

The APPI eJournal



Year 16 | Autumn 2019  Associação Portuguesa de Professores de Inglês

Reading Comprehension Questions in ELT Coursebooks. A Waste of Time?

Nicolas Hurst

Reading comprehension questions follow reading texts in every unit of every ELT coursebook. But what kind of comprehension questions are best? What kind are most effective? This short article will hopefully help us have a better picture of what we can do after our learners read a text in our 21st century ELT classrooms.

Introduction.

When we think about the coursebook materials we use in our ELT classrooms we expect them to be both effective and affective; this means that they expose the learners to language in authentic use through varied texts, they help learners to notice the salient features of the English and they provide learners with opportunities to use the language for communicative purposes. In addition, the materials should achieve impact so that they arouse and sustain motivation, promote the use of various cognitive processes and stimulate aesthetic and emotional involvement (see Tomlinson, 2010).

Approaches to texts and tasks.

Most ELT coursebooks, in their approach to reading texts and reading comprehension, follow a fairly standard kind of 'top-down' pedagogic framework. There is some kind of 'lead-in' where learners' interest in the topic/text is encouraged; a pre-reading task perhaps predicting language or information that may be present in the text; a quick, preliminary reading of the text ('skimming') to check these predictions; a closer reading for specific information ('scanning') sometimes connected to true/false questions or filling in a table; some language work arising from the text often connected with vocabulary development; then, finally, some more general

questions related to text interpretation or personal experiences in relation to the topic (see Scrivener, 2005, p.187).

With regard to different types of reading comprehension questions, there are several taxonomies available (of varying complexity). These taxonomies detail the variety of ways in which the concept of 'comprehension' can be approached (see, for example: Johns & Davies, 1983; Kern, 2000; Grabe & Stoller, 2001). For example, imagining a text about a friend, John, and his holiday in Italy we can identify six basic types of comprehension questions: (i) Literal comprehension: How many times has John visited Italy? (ii) Re-organisation: John was born in 1948, he died in 1968. How old was John when he died? (iii) Inference: Is Italy John's favourite holiday destination? (iv) Prediction: Is John going back to Italy next year? (v) Evaluation: Has Italy always been so popular with British tourists? and (vi) Personal response: Would you like to visit the same places as John did? (see Day & Park, 2005, pp. 62-64).

Local teaching materials.

A brief survey of the types of post-reading activities proposed in two locally-produced coursebooks (one 7th grade and one 10th grade) produced the following overall results:

Comparison of Post-Reading Activities		7 th grade percentages	10 th grade percentages
Total number of post-reading activities/exercises		100	100
a)	Standard reading comp. questions	19.7	10.4
b)	True/False questions	7.0	4.2
c)	Sentence completion	9.9	8.3
d)	Join sentence halves	9.9	2.8
e)	Vocabulary related	16.9	18.1
f)	Matching: pix/topics/texts	8.5	10.4
g)	Fill in tables/ diagrams (info. transfer)	4.2	7.6
h)	Others	17	38.2

The kind of activities which require learners to think, understand and produce a personal response were very scarce: only 6 instances in the 7th grade book and 15 instances in the 10th grade book. There is a lack of questions which focus on higher order thinking skills (see Anderson et al, 2001); reading comprehension questions should include verbs (concepts) like categorise, examine, compare, contrast and organise so that learners can analyse the text; or verbs like judge, critique, defend, criticise so that learners can evaluate the text; or verbs like design, build, plan, devise, invent or construct so that learners can create something new, their own meanings resulting from reading the text. Besides, more account should be taken of the connection between cognition, emotion and learning, coursebooks should offer texts and tasks which provide texts that create some kind of positive, emotional response in the learners. "Neuroscience (i.e. the study of the central nervous systems – the study of the brain) provides evidence [...] that emotion [...] casts a fundamental and powerful influence on

cognition, learning and memory." (Masuhara, 2003, p. 351).

Reading comprehension tasks should also align more specifically with issues related to motivation (see Dornyei, 2001). There should be a greater focus on the learners' interests in relation to the topic. This means not just including a convenient text that popped up on the internet that 'fits' the topic, followed by boring 'traditional' reading comprehension questions, as evidenced in the two coursebooks mentioned above. In both cases, approximately a third of the reading comprehension questions are focussed on the manipulation of language (in general or specific items of vocabulary) which means that the learners are dealing with the text as a linguistic object rather than as a vehicle for the public expression of meaning(s). There is little evidence to suggest that texts and tasks are viewed as stimuli for add-on activities related to language production or related to alternative modes of responses, perhaps through drawing, drama or other creative arts.

The reading comprehension questions should be more varied and not so predictable; there is an over-reliance on the type of questions which just require the learners to 'fish' for the relevant item of information or language which is so strongly cued in the question that they may not even have to understand the meaning of the question in order to get the 'right' answer! Therefore, the text and post-reading tasks must provide/generate something NEW and not just 'accept' what the learners can easily identify or already know (see Applegate, Quinn & Applegate, 2002). Coursebooks should provide texts and tasks which provide the learners with multiple opportunities to make connections and/or comparisons with their own past experiences and/or their own lives, to develop their critical competences when reading: "Students who engage in critical literacy become open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of comprehending text at deeper levels. They understand that the information presented in texts, magazines, newspapers, song lyrics, and

Recommendations.

1. Post reading activities/questions should be content based. Reading texts are sources of knowledge [meaning] (see Snow, 2005)
2. Post-reading activities/questions should allow the learners to use all the/their language and not just practise specific language items or structures (see Gilmore, 2007)
3. Post-reading activities/questions should promote skills integration e.g. summary writing (see Alderson, 2005)
4. Post-reading questions generated by the learners can help them to become critical yet collaborative readers; teachers can encourage them to ask and answer the questions they posed (see Hedge, 2008)
5. Post-reading activities/questions should accommodate a range of cognitive processes from LOTS to HOTS (see Tomlinson, 2010)

websites has been authored from a particular perspective for a particular purpose" (McLaughlin, 2012, p.439).

The attitude to the target culture(s) and language should be positive, allowing for some issues related to 'intercultural citizenship education' to be explored without undermining individual learner identity. The comprehension questions should facilitate learner success and autonomy with a greater emphasis on individualisation and personalisation: each reader produces their own 'truth' in relation to what a text means. In this way, levels of learner interest and involvement may be increased. As has been known for quite some time now: "In the absence of interesting texts, very little is possible." (Williams, 1986, p.42). There is an obvious connection between 'text topic' and learner motivation and participation, but we should also consider 'text type' and 'text genre' (see Hurst, 2014) in our efforts to provide our learners with varied reading experiences.

6. Post-reading questions/activities should encourage learner awareness, development and use of specific reading strategies (see Khaki, 2014)
7. Post-reading questions/activities should allow learners to express their personal perspectives and connect with other viewpoints (see Kern, 2008)
8. Post-reading questions/activities should require the learners to interact: they should be pushed to elaborate, extend, clarify etc. in communicative contexts (see Swain, 2005)
9. Post-reading questions/activities should have an intercultural dimension; C1 and C2 identities, values, beliefs etc. interacting (see Byram et al, 2002)
10. Post-reading questions/activities should help learners develop their 21st century skills: The 4 Cs [or more?] (see Trilling & Fadel, 2009)

Main references.

Anderson, L. W., Krathwohl, D. R., Airasian, P., Cruikshank, K., Mayer, R., Pintrich, P. & Wittrock, M. (2001). A taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy. New York: Longman.

Day, R. & Park, J-S. (2005). Developing reading comprehension questions. *Reading in a foreign language*, Vol.17 (1), 60-73.

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kern, R. (2008). Making connections through texts in language teaching. *Language Teaching*, Vol.41 (3), 367-387.

Masuhara, H. (2003). Materials for developing reading skills. In B. Tomlinson (ed.) *Developing materials for language teaching.* London: Continuum Press, 365-389.

McLaughlin, M. (2012). Reading comprehension: What every teacher should know. *The Reading Teacher*, Vol.65 (7), 432-440.

Scrivener, J. (2005). *Learning teaching. A guidebook for English language teachers.* Oxford: MacMillan.

Tomlinson, B. (2010). *English Language learning materials: a critical review.* London: Continuum Press.

Williams, J. (1986). Top ten principles for teaching reading. *English Language Teaching Journal*, Vol. 40 (1), 42-45.

Nicolas Hurst (APPI-B-1415). Nicolas is an Assistant Professor in English Studies at FLUP. Teacher of English, ELT methodology and teacher trainer. Numerous articles published in Portugal and abroad. Regular speaker at local and international conferences. ELT coursebook consultant. PhD in Anglo-American Studies (University of Porto, 2014).

