

ASSESSMENT OF READING COMPREHENSION

Iulia Ignatiuc, Doctor of Philology
Balti State University

Assessment of reading comprehension is very important in foreign language teaching. It doesn't only measure student progress in text understanding, but also gives the teacher the possibility to estimate the level of materials appropriate for teaching and helps him determine what modifications of planned interventions are necessary. Besides, it contributes to the evaluation of word-level skills and knowledge. The success depends on how valid the assessment itself is.

Comprehension is defined in different ways. Scholars concerned with the mental activities of the readers who interact with written language define it as thought-getting and thought-manipulating (E. B. Huey) or as “construction and progressive refinement of hypotheses in order to comprehend, interpret, or evaluate text information” (R. L. Thorndike). Others are interested in the outcome, or product, of readers’ encounter with texts (R. Barr and M. Sadow).

The main activities for developing reading comprehension skills are question answering and discussion. The questions teachers ask to assess student reading comprehension may be very different and it is the teacher’s

responsibility to choose those that are most effective. These questions should be reasonable and make it possible for students to use various ways of responding to what they have read.

Sometimes unexperienced teachers concentrate too much on asking questions that require only memory for directly stated information, just some simple recall of a phrase, a detail from a text, or a vocabulary item. However, a different type of questions should be in the teacher's attention. These are the questions that require students to formulate and express an opinion or an evaluation of an event or a reading passage. Such questions require high-level thinking which further develop high-level cognitive processes. Differences like these between questions affect not only the cognitive complexity of students' responses, but the grammatical complexity as well.

The questions asked to assess reading comprehension play one more role: they teach the students what it means to understand a text, how to distinguish between what is important and what is not in a particular text. By answering such questions again and again about different texts the students learn to understand prose in general and develop the sense of what is generally important.

Though we should distinguish between teaching comprehension and assessing it, in most cases the questions appropriate for developing comprehension skills are also appropriate for assessing them. The problem is to state what are the 'good' questions to fairly assess the students' comprehension skills. A lot has been written about this. A number of question-classification schemes have been developed but they are difficult for implementation. R. Barr and M. Sadow speak about text-related and beyond-text questions. The first reflect the story as a coherent whole and should be asked in order to follow the author's thoughts. Beyond-text questions ask about the information that is 'beyond' the lines. Such questions that are always thought provoking help students make generalizations about the writer's ideas and also relate the given text to texts they have already read. Beyond-text questions teach students how to enjoy and appreciate literature.

If we relate the above mentioned types of questions to Th. Barrett's taxonomy of questions we can state that the text-related questions require the students to focus on ideas and information explicitly stated in the text. They locate or identify information explicitly stated in the text and recall it from memory. We may ask students to recognize and recall details, main ideas, comparisons, cause-effect relationships and character traits. These questions also require the students to analyse, synthesise or organise information, involving quotation, summary and paraphrase.

The beyond-text questions require the students to conjecture about information that might have been included in the text, to guess what may have occurred in addition to explicitly stated events, to predict outcomes, to interpret figurative language, and personal experience, to emotionally respond to the text.

Both types of questions are very important in language teaching. Only after answering text-related questions the students can get involved in answering the questions that go beyond the text as a communicative entity. In the first case the teacher will assess the students' comprehension of the text while in the second case he will assess the students' ability to use the information from a text to form and express their own ideas about the world in general.

The answers to beyond-text questions may often turn into a discussion of things that are not at all related to the text the students have just read.

As far as the surface structure of the questions is concerned, it does not always reveal the level of cognitive difficulty of the question. A question like "when did it happen?" may be text-related if the answer is explicitly given in the text and beyond-text if the student must infer or form a guess. Thus it may be very easy or very difficult.

Another activity to assess reading comprehension is using 'free recall' by having the students retell the story or reproduce the information in their own words.

Teachers may use other activities, e.g. different tests, for comprehension assessment, however they will always know that as reading comprehension is first of all the ability to answer comprehension questions, the role of asking these questions is of paramount importance.

References

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