbing is dangerous! What is the opposite of dangerous, Erina?

Erina: Safe.

Teacher: That's right! What sport is safe, Mihoko?

Mihoko: Tennis.

Teacher: Right! And do you play tennis, Mihoko?

7. Contrasts

dangerous Teacher: Wow! Rock climbing is dangerous!

Akemi: Yes.

Teacher: What sport is not dangerous, Miho?

Miho: Tennis.

Teacher: That's right.

ugly Teacher: You said your kitten is cute, Ami. What animal is ugly?

Ami: A dog is ugly. (leads to a discussion about personal preference)

8. Giving advice

broke (no money) Teacher: Hideo, can you lend me 500 yen for lunch?
(role play situation)

Hideo: (using his own choice of vocabulary) I can't. I'm broke.

Teacher: We're both broke. Any advice, Aya?

Aya: Don't eat today. (actual advice from Aya, said as a joke)

thirsty Teacher: If your dog is thirsty, what should you do?

9. Fill in the blanks (on the board)

bored/boring I was _____ because the game was _____. I hate _____ games.

obese/skinny My friend started dieting because he is _____. His wife started dieting because she's _____. She wants to be _____.

10. Either / or questions

cast Teacher: Is a cast hard or soft, Kikuo? And is it white or black?

hippo Teacher: Is a hippo big or small, Ayako? And is it fat or thin?

11. Student pantomime

skidded Give the student a blackboard brush. Ask them to demonstrate skidded with it.

waitress Teacher: Can you show me what a waitress does, Keiko? (The student put a tissue over her arm and pretended to pour wine).

12. offering a choice

up to my ears in work Teacher: If I'm up to my ears in work, I'm lazy, I'm busy, I've got sore ears?

Note: *Teachers should be careful about the choices given to students. Students may be able to guess correctly if the wrong choices (distracters) are poorly designed. Often, however, a quick response from a student tells you the student knows the lexical item.*

13. set up a situation

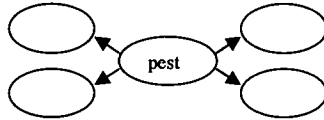
make it Teacher: Aki, let's say you invite me to your house for dinner tomorrow at 8:00. Hideo, last week you invited me to go to a movie with you tomorrow at 7:00. Now, can I make it to Aki's house for dinner, tomorrow night, Aimi? No? Why not?

14. True / false

planet Teacher: The moon is a very small planet. True or false?

15. Association map

pest The teacher draws an association map on the board and asks a student or students, to fill it in.



Note: *Many of the devices I've shown here are derived from methods used to present vocabulary, or from other areas of language teaching, and I have taken the liberty of adapting them for use as comprehension checking devices. Since the original ideas are used in thousands of texts around the world, it is impossible to footnote authorship. I do, however, acknowledge the original contributors of any or all the techniques and methods adapted or used in this paper.*

Comprehension checking—Implications for teachers

Throughout this paper I have tried to show the importance of making comprehension checking a part of the teacher's repertoire of teaching skills and have provided numerous options for teachers who understand the need to check their students' understanding of a lexical item. Though the list of devices I've presented is by no means exhaustive, it does provide teachers with options for checking comprehension. I would like to point out here that teachers should not feel that they have to employ all the devices presented in this paper in their classes. In fact, questions about the numerous types of comprehension checking devices have been raised numerous times in seminars I have given on the subject of comprehension checking.

One teacher asked the following important question:

You make it look so easy, the comprehension checking I mean, but I wonder if anyone can do it? You've no doubt been doing it for a long time and your personality seems to be suited to the different [comprehension checking] devices you've presented. Do you think the devices like pantomiming and playing dumb are techniques any teacher can use? It seems like a question of personal choice.

My response to this question was and is this: Yes, some teachers may not be comfortable using all the techniques I've presented but I think the key point is that using just one or two techniques may limit a teacher's effectiveness. As mentioned earlier, if a teacher is checking comprehension with a limited number of devices, especially of the Q&A type, he or she runs the risk of appearing mechanical. This is especially true if teachers are not skilled at asking the right types of questions. Questions which clue the teacher in to a student's level of understanding of a vocabulary item, yet appear as "display-type" questions can often give the appearance of disinterest on the part of the teacher asking them. Display-type questions are often yes/no type questions that elicit a response from students but are often seen as sterile attempts at gaining information (Thompson 1997). It's true that comprehension checking need not lead to follow up discussion of a particular vocabulary item (especially if teachers merely want to be sure students know a certain word), but teachers should avoid *appearing* like they are only interested in the information learned. Students may also appreciate the various methods from which the teacher attempts to discover words they know or don't know. As one of my students put it:

I think you are kind to check if we understand some words. Many Japanese pretend to know words because they don't like to be embarrassed. Your way is fun and interesting and students don't feel nervous.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that teachers need to be more in tune to the skill of comprehension checking and that it deserves closer scrutiny as a skill intertwined with the teaching of vocabulary. My experience as a teacher-trainer has led me to believe that many teachers are unaware of the importance of comprehension checking or have never regarded it as a serious element of teaching. I have also presented a list of comprehension checking devices which when used on a daily basis, can arm teachers with the tools necessary to check comprehension of both active and passive vocabulary. While admitting that a teacher's personality may play a part in the type of comprehension checking device he or she chooses to incorporate in the lesson, I have shown that by using a variety of devices, teachers can enhance their method of checking comprehension, which can only serve to stimulate the teaching/learning process. Finally, comprehension checking is a skill, and like any skill, requires time to perfect. However, I'm confident in saying, those willing to put in the time and effort to master it, will be delighted with the results.

Notes

1 The video extract comes from the author's own training course material and is an excerpt from a paper published by Bossaer , (2000) - (see references

below).

References

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