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Concept Questions and Alternatives: Easing Check Understanding

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Abstract

It is axiomatic to think of teaching, especially in a foreign language classroom context, without having moments to verify the extent to which the teaching is being successful or not. Teacher's input is no guarantee that intake and output are taking place. Therefore, there is a constant need to check for understanding which is done usually by the means of questioning. However, the efficiency and the type of questions to be asked are crucial to assure the effectiveness of the check for understanding. Teachers, and language teachers in particular, should have a repertoire of means to check for understanding, there should be a variation not only in the types of questions to ask, but also in the use some alternatives which may bring variety and joy. Concept Questions (CQs) have been proven to be an effective means to check for understanding, they are easy, quick and simple which can make checks for understanding more efficient for teachers and students, but they should be well planned and asked depending very much on the stage of the lesson and what is being checked. The purpose of this article is to discuss how CQs are to be prepared, illustrate the way they can be successfully used in a language lesson, having a of Presentation Practice and Production (PPP) lesson as an example, and present new alternatives for check for understanding in a language classroom.

Keywords: Check Understating, Concept Questions, Alternatives

1. Introduction

Asking the right questions at the right time with the right words in a conversation is like good chefs who know the right time, the right amount, and the right temperature to cook his food. Questioning is the root of planning. It is the root of searching for the unknown and the root of development. In English language teaching, the right question formation "is a basic part of teaching and learning English" (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 32).

What is more, a very high percentage of teaching and learning in the classroom involves questions and answers (Talebinezahd, 2003, p. 46). In teaching, questioning is not only done when testing or practicing, it is also done when checking for student understanding. Questions such as "Is it clear?" "Any problem?" "Any doubt?" are valuable but not reliable when teachers want to check for understanding. Thus, teachers have to look for alternative ways to check for student understanding.

The use of Concept Questions is an easy, quick and simple procedure which can make checks for understanding more efficient for teachers and students. The purpose of this article is to show how CQs can be asked and successfully used in EFL lessons particularly when used in the Presentation Practice and Production (PPP) approach.

2. Questions in a language classroom

Most teaching practice involves questions. Teachers use questions to teach, test and chat. Display and referential questions are one category of questions used in the classroom. Nunan (1989) maintains that the difference between display and referential questions is that the former refers to questions that questioners asks and know the answers to, and the latter has to do with questions that questioners ask because they do not know the answers.

In his explanation of display questions, Talebinezahd (2003, p. 46) writes, "Some teachers give their students the information and then try to ask them questions. For example, "This is a pen. What is this?" Such questions, at best, test something of the students' memory, not their comprehension". As for referential questions, Talebinezahd (2003, p. 46) warns that they should be "meaning based, and not focus solely on form."

Another category of classroom questions involves polar closed questions, closed questions, and open questions (Scrivener, 2012 as cited in Rachmawaty and Ariani, 2018, p. 41). Polar closed questions are those that require one of two possible one-word answers. Alternative questions fit into this type of question, examples are "Is Japan in Asia or America?", "Do you live in a house or a flat?". Closed Questions are questions about facts. Usually there is only one possible correct answer. For example, "Are you a student?", "Is Windhoek the capital city of Namibia?" Open questions are questions with no single possible correct answer. Different convincing answers are acceptable, examples are "What is the best way to learn a foreign language?", "When should people retire?".

A third question category is test questions. Test question are questions asked to test students' knowledge. For example, teachers may ask students "What is the plural of foot?" In this case teachers are testing students' mastery of the irregular plural.

CQs, another category of questions, can be defined, as Gower et al. (2005) put it, as procedures to check whether pupils understand the information taught by asking display questions and referential questions. Concepts questions are used to highlight the gist of the meaning of the target language taught during a lesson and verbally check students' understanding of new vocabulary, grammar points, communicative functions and instructions presented in class (Kargar and Divsar, 2019). The focus of this article is on CQs which can be defined as questions for check students' understanding of what is taught and instructions given for classroom management. They require very short answers, usually one or two words and teachers generally know the correct answers that they expect their students to give.

3. The Importance of Concept Questions

CQs are important because they allow students to convey meaning and understanding of grammar in an efficient, student-centered manner (David, 2007; Florkowska, 2018; Workman, 2008). CQs are effective because students' responses to these questions may tell teachers if students understand or not, they are student-centered because students are likely to give their own real answers.

The use of CQs can help teachers see if students fully comprehend instructions and their use allows teachers to clarify the areas which students did not grasp (Zurakowski, nd). CQs may help teachers have an idea if students understand the new language or the instructions given, but they may not, sometimes, give teachers a "full" view of students' understanding. In fact, no technique, question or procedure will give teachers such an understanding. Whenever necessary, teachers have to combine different techniques to check for understanding despite the fact that CQs are effective. CQs allow teachers to notice the areas that students still find confusing (Zurakowski, nd). In other words, CQs help teachers carry out remedial work after teaching, and/or after presenting a new language concept because it is often the case that the lesson will not proceed if students lack understanding.

CQs help teachers determine if students understand what was taught without directly asking, “Do you understand?” What is more, CQ may be a starting point for a natural conversation. Students may expand on their answers and ideas. CQs may allow teachers to evaluate what students know. They may help students articulate their English knowledge and teachers may clarify and add to such knowledge (see <https://bridge.edu/tefl/blog/ccq-using-concept-checking-questions-esl-classroom/>).

In short, CQs may help teachers check student understanding. CQs may open a conversation between students and students, and teachers can create natural conversations with students starting with their answers. Student answers will permit students to express and incorporate ideas about what is taught and this, in turn, may make for more student-centered teaching.

4. Guidelines on How to Make Concept Questions

It is important to understand the way a procedure can be used before using it. Although creativity and spontaneity are part of teaching, knowing the backbone of a technique is critically important for teachers. Before jumping into the guidelines on how to make CQs, it is important for teachers to bear in mind the following general principles of classroom questioning as summarized by Talebinezahd (2003):

1. Always have a purpose for your questions, other than testing the students’ knowledge of form.
2. Ask for information you do not share with your learners, but make sure they have it, because you do not want to be confined to clichés.
3. Try to contextualize your questions and make them as learning-based as possible.
4. Do not let questions and answers become only one-way activities: questions from teachers and answers from students (p. 47).

The principles above should be taken into account when planning and asking CQs. One principle is to not ask questions that require student knowledge about For example when asking CQs to check for understanding the word “plane” teachers should not ask “Does it have two engines?” In this case the teacher is testing students’ knowledge about planes rather than check for understanding. Contextualization is another principle to be considered when planning or asking CQs. For example, when checking to understand the word *Spring* in a context like Angola where there is no such season, a teacher may ask, “Does it snow in spring?” First students are unlikely to know what snow is. Second, they undoubtedly never lived in a place where there is snow. Unless the teacher explains what snow is, teachers should ask communicative questions and avoid questions which are memory questions. Below are some guidelines to consider when planning and asking CQs.

- Jot down different concepts related to the item being checked. For example, if teaching the word *strawberry* teachers can write the following statements. It is usually red. It is sweet. It is small. From these statements it is easy for teachers to plan the CQs . For the first statement, “it is usually red”, a concept question may be *Is it usually red?* For the second statement, a concept question may be *Is it sweet?* For the third statement, a concept question may be *Is it small?* Teachers can consider this guideline mainly when planning CQs to check for students’ understanding of new vocabulary.
- Use simple language. Language used in CQs should be within students’ comprehension. The fewer words the better. Teachers should not embellish their language or be too wordy. If the question sounds too complex students can become confused and bored. For example, when teaching *the present continuous* and using the sentence *I’m driving to my work*, the following question may be very complicated, *Am I inside a four wheel vehicle with an engine on a street moving towards the place where I am paid for what I do?* Teachers should avoid very wordy and complicated questions. Instead teachers could simply ask *Am I going to my job? Am I on a bus? Is the car mine?* These are simple and short questions.
- Do not use the same language taught in the concept question. It is not a good idea to incorporate the language we are checking in the concept question because students may answer correctly even if they do

not understand what was taught. For example, when teaching comparisons and the grammatical structure *short adjective+er than* and the sentence is *Lubango (an Angolan city) is colder than Ondjiva (an Angolan city)* an ineffective concept question would be *Is Lubango colder than Ondjiva?* It is obvious that students will answer yes even if they did not understand what colder than is. A better question would be *Is the temperature higher in Ondjiva? Where do we need more air conditioning, Lubango or Ondjiva?* Teachers do not have to incorporate colder than in these questions.

- Ask questions that require short, simple answers. It is important when asking CQs to pose questions that require short answers. Asking open-ended questions may lead to various possible answers that may end up bewildering the teachers and others students in the class. More preferable is to ask *Yes or No Questions* and *Alternative Questions* such questions that require short answers, although some *Wh Questions* may also elicit a single answer. For example when teaching past events using verbs in the simple past in the sentence *Júlia went to Benguela yesterday*, a simple concept question could be *Is Júlia here?* or *Did she go there today?* *Did she go to Huambo?* Note that all questions require a single answer. The possibilities for other answers are very remote.
- Ask questions to check for understanding of the language taught, not of the situation. In other words, when checking for understanding the focus should be on the language alone, and the teacher should avoid asking questions that require answers beyond the language focus being taught. For example, the topic is *Other People's Routines* and the teacher taught *Katumbo does not have breakfast and goes to school at 7 0'clock in the morning*. The teacher should not ask questions like *Is Katumbo healthy?* *Why do think she does not have breakfast?* *Are her parents poor?* *Should the school provide breakfast for pupils like Katumbo?* These questions do not check for understanding of the language taught. Instead the teacher can simply ask *Does Katumbo eat in the morning?* *Does she have a meal before going to school?*
- Be receptive to students' unanticipated answers. Students' may give a yes to a question that teachers had expected them to answer *no*. Sometimes students may explain their answer. In these cases, teachers should listen to the students. Students can support their answer and teachers should be flexible and not consider themselves as knowers of everything. For example, if teachers teach the word *skirt* and want to check for understanding, they may ask *Do men wear skirts?* In some rural areas of southern Angola, some men wear cloth that resembles a skirt. If students answer yes, in this case as long as they can explain their answers, this answer may be considered correct. For beginning students if they do not have enough English they may explain their answer in the L1 if others in the classroom share the same L1.
- Involve students in questioning. Give the floor to the class to ask CQs about the language being taught. They may want to focus primarily on vocabulary. For example, when teaching the word *breakfast*, teachers may ask *Can we have bread for breakfast?* Students may continue by asking *Can you have Kizangua (a local non alcoholic maize drink) for breakfast?* This should only be done if teachers have enough time and if they can involve one or two students. Otherwise, it may sound like a drill.

When planning or asking concept questions teachers should bear in mind that CQs should use simple language. The language being checked should not be a part of the question. The questions should focus on what is taught, not social situations. When planning, it is good to jot down different concepts related to the item being checked because these notes may help teachers to construct the questions.

5. Concept Questions in a Lesson

To illustrate how we can use CQs in English lessons we can adopt the Presentation Practice Production (PPP) approach. PPP is a commonly used approach to train teachers of English and to teach English in many parts of the world. As the name suggests, a PPP lesson usually has three stages: Presentation, Practice and Production. At the presentation stage, the new language is presented, i.e, new words, new structures or any new linguistic item. Teachers usually teach the meaning, the pronunciation and the written form of the new language, i.e, what the new language means, how it sounds and what it looks like. This is a very teacher-controlled.

At the practice stage, also called controlled practice, the new language is practiced in a very mechanical way, usually based on verbal or picture prompts. Usually students do not express their opinions, feelings, and ideas.

The focus is to manipulate the new language. Teachers usually correct most of the mistakes students commit. At this stage the degree of teacher control decreases.

At the production stage, also called freer practice, students practice the language in creative and communicative activities, incorporating ideas, feelings and opinions of what is being practiced. Students are allowed to incorporate other language which might not have been taught. Teachers may delay error correction. There are several alternatives to PPP but this is a very commonly used approach. It is also called the *popular methodology*. Although CQs can be used a PPP lesson format, CQs can be adapted to almost all formats of an English lesson.

6. Presentation

Let us consider a school located in a rural area. The students are beginners. The topic presented is, for example, Jobs and the new vocabulary includes the words nurse, farmer, and police officer (for the sake of this article only these jobs were selected, but other common jobs around the world may include teachers, taxi driver, and mechanics).

Step 1: Teacher introduces the new topic:

Teacher: *Today we are going to talk about Jobs.*

Step 2: Teacher clarifies the term, jobs, by showing different pictures of jobs.

Teacher checks for understanding:

Teacher: *Are jobs for adults or for children?*

Students: *For adults*

Teacher: *Do adults receive a salary?*

Students: *Yes*

Teacher: *Do you want to have a job in the future?*

Students: *Yes*

In this example, the teacher asks questions that do not require long answers. Students simply offer one answer for the first question and yes or no for the rest.

Step 3: Teacher focuses on the meaning of the new words using pictures. After focusing on the meaning of the new words the teacher checks for understanding.

For the word nurse.

Teacher: *Does a nurse wear a uniform?*

Students: *Yes*

Teacher: *Does a nurse work in a school or an hospital?*

Students: *In an hospital.*

In the first question there is one characteristic, the nurse's uniform. Although there are other jobs where workers wear uniforms, nurses do most of the time. As for the second question it is very easy for students to understand that nurses usually work in hospitals, and the word hospital is very familiar to students.

For the word farmer:

Teacher: *Does a farmer work in agriculture?*

Students: *Yes*

Teacher: *Do farmers work in the city?*

Students: *No*

In the first question the word agriculture is related to farmers and students would easily understand it. Their answer would be realistic. As to the second question students know the word city and farmers usually work on farms outside of the city. The word city is not as difficult as words like fertilizer or seeds.

For the word Police Officer:

Teacher: *Do they wear a brown or blue uniform?*

Students: *Blue uniform.*

Teacher: *Can they work on the weekends?*

Students: *Yes*

Words like guns, sirens, and law enforcement are avoided because students may not know these terms. The teacher tries to use words which are within the range of students' vocabulary. Students know the uniform that police officers wear. So these words are familiar to the students. The questions are short, they simple requiring a single answer.

Step 4: After clarifying the new topic and presenting the new vocabulary the teacher focuses on pronunciation and the written form of the new vocabulary.

Turning to the presentation of the new structure, *what are you going to be...? I am going to be...* The teacher creates a context in which Kawé and Yola (two boys who are friends) talk about their future plans using T-T interactions and pictures.

Kawé: *Hello Yola.*

Yola: *Hello Kawé.*

Kawé: *What are you going to be when you grow up?*

Yola: *I am going to be a nurse. And you?*

Kawé: *I am going to be a police officer, I like that uniform.*

To check for understanding of the question *what are you going to be when you grow up?* the teacher asks the following concept questions:

Teacher: *Is Kawé asking about the present or future?*

Students: *Future*

Teacher: *Does Kawé want to have Yola's job in the future?*

Students: *Yes*

To check for understanding of Yola's answer, the teacher asks the following questions.

Teacher: *Does Yola want to treat people in the future?*

Students: *Yes*

To check for understanding of Kawé's answer, the teacher asks the following question:

Teacher: *Is Kawé joining the military in the future?*

Students: *No*

In both examples the questions are simple and clear. The teacher avoids incorporating *going to be* in the questions.

Step 5: The teacher focuses on the pronunciation and written form of the questions and answers, highlighting the new structures by underlining them.

Practice

Step 6: At the practice stage the teacher gives some picture prompts by asking students questions. They have to answer according to the picture the teacher displays:

Teacher: Now, I am going to ask you the question and you are going to answer. Teacher demonstrates with a student to make it clear how the drill is going to take place. The teacher checks for understanding:

Teacher: *Who is asking the questions you, or the teacher?*

Students: *The teacher.*

Teacher: *Is the answer from you or from the picture?*

Students: *The picture.*

Two alternative questions could be used to check if the students understand the instructions. The answers are in the questions making it easy for the teacher to see whether students understood the question or not.

Production

At this stage the teacher wants students to work in pairs and incorporate their views, ideas and the language that they know.

Step 7: Teacher's instruction: Now, you are going to work in pairs and ask each other about what you are going to be when you grow up. The teacher demonstrates by using a dialogue, not pictures.

Teacher checks for understanding:

Teacher: *Are you going to ask the teacher?*

Students: *No*

Teacher: *Are you going to work in pairs?*

Students: *Yes*

Teacher: *Are you going to use the pictures?*

Students: *No*

These questions are a good way to see if students understand how the activity is to be done. The questions indicate whether the teacher will be involved or not, if students will work individually or in pairs and if the answers are based on the pictures or not.

Step 8: After students finish pair work, it is the feedback stage where the teacher asks some students to go to the front of the class and present what they practiced.

The mini scenario above illustrates how teachers can use CQs in PPP to check students' understanding. Using CQs can be a useful, simple and effective way to check if the teaching is effective or not.

CQs may be an effective means to check if students understand a language concept taught or an instruction given. But, there are other innovative ways to check for understanding which can be easily adopted or adapted by language teachers. These are presented below.

Goes with/go with formula

This is a way of checking for understanding where students are invited to become active. After teaching a new language concept students are required to say the items which have an association with, even if they do not have enough language to do so. If they share a common L1 among themselves and the teacher they can use it.

Teacher: (showing a picture of a bank) says "this is a bank".

Teacher: Class, Bank goes with...

SS1: Goes with people

Teacher: Quite right

SS2: Goes with money

Teacher: Very well

SS3: Goes with cheque

Teacher: Very well

This "formula" can be done a bit differently when the teacher is the one who says *the goes with* and students are those who will say *if the goes with* is correct. Using the example above it can be as follows:

Teacher: (showing a picture of a bank) says "this is a bank".

Teacher: Does it go with food?

SS: No

Teacher: Does it go with money transfer?

SS: Yes

Teacher: Does it go with ATM?

SS: Yes

Teacher: Does it go with business?

SS: Yes

Positive/negative formula

This is another way to check for understanding. It helps not only in checking for understanding but also reinforcing the negative structures in students' minds. As the name suggests here the teacher gives students two alternatives for them to select, one positive and one negative, for example it is or it is not, do or don't, can or can't etc. and students have to select which one is correct. Below is an illustration how it can be implemented in the classroom.

Teacher: (Teaching the word shoplift) Imagine you go to a fruit and vegetable market and you pick up an apple. You hide it inside your jacket because you want nobody to see it, you don't want to pay for. Class, you are shoplifting, that is called shoplifting.

Teacher: Is it legal or not legal?

SS: It is not legal.

Teacher: Can you be caught or not caught?

SS: Can be caught.

Teacher: You should do that or you shouldn't do that? **SS:** You shouldn't do that.

Yes, quite there, sorry formula

In here students are the ones who ask the CQs about that. L1 may be used for lower level students. Even if students do not ask questions or ask them correctly, the teacher is not to correct them, but focuses on the gist of the questions or statements. Teacher should only say *Yes, quite there, or sorry*.

Teacher: (teaching the expression "out of the loop") Look class, the president said that at the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic it was out of the loop the number of people who were infected in the country.

Teacher: Class, questions or statements on the meaning of out of the loop.

SS1: Can't see.

Teacher: Quite there.

SS2: It means very short?

Teacher: Sorry.

SS3: Didn't know.

Teacher: Yes.

One in three formula

It is a procedure where the teacher states three words and students have to choose the one which is related to the language item being checked.

Teacher: (Showing a picture of potatoes) Class, these are potatoes.

Teacher: Cakes, chips, or salad.

SS: Chips

All of these ways of checking for understanding do not magically work in a classroom. They need planning and practice. The more the teacher and students are acquainted with them the easier it will be to implement them, enlarging in this way the repertoire of procedures to check for understanding.

7. Conclusion

Learning a foreign language is one of the greatest challenges individuals can pose to themselves. Language learning is done mostly in classrooms. It may involve not only the individuals who want to learn but also teachers and other students. Teachers play key roles as facilitators of the learning process by providing input for the students to produce the expected language. Stops and checks throughout the process are important for teachers to do so they can make the necessary changes to the learning so that students can be successful. Concept Questions are an effective means for measuring the efficacy of teaching. The points described in this article can be summarized as follows:

- The term, concept questions, refers to notions of questions that check for understanding, questions that elicit conversations about unrealistic questions that check for understanding and short questions.

- Concept questions may help teachers check for students' understanding and carry out remedial work.
- When planning concept questions, teachers should: (a) jot down different concepts related to the item being checked; (b) use simple language; (c) not use the same language taught in the concept questions; (d) ask questions that require short, simple answers; (e) ask questions to check for understanding of the language being taught, not of the situation; (f) be receptive to students' unanticipated answers; and (g) be involved in questioning.
- There are other innovative ways teachers can adapt or adopt to check for understanding such as *Goes with/go* with formula, *positive/negative* formula; *yes, quite there, sorry* formula and *One in three* formula.

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