

## Checking In So That Learners Don't Check Out

When teaching an ESL class, it's essential that you check comprehension throughout the lesson. Checking comprehension lets you know how quickly to move the lesson along. Do learners need clarification of the grammar point you just explained? Do they need more examples of how the vocabulary word can be used in a sentence? Do they need the directions for the activity to be modeled again so that they can successfully complete it? When you check comprehension by asking the right type of questions, you get valuable information about where the learners are at in their understanding.

When you ask a question to a group of people, who responds? Usually, it's the people who are confident that they have the correct answer. When you are teaching a group of ESL learners, not everyone will have the same level of English or feel as confident saying their answer out loud. If you're not checking comprehension of the entire group or a varied sample of learners at different ability levels, you won't have a clear idea of what everyone in the class understands, and you might leave learners behind.

### Asking Good Questions

When you ask a class of ESL learners *Does that make sense?* or *Do you understand?* 99% of the time the answer is going to be *Yes*. Even when learners don't understand, they will often reply affirmatively to yes/no comprehension questions. It's very difficult to admit that you don't understand something in front of your peers! But unspecific questions get unspecific answers. Asking them doesn't give you reliable information. Instead, ask questions that are specific to what you want learners to know. For instructions, ask learners what the first step is. For vocabulary, ask learners to explain the definition, or use it in a sentence. These specific questions will give you much better information about learner understanding.

Try to ask questions that get learners to demonstrate and explain their knowledge. Think back to when you were in school. What types of questions did the teacher ask?

### Types of Questions

True/False: *Goldilocks broke three chairs. True or false?*

Wh- questions (what, why, where, when, how, who): *What did Goldilocks do in the Bear's house?*

Fill in the blank: *When Goldilocks tried Papa Bear's porridge, she said "This porridge is too \_\_\_!"*

Multiple choice: *Did Goldilocks fall asleep in Papa Bear's, Mama Bear's or Baby Bear's bed?*

Open/Close-ended: *Why do you think Goldilocks broke Baby Bear's chair/Which chair did she break?*

Give an example: *What is the name of another fairytale?*

Give a definition: *Can you explain the word "fairytale?"*

Either/or: *Did Goldilocks eat Mama Bear's porridge or Baby Bear's porridge?*

The best way to know that learners aren't guessing the correct answer is to ask multiple types of questions. Let's look at some examples of questions we can use to check comprehension in the ESL classroom.

### **General Comprehension Checks**

*Why is that the answer? (even if the answer is correct)*

*Is \_\_\_ an example of \_\_\_?*

*Are \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ the same or different?*

*Why?*

*Is \_\_\_ an example of \_\_\_?*

### **Understanding Directions**

*What will you do first? Next? Last?*

*Where will you write your answer?*

*Tell me the directions.*

*Will you \_\_\_ or \_\_\_ first?*

*Tell the directions to your neighbor.*

### **Grammar Exercises**

*What is the rule?*

*Is this sentence correct? Why or why not?*

*What is the past/present/future tense of \_\_\_?*

*How do we say that in the past/present/future?*

*Why is this different?*

*What tense should you use? Why?*

### **Writing**

*What word is missing?*

*Are these the same topic, or different?*

*Who can say a main idea?*

*Who can add a detail?*

*Does this look the same or different than the example?*

### **Pronunciation**

*How do you say this word?*

*How many syllables? Which one is stressed?*

*What is the final sound in this word?*

*Should your voice go up or down?*

As you plan a lesson, think about where you'll want to check comprehension (e.g. after giving activity instructions, after introducing new language, etc.). Write down 2-3 different questions you can ask to see if the learners understand. If you are a classroom assistant, use the time when the teacher is instructing the learners think of questions you might ask, then ask them as you float around the room helping learners.

### **Vocabulary**

*Is \_\_\_ an example of \_\_\_?*

*Is \_\_\_ a noun or a verb?*

*Can I say \_\_\_?*

*How would you say that in a sentence?*

*What does that mean, in your own words?*

*Does \_\_\_ mean \_\_\_ or \_\_\_?*

*Can you give me another example of \_\_\_?*

### **Dialogues/Conversation**

*Who talks first?*

*What is a way to be polite and disagree?*

*What should you say if you don't understand?*

*What does he want to do?*

*What is a different way to say it?*

### **Math Problems**

*What should I do first?*

*What can we try next?*

*Is \_\_\_ bigger than \_\_\_?*

*Should you add or multiply first? Why?*

*Is this answer correct? Why?*

*What steps did you take to get this answer?*

### **Computer Technology Use**

*What can we try?*

*What just happened?*

*What will you do next?*

*Where is the \_\_\_?*

*What will you do when you're finished?*

### **I Teach a Pre-Beginning Class; How Do I Check Comprehension?**

Low-level learners can answer true/false and either/or questions. For example: *You write your name here, true or false?* or *Should I write a big 'A' or a small 'a'?* They can respond to more open ended questions by pointing to a picture. For example: *When should you see a doctor?* (Learners point to health problem pictures).

### **How Do I Make Sure the Learners Really Understand What They're Reading?**

Many reading texts come with questions, but not all questions are created equal. If the questions are a matching exercise, meaning it is possible to circle the answers in the text, they are checking for a shallow level of understanding. Check for a deeper level of understanding by seeking answers that combine what learners read with their own opinions and experiences. A good way to start is to ask *Why do you think...?*

### **The Same Learners Always Call Out the Answers! How Do I Check In with Quiet Learners?**

All ESL classes have learners with different abilities, strengths and confidence levels, which can make checking in with shy learners or learners with lower speaking abilities challenging. Let's explore a few ways to tackle this issue.

#### **Cold Calling**

Tell the learners that you are going to ask a question and call on a learner to answer it. Request that no one say the answer unless they are called on. Remind the learners that there is nothing wrong with making mistakes—that's how we learn!

Ask the question and pause for a few seconds before you say a learner's name to give everyone time to think.

Start with an easy question to build confidence and then gradually increase the difficulty.

*Suggestion:* Have the learners' names written down on index cards or popsicle sticks. After you ask a question, draw a name. You can color code the cards or sticks by level so that you can ask easier questions of lower level learners, and more challenging or lengthy questions to higher levels.

#### **Think/Pair/Share**

Tell the learners that you are going to ask them a question, and that you want them to **think** about the answer. No talking!

After 10-20 seconds, have them **pair up** with a neighbor and say their answer.

Ask for volunteers to **share** their answers with the whole class, or call on a few different learners (this works well with cold calling).

When you use this technique, everyone gets a chance to process what they want to say and rehearse their answer out loud before they are asked to speak in front of the group.

### **Non-Verbal Whole Class Check Ins**

In the following activities, give a count before learners all show their answers at the same time (one, two, three!). This will prevent learners from copying answers.

*Slates:* Give learners mini-white boards, blank paper or iPads and have them write and hold up answers to questions.

*Thumb Scan:* Ask learners to agree (thumbs up) or disagree (thumbs down). They can also answer yes/no or true/false questions this way.

*Point to the Answer:* Tape pictures, words, letters (for multiple choice questions) or categories to the walls in the room. Ask a question and have learners point to the answer.

*Raise Hands:* Raise your hand if you got the same answer (or if you got a different answer). Learners can also hold up different fingers to show their answers choices for multiple choice questions.

*Exit Ticket:* Learners say or write something as they leave class that day. Stand by the door to collect answers. Ask one or two questions that have learners show what they learned (you can even ask: What is one thing you learned today?).

If learners are used to always calling out answers, it may take some time to get them used to these new methods. Explain that it's important for you to know what everyone understands, and keep trying! With repetition, these methods will become classroom norms.

### **How Can I Check Comprehension During Individual or Small Group Work?**

You can learn a lot from observing the work that learners do. When learners are doing an activity such as a worksheet or paired conversation, float around the classroom to track errors and misunderstandings. This will let you see if there are any particular grammar points or questions you should address with the whole group. It's helpful to think about one or two learning goals to focus on while you make observations. If you are a classroom assistant, check in with the teacher about what to focus on before you start circulating.

If learners are reading a text, they can do a task while they read so you have something to observe. For example, they can circle topic sentences, underline key words **or** mark the margins with a symbol that you taught them.

### **How do I Encourage Learners to Embrace Errors?**

It is difficult to find out where learners are at if they are hiding their errors. Errors are necessary. If you aren't making mistakes, you aren't trying anything new. Make sure to keep your tone positive when checking comprehension and giving feedback, and encourage learners to embrace making mistakes.

### **I Checked In—Now What?**

*Most of the class understands, but a couple learners are not on target:* Proceed with the lesson and give extra help to those learners while others work on the next activity.

*A couple learners are on target and the rest are not there yet:* Ask these learners to provide additional models for the class, pair them up with learners who are almost on target or give them bonus questions that ask them to go deeper with the content.

*The whole class is confused:* Reteach the problem areas and then provide additional practice opportunities. Be prepared to break down complicated content or instructions into smaller steps.

### **Reading Reflection Questions:**

1. Why is it necessary to check comprehension throughout the lesson?
2. You have just explained to the class that we use the present simple tense when we want to talk about fixed habits or routines—things that don't change (I walk to school every day). We use the present continuous to talk about actions which are happening at the present moment, but will soon finish (I am walking to the door). What are three different questions that you could ask (True/False, Multiple Choice, Example, Fill in the Blank, etc.) to see if the learners understand when to use the two tenses?
3. What are two ways to check comprehension with the whole class?
4. What is one thing from this reading that you want to try out in your teaching?

## Checking Comprehension: Video Discussion Questions

### Classroom Video 1: Low Beginning Level

What issues did you see with how the teacher checked comprehension? What do you want to avoid doing?

What are two ways the teacher could have checked comprehension at the end of the activity instructions?

### Classroom Video 2: Intermediate Level

What questions does the teacher use to check comprehension?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> True/False        | <input type="checkbox"/> Open/Close Ended  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wh- Questions     | <input type="checkbox"/> Give an Example   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fill in the Blank | <input type="checkbox"/> Give a Definition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple Choice   | <input type="checkbox"/> Either/Or         |

What specific information does the teacher learn from asking the questions? How do you think this will inform what happens next?

What is one other method that the teacher could use to check comprehension?

### Classroom Video 3: Low Beginning Level

What questions does the teacher use to check comprehension?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> True/False        | <input type="checkbox"/> Open/Close Ended  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wh- Questions     | <input type="checkbox"/> Give an Example   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fill in the Blank | <input type="checkbox"/> Give a Definition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple Choice   | <input type="checkbox"/> Either/Or         |

What specific information does the teacher learn from asking the questions? How do you think this will inform what happens next?

What is one other method that the teacher could use to check comprehension?

## Checking Comprehension: Video Discussion Questions

### Classroom Video 4: Checking Comprehension Compilation

What methods do the teachers use to check comprehension?

- Cold Calling
- Think/Pair/Share
- Non-Verbal Check-Ins
- Other (write down what you saw)

What were two examples of non-verbal check-ins used in these classes?

Which methods to check comprehension seemed to be the most effective? Why?

Could you use any of these methods in your own teaching? How would you adapt it for your learners?

What are your top three takeaways from the video?

What will you do to check comprehension the next time you teach?

## Checking Comprehension: Your Turn!

Pick out 1-2 times during the next class that you will teach to stop and check for learner understanding. Plan how you will check in with all of the learners.

	Questions	We Do It
<b>Name of Activity:</b>	<i>What questions will you ask? Check 1-3 different types of questions you will ask, then write them out.</i>	<i>How will you get all learners engaged? Check at least one different method of involving learners, and write down how you will integrate it in the activity.</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> True/False <input type="checkbox"/> Open/Close Ended <input type="checkbox"/> Wh- Questions <input type="checkbox"/> Give an Example <input type="checkbox"/> Fill in the Blank <input type="checkbox"/> Give a Definition <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple Choice <input type="checkbox"/> Either/Or	<input type="checkbox"/> Cold Calling <input type="checkbox"/> Think/Pair/Share <input type="checkbox"/> Non-Verbal Check-Ins <input type="checkbox"/> Other
	<i>Think about how you will respond if learners struggle to answer these questions. How will you support them?</i>	<i>Think about how you will respond if learners struggle to demonstrate understanding. How will you support them?</i>

### Reflection Questions: After Teaching

What happened when you checked comprehension? What went well?

What was challenging? What do you want to continue to work on?

How did the learners respond?

What are two goals you have for checking comprehension in your future teaching?