

What Do We Test When We Test Reading Comprehension?

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As ESL/EFL teachers, we are aware that the primary objective of reading is comprehension--being able to find meaning in what is read. Thus, we give our students reading assessments in order to test their reading abilities. When we are preparing these assessments, we may go through some of the following:

- We ensure that we select an appropriate text.
- We make sure that the language used in the text is suitably pitched to our students' proficiency.
- We carefully scrutinise the text to ensure that the information in each paragraph is tested.

However, some teachers may not be aware that the comprehension questions they formulate only test students' ability to understand and recall ideas and information directly stated in the given text. It is indeed unfortunate if comprehension assessments do not go beyond this level of comprehension. The purpose of this article is to provide ESL/EFL teachers with some guidelines when preparing reading assessments.

Teachers need to be aware that there are actually three main levels or strands of comprehension--literal, interpretive and critical comprehension.

- The first level, **literal comprehension**, is the most obvious. Comprehension at this level involves surface meanings. At this level, teachers can ask students to find information and ideas that are explicitly stated in the text. In addition, it is also appropriate to test vocabulary. According to Karlin(1971), "being able to read for literal meanings ie stated ideas is influenced by one's mastery of word meanings in context'.
- The second level or strand is **interpretive or referential comprehension**. At this level, students go beyond what is said and read for deeper meanings. They must be able to read critically and analyse carefully what they have read. Students need to be able to see relationships among ideas, for exmple how ideas go together and also see the implied meanings of these ideas. It is also obvious that before our students can do this, they have to first understand the ideas that are stated (literal comprehension). Interpretive or referential comprehension includes thinking processes such as drawing conclusions, making generalizations and predicting outcomes. At this level, teachers can ask more challenging questions such as asking students to do the following:
 - Re-arrange the ideas or topics discussed in the text.
 - Explain the author's purpose of writing the text.
 - Summarize the main idea when this is not explicitly stated in the text.
 - Select conclusions which can be deduced from the text t!hey have read.
- Finally, the third level of comprehension is **critical reading** whereby ideas and information are evaluated. Critical evaluation occurs only after our students have understood the ideas and information that the writer has presented. At this level, students can be tested on the following skills:
 - The ability to differentiate between facts and opinions.
 - The ability to recognize persuasive statements .
 - The ability to judge the accuracy of the information given in the text.

Conclusion

Although comprehension takes place at several levels, mastery at any one level is not a prerequisite to comprehension at another level. Furthermore, the reading skills for each level or strand cut across ages; they are relevant to young readers in primary schools,

secondary school students right up to students at tertiary level. EFL/ESL teachers also need to keep in mind that the three levels are not distinct . Dividing comprehension into literal, referential and critical strands is only intended as a guide for teachers when preparing reading assessments. Studies have shown that teachers tend to ask their students mainly literal comprehension questions. They need to be aware that there is more to reading than just the basic skills of reading and recalling information.

References

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. V, No. 12, December 1999

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