

CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING



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Checking for Understanding creates a picture of learning so that teachers can be sure of what students have learned and make any changes needed to increase their understanding. Below you will find an overview to Checking for Understanding and its role in the language classroom today.

A LITTLE STORY

There you are in front of your class teaching your heart out in the target language. Students track you and nod. They look attentive but how do you know that your students are understanding the words that are coming out of your mouth? You ask if they understand and your students nod while a few say yes. To verify their nods you ask a couple of students some questions to reassure yourself that the nods were truthful. Those couple of students answer your questions with varying degrees of success and you begin to question who really DOES understand? Many students today have mastered the role of being compliant learners and as the instructional leaders in our classrooms we must keep our finger on the pulse of student comprehension and skill acquisition.

WHAT IS CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING?

Checking for understanding is a powerful diagnostic tool that helps teachers ensure that students are engaged in the lesson and understand what the teacher is trying to get across. It simply means that the teacher asks all of the students to do or say something to demonstrate their understanding or comprehension. These checks should be frequent and should happen in an ongoing manner throughout the lesson, as it can create a detailed picture of student learning for a teacher. If students don't understand what a teacher is saying, there is NO learning taking place. When students are learning a new word, phrase, or structure, they will need multiple opportunities for input before being expected to produce. By providing students time to process language, and receive feedback through a carefully designed check for understanding, the teacher will ensure students will be ready to move on and create output in the new language.

Through the check for understanding, a teacher will have an accurate picture of what students can do at any given moment

and the opportunity to modify the learning experiences to increase student understanding. If students do not understand, the teacher must provide additional strategies to make the language comprehensible and ensure that all students can meet or exceed the targets of the lesson.

Since learners vary in how quickly they acquire new learning, when teachers check for comprehension they can identify who is ready for the next step and who needs more input.

Checking for understanding lets the teachers know which students are ready to move on and which ones need additional help in reaching the learning target. This knowledge then allows the teacher to modify instruction in a way that is closely aligned to students needs. If teachers wait to check student performance during practice activities, quizzes, homework, or assessments, it will likely be too late to make any changes in instruction.

STUDENT MOTIVATION

One of the most essential elements of learning is student motivation: a learner's ability to see value in the learning experience and therefore commit to the process. This happens largely when students believe that the work is relevant, interesting and meaningful. Checking for understanding allows a teacher to provide relevance, not only to the content, but also to the learning process itself, and consequently requires that ALL students be involved. When students feel they are a valued member of the classroom community and will be held accountable for demonstrating their learning via meaningful performances, they are more likely to commit to the activities themselves and the overall learning process. Therefore, as students and teachers progress through a learning episode, teacher must be checking with every student to gauge each one's comprehension. Even more important is the impact of the feedback for students. Feedback allows a teacher to



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provide just-in-time support for those students who need it, sometime that is essential to keeping students on track. Students commit to learning when they are successful. Checking frequently for understanding throughout a learning episode helps to ensure learner success, and allows students to become increasingly aware of how to monitor their own understanding (Fischer & Frey, 2007).

CHECKING AS FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Neither effective formative assessment nor effective checks of understanding do not happen by accident. They are most useful when they are both part of a larger plan that leverages strategies to ensure that all students meet or exceed the performance targets. Checking for understanding is formative assessment, albeit on a smaller and less formal scale than some. It may or may not be planned in advance. The information gathered while checking for understanding tends to be rather temporary and may not be recorded in any way. It gives a moving picture of the state of instruction at that moment. The instant feedback is invaluable for moving forward in the lesson. If students are not demonstrating comprehension, they can be immediately regrouped based on their performance level or their learning style. The next activity can be differentiated through content, process or product, based on the information gathered during the check.

Formal Formative assessments on the other hand are deliberate and intentionally paced to provide the needed data on student learning. Formative assessment is part of an overall assessment plan that seeks to generate the kind of information a teacher and a student need to ensure a successful learning experience. Many of the activities teachers use in the classroom can function as both a check for understanding and formative assessments when used to provide information on student understanding in the learning episode. The information from both should effect a change in instruction based on student needs as demonstrated in the data.

STRATEGIES FOR CHECKING

World language students need to experience the language through the language; therefore, it is important not to check comprehension by asking students to use English to explain what they have understood. And simply asking, "Do you understand?" is often not helpful because learners tend to automatically say "yes," and this becomes a meaningless exercise.

Checking For Understanding with Non-Verbal Responses

Students use some type of signal to indicate their response to a comprehension check.

Finger Hold-Ups. Students signal their responses by hold their thumbs up to show "Yes," "I understand completely," hold their thumbs down to signal "No," "I don't understand at all." They can signal their lack of understanding by wiggling their thumbs to indicate "I'm not sure."

Hold-Ups with Colored Cards. Students hold up different colored cards to give the same information to the teacher but instead of hand signals they can use colored cards. A green card might indicate "yes," a red card might indicate "no," and a yellow card might indicate, "I'm not sure."

Hold Ups with Correct Number or Letter. Teachers ask students to show the number or letter of the correct answer to a teacher question. The teacher may pose a question and then give the students three or four possible answers each of which has a number attached to it. For example, if the answer to the teacher question is number 3 then the students can hold up three fingers for the teacher to see, they can write the number 3 on a piece of paper to show the teacher, or they can find and hold up the number 3 from an envelope full of numbers that they keep at their desks or in their language folders. These same procedures could be used if the students must choose the answer to a teacher question among three or four letters. They might hold up the letter "a" if the answer to the teacher's question corresponds to that letter, or the letter "b" if the answer is "b."

Hold Ups with Picture Signals. Students hold up pictures to signal their response to a question. For example, students might have a set of pictures for each member of the family or for each character or event in a story. They must hold up the correct picture according to the question that the teacher is asking.

Electronic Student Response System. Students use an input device such as "clickers" to show understanding that can be seen electronically as respond to the teacher's question.

Mini-Whiteboards. Students write or draw answers on small whiteboards. Students hold up the whiteboards once they have completed the comprehension task.

Four Corners. Students show their answer to a teacher question by going to different corners of the room for the answer they have selected.



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Effective strategies in checking for understanding include a wide variety of monitoring techniques. Observing students' performance is the most basic way to see if they understand. It will be clear to the teacher if the students do not understand, if they are not following directions or if they have puzzled looks on their faces.

More intentional strategies include student checks where responses can be verbal and non-verbal, oral or written, or pictures or actions. There are roles for both the verbal and non-verbal responses at various stages of language acquisition. Responses can also be at various levels of complexity and could be at the word level, sentence level or the extended discourse level.

Careful planning is essential in leveraging student performance and growth through effective checks for understanding. While there is a wide variety of strategies from which one can choose, it is essential to choose the best strategy for the situation. This way checks stay fresh and engaging for students and provide teachers with the information they need to modify the learning experience.

A FINAL WORD

Remember, checking for understanding is a powerful diagnostic tool that helps teachers ensure that students are with them every step of the way and helps students know they are understanding what the teacher is trying to get across. It is an essential component of the learning process that allows teachers to keep their finger on the pulse of learning in a classroom.

Checking For Understanding with Verbal Responses

Students produce spoken or written language to demonstrate their comprehension.

Questions – Teachers –or students—can ask questions to which students must respond

yes–no/true–false
either–or
who, what, where, when,
why

Missing Information – Students can supply missing information.
fill-in-the-blank (orally or in writing)

supply the next step in a set of directions or a process
Complete open-ended sentences

Fill in a concept-organizer such as a Venn Diagram or a story map

Sequencing/Retelling – Students can sequence or retell a story

Exit/Entrance Slip – Students can complete an exit or entrance slip orally or in writing on their way in or out the door.

Summarizing – Students can summarize what the teacher said and a second student can summarize what the first student said

Cloze – Short cloze exercise

3-2-1 – 3 things you found out, 2 interesting things, and 1 question you still have.

Reflections – Students write reflections on a lesson, such as what they learned, what caused them difficulty, what they found helpful

Line-Ups – two lines of students face each other, one line moves with same question or a new one

Inside-Outside Circles – same as line up except with circles, better for limited spaces

Partner-Share/Turn and Talk/Elbow Buddies/Shoulder Buddies –students tell partners their understanding about the learning

Pairs Squared –two partners share with two more partners

Jigsaw/Base Groups Expert Groups – each group becomes an expert on a certain part of the lesson, then debriefs the whole group

