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## A QUESTIONING SPREE FOR EASY COMPREHENSION

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### ABSTRACT

The target of any reading activity is comprehension, but it can be the most difficult skill to master, especially for English language learners. Learners often have problems in mastering, Science, Math, or Social Studies concepts. Therefore at all levels of English proficiency and literacy development learners will benefit from improved comprehension skills.

There are a number of ways to build English language comprehension skills. Often, standard strategies that teachers use in main stream classrooms are a good starting point, where the teacher just needs to be familiarized with language learner's academic needs. This article focuses on strategies of questioning in the acquisition of comprehension skills. An experiment was conducted for 3rd year students of engineering college who need to sharpen their comprehension skills in English. First the methodology of designing and using questioning for comprehension was explained to the students. Then one set of students undertook the exercise for both direct comprehension i.e. the traditional method and the other one using questions to do the comprehension exercise. The criteria for evaluation and performance was formulated. Using these criteria the answers were evaluated and results tabulated. Detailed analysis of the performance showed that there was merit in using questioning method for improving comprehension skills.

Key words: comprehension, questions, strategy, skill, retention

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### INTRODUCTION

Time and again educationists have stressed on the importance of questions in classroom teaching. Questions stimulate the mental faculties and promote logical thinking, analyses and reasoning. They start from the time of birth till the very end of the learning career. Asking questions is not only a natural feature of communication but also one of the most important tool which teachers have at their disposal. A teacher questioning is a normal situation, but a learner questioning himself would put different skills to task. Questions demand response; however simple or complex they may be,

in turn leading to a series of communicative activities. However the relevance of questions and the time taken to seek maximum answers out of minimal questions maximizes a learner's objective.

Academicians believe that declarative and affirmative sentences of a long prose text can be easily rote learnt in a class and require no questions. Every statement is an answer to some question or other. Hence if every sentence is converted into an interrogative mode by the learners themselves, then the urge to search for the answers might be very strong thereby, generating research abilities. Therefore it is pertinent for teachers to convert a

dull boring class full of affirmed information into a vibrant class full of questions for which the learners eagerly try to extract the answers. Had no questions been initiated in the class then the classroom scenario would not have been stimulating enough for any thought. Keeping this as a point of contention it might be a good move to make students create questions for the text in hand, where the learners write questions. It is obvious that they have to read, comprehend, and reproduce the text in the questioning form.

#### **Why Questions in COMPREHENSION?**

Questions define tasks, express problems and delineate issues. Once an answer is given on a platter then all active thinking stops. When a learner is made to write questions on a given topic his cognitive abilities are ignited. Thinking intensely and framing sentences in order to exemplify a point with due justifications means questioning ones mind, one's thought process continually. When students are made to memorize the content of the lesson by designing their own questions, it is like turning on the ignition of the vehicle rolling towards its destination. In order to achieve this, learners must try to generate questions. The kind of questions the learners prepare depend on their attitude and aptitude. In order to understand the sequence a learner should be made to comprehend the different kinds of questions and what they may lead to, for eg

- a) Deep questions drive our thoughts underneath the surface of things, force us to deal with complexity.
- b) Questions of purpose force us to define our task.
- c) Questions of information force us to look at our sources of information as well as the quality of information.
- d) Questions of interpretation force us to examine how well we are able to organize and give meaning to information.
- e) Questions of assumption force us to examine what we are taking for granted.
- f) Questions of implications force us to follow up where our thinking is going.

- g) Questions of point of view force us to examine our point of view and to consider other relevant points of view.
- h) Questions of relevance force us to discriminate what does and what does not seem to be in the question.
- i) Questions of accuracy force us to evaluate and test for truth and correctness.
- j) Questions of precision force us to give details and be specific.
- k) Questions of consistency force us to examine our thinking for contradictions.
- l) Questions of logic force us to consider how we are able to consider, to rope in ideas, thoughts together. To make sure that it all adds up and makes sense within a reasonable system of some kind.

Many students when given an exercise, do not bother to work it out due to lethargy. eg create questions on a given comprehension passage. The students only activate their minds at the time of their exams. On the other hand there are some teachers who do not propose to generate questions but to rely on a predesigned question bank.

It is important for a teacher and a learner to realize that thinking begins only when questions are framed. No questions means no understanding. Some teachers may resort to easy superficial questions so that it suits their speedy corrections. Students who maintain a disciplined silence have not begun to put together their brains on an exercise or begun to ignite their thought process. They are physically present and mentally absent. Hence throughout the day their silence means entertaining a vacuum. A thinking mind has loads of questions. This surely goes against another preconceived notion that a silent class is a dead class or a zero thinking class? This depends on the subject taken in a particular class for e.g. an English teacher may prefer noise because it means more communication where as a science or a math's teacher may prefer silence which to the teacher means the thought process of the learner has been put to motion.

#### **TYPE OF QUESTIONS**

Questions are categorized under two divisions-teacher derived and learner derived. While

evaluating the questions teachers might use the following check list to create questions.

- a) Decide on the purpose of the question.
- b) Minimize 'yes' and 'no' questions except when checking meaning understanding or encouraging weaker students.
- c) There should be a balance of referential and display questions
- d) Use open ended questions to encourage, elaborate and promote discussion.
- e) Ask questions about important issues rather than trivial content.
- f) Personalize questions wherever possible.
- g) Avoid questions that contain the answer.
- h) Speak questions randomly across the class.
- i) Give enough time for students to answer.
- j) Anticipate student's response.
- k) Give appropriate responses to questions.

Many teachers find it difficult to estimate the amount of time needed for a student to respond to a question. Due to these time constraints a learner might be under pressure and commit errors in frustration. At a higher level, when teachers execute this kind of question seeking exercise a degree of explanation regarding the background and theoretical aspect of questions need to be imparted before hand to the students .In other words students need to be told the kind of questions they need to prepare in order to comprehend and memorize the chapter.

#### FRAMING QUESTIONS

The different kinds of questions that need to be prepared should be based on:

- a) Textual-main idea of the passage
- b) Inferential-supporting ideas with analogies
- c) Vocabulary and structurally related-tone and style of the passage.
- d) Global-Application and logical reasoning.

Although there is by no means a hard and fast rule about the type of questions that fall into each category, textual questions seem easier while questions to do with inference and application category seem to be more difficult.

Different questions that the learners can make.

1. Main idea of the passage-Textual
2. Supporting ideas with analogies-inferential

3. Tone and style of the passage-vocabulary and structurally related.
4. Logical reasoning and overall perspective-global

#### Examples of different Question type.

1. Main idea of the passage-Textual
  - a. Which of the following most accurately states the main idea of the passage.
  - b. The primary purpose of the passage is to.....
  - c. The passage is primarily concerned with which of the following...
  - d. The main point of the passage is that...
2. Supporting idea...-Extra Information
  - a. The passage implies which of the following was true of X..
  - b. It can be inferred by the passage that..
  - c. The passage suggests which of the following about X..
  - d. The author implies that X occurred because of ....
  - e. The author implies that all of the following statements about X are true except....
3. Reading in between the lines-Inferential
  - a. One function of the third paragraph of the passage is to...
  - b. The author uses the adjective X in line with Y to emphasize....
  - c. Which of the following best describes the relation of the first paragraph to the message as a whole.
  - d. In the context of the passage the word X most loosely corresponds to which of the following phrase.
4. Use in different context—Application
  - a. The author of the passage would most likely agree with which of the following...
  - b. Which of the following statement provide the most logical continuation of the first paragraph.
  - c. The idea or action described in the passage is most similar to which of the following..
5. Comprehension on the whole...Global
  - a. The attitude of the author of the passage of X is best described as one of...
  - b. The tone of the author is ...
  - c. A similar incident took place when ....

## THE EXPERIMENT

To prove the underlying theory that creating questions by the learner himself leads to speedy comprehension and retention, an experiment was conducted in 2 Phases where third year B tech students were target learners.

### Phase 1

Students were separated into a group of 4 each and were given a passage to read within 5 minutes.

Students were asked to write down what they had read individually.

The script was evaluated.

### Phase 2

The same group was given another passage to read together within 5 minutes as discussed earlier.

They were then asked to create 4 questions of different types. All four in the group created the questions together based on a different passage and then they shared them. After this they were asked to recollect and write down what they had read in the passage keeping the questions in front of them. The script was then evaluated. The same procedure was repeated one more time yielding similar results

## EVALUATION

The evaluation of the answer scripts was based on the following criteria. Each criteria having equal weightage of 20 % each.

- Textual Comprehension**-The learner must be able to identify the main idea of the passage and the ideas supporting it.
- Sequence of supporting ideas**.-Most of the questions that fit into the category can be categorized under "find the fact". This means finding the information and fitting it in the right sequence..
- Fluency of English**.-Using the words from the given passage to create questions Using them appropriately in the questions would display a strengthening of vocabulary and its application.
- Inference and application** is related to the suggestions that the author may apply. Inference and supporting ideas are closely linked to one another. The answers of the learners may vary. It may be impossible to decipher what is right and what is wrong. The

key point here is to identify the crux of the argument and see how it relates to a real life identical situation.

- Overall understanding** empowers a learner to create a logical connectivity between all the parts of the passage. It makes one aware of the presence of different ideas leading to one made idea and its application.

The results of the exercises are given below.

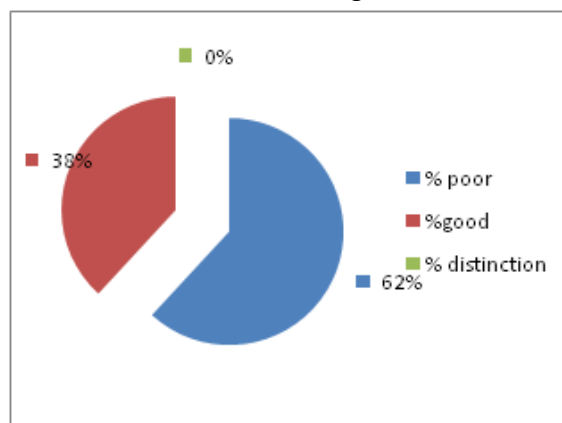


Fig 1. Chart Showing Performance in Normal Comprehension Method.

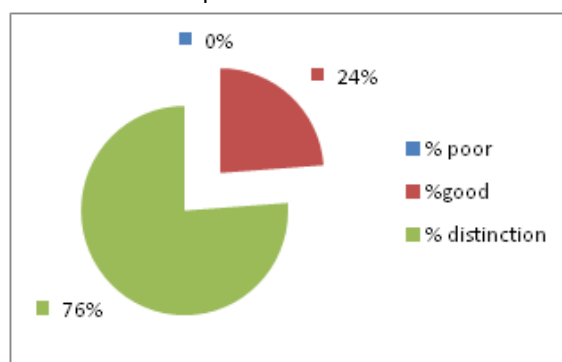


Fig 2. Chart Showing Performance In Question Comprehension Method.

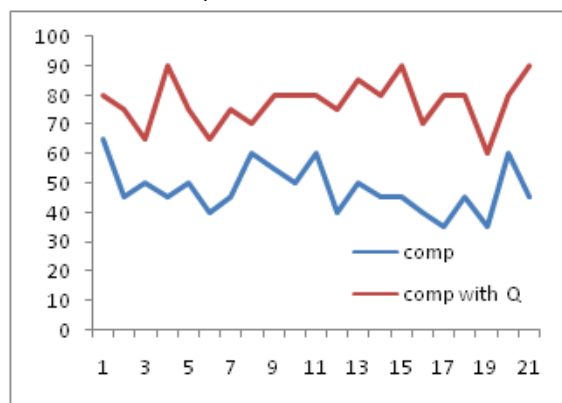


Fig3. Marks (%) - Normal Vs with Questions.

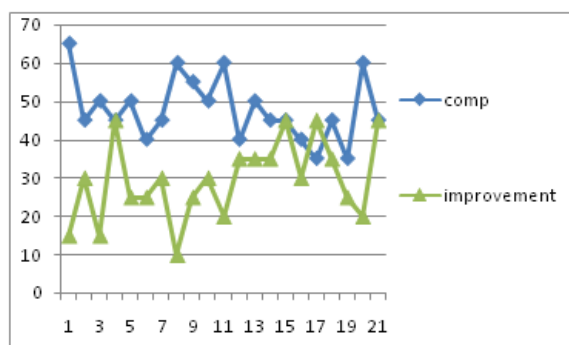


Fig 4. Improvement Seen After Using Questioning Method.

## INFERENCE

### Direct Comprehension

1. Average marks for students who directly attempted comprehension was 45%. (fig 1)
2. Only 33% students got 50 % or more marks.
3. The maximum marks were 65%.

### Using question for comprehension

4. Average marks was 77 % (fig 2)
5. All students (100% ) showed improvement (fig 3)
6. Average improvement was 65% over Direct Comprehension.
7. Students who were poor in Direct comprehension ( got < 50%) showing 80% improvement.(fig 4)
8. Max Marks were 90%
9. Only one student got less than 50%.

Group work is a time tested phenomena where in the teacher is merely a facilitator and can give support by giving model questions. This method can be initiated only from levels where text books are prescribed. Teachers can now catapult into facilitators rather than demanding answers from the learners. They can rest assured that the text from the lesson has been duly understood and can be reproduced at a moment's notice.

The students who had created the questions could successfully recall 80% of the passage, as compared to the students who only read it without creating questions could recall only 40% of the passage.

Hence it is better for teachers to help learners use this strategy until they can apply this mode independently. The making of questions as a comprehension strategy can also be accomplished through group learning.

## CONCLUSION

The suggested theory that questions play an important role in the retention and retrieval of information has been proved. The teachers can now reverse the scenario by asking the students to create interrogatives instead of making them look for the answers in the text. This ensures effective learning and greater retention.

Though the concept of creating questions rather than writing answers is new, it has its limitation. When the reader is ready to answer, the use of text book begins. Students can be made to draft questions gradually in parts say for e.g. Para 1, 2, 3 of a lesson rather than looking for answers as homework. The concept of homework will now be revolutionized.

Boring mundane lectures which continue for 50 minutes are more often than not monologues. On the other hand the same text book can be made dynamic and interactive when students pour over it to make questions that will encompass huge learning. Active learning activities provide feedback to the teachers and the students so that learning and teaching can be adjusted as necessary to confirm mastery of learning objectives.

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