A Note on Comprehension Checking

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The focus in this note is on comprehension checking during aural/oral interaction, e.g interrupting the telling of a story and asking students if they understood. There are two kinds of questions used for this kind of comprehension checking: Global, eg. "Did you understand?" and Local, focused on a particular item used in the story or discussion, e.g. What does "vicarious" mean? To simplify discussion, the focus here is on comprehension checking while the teacher is telling the class a story.

The goal of comprehension checking during a story is to inform the teacher if input is comprehensible. We must ask whether comprehension checking is necessary.

Students generally (but not always, see below) know when they have not understood a message. If students feel that they have not understood, they should be able to communicate this to the teacher. In other words, if students know when they have understood, there is no need for comprehension checking.

Certain conditions must be met for this to happen: Most important, students must feel free to interact with the teacher.

Teacher-imposed comprehension checking (e.g. "tell me what I just said") is only necessary when students will not indicate lack of comprehension, that is, when they feel they have no control over the situation.

When comprehension checking is Interpreted as a test

Whether comprehension checks are aimed at globalor local comprehension they can be interpreted as a test, raise anxiety, and take the focus away from understanding. Instead, the focus will be on preparing for the comprehension question, which often means having a translation ready to demonstrate comprehension. Also, local comprehension checking sends the message that students should fully understand every word and understand each word well enough to give an accurate translation, which is counter to what we know about vocabulary acquisition.

Reducing the need for comprehension clarification requests

Students need to be informed that they do not have to understand every word: Even optimal input will contain a little "noise," a little incomprehensible input (unknown vocabulary, unacquired grammar). This is normal and harmless if it does not seriously impair comprehension.

When there are comprehension problems, in many cases, comprehension of the story will improve with more input; even the very next thing the teacher says may help listeners understand the flow of the story

and lead to more language acquisition. Students need to know this. Similar advice applies to reading as all.

Arguments in favor of comprehension-checking.

There are two arguments used to support teacher-initiated comprehension checks:

First, students sometimes think they understand but they don't. But errors in comprehension, as noted just above, often work themselves out with more input. Of course, when input is impoverished, when it consists of only a few sentences, one cannot be sure. But with longer, more natural input,we generally arrive at the correct interpretation.

A second justification for comprehension checks is that they force students to pay attention to input they would normally not pay attention to. Knowledge that a comprehension check is coming acts as an incentive to attend to a text or presentation that is difficult or boring. Surely a better way is to provide more interesting and more comprehensible input.

Nearly all language acquisition proceeds quite well without external comprehension checking. If we make sure input isinteresting and comprehensible, are sensitive to students' indications of lack of comprehension, and make sure that students feel comfortable indicating lack of comprehension, there will be no need for a great deal of comprehension checking. Even shy students will not hesitate to ask for clarification when necessary; with truly compelling stories, students will really want to know what is taking place.

We have arrived at the same conclusions McQuillan and Tse (1999) did. Seely and Ray

(1999 argued that "it is impossible to know whether every student is ... understanding unless further steps are taken." Moreover, it must take place "early in the process of vocabulary acquisition...(and be) nearly instantaneous..." (p. 5).

But McQuillan and Tse point out that there should be "no expectation that students will understand every word of the story, nor [should they be] held accountable for such a standard ... Freed of this burden, students are much more likely to be engaged. As real listeners, students feel more comfortable asking questions or indicating a breakdown in comprehension when they do not understand. If that atmosphere is absent, then the problem is with the teacher, not the students. We believe that putting students on the spot with constant comprehension checking is counterproductive because it may raise student anxiety and certainly will break the flow of the storytelling itself" (p. 6).

Works cited:

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