

DIFFERENTIATED COMPREHENSION CHECKS: Different Questions for Different Students to Help Them All Understand at Their Level

By Bryce Hedstrom

INTRODUCTION

• BRAIN BREAKS WITH A GRAMMATICAL COMPONENT

Using differentiated comprehension checks is a way to reach all students in your classroom. It helps students understand grammatical features by asking a quick series of tiered questions during a story or conversation. These questions are not grammar lessons in the traditional sense. This is a meaning-based technique that promotes deeper comprehension. All words are used in context to ensure that students understand form and meaning at the highest level they are able.

This technique is effective, and it takes very little time to do. You could think of it as “drive-by” grammar because it is fast, and it works. It makes a quick point so you can get back to the content of the lesson without students losing concentration. Because comprehension checks like this take advantage of the meaning in the classroom at the moment as the content, there is minimal distraction from the flow of comprehensible input.

• ON-THE-SPOT DIFFERENTIATION

These comprehension check questions are valuable because they address the diverse abilities of students. Our students are different, and this technique provides a way to deal with those differences. Anyone can learn a language, but students learn at different depths and at different rates. The variability in language ability is enormous and it grows exponentially throughout any course. Students are at different stages in the acquisition process. Even if they start at the same level, students will quickly spread out in ability. In this sense, every classroom is a multi-level classroom.

Harvard linguist and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker in his book *Words and Rules* claims that the spread in human vocabulary size is enormous. It can range between a low of 6,000 words (for non-cognitively impaired non-readers—those who are educable, have been to school and that can read but do not read regularly) to over 100,000 words (regular readers).

“When teachers regularly check for understanding, students become increasingly aware of how to monitor their own understanding.”
—Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey

This is not the slight 40% difference between an “F” and an “A” (55% vs. 95%) in a traditional school grading system; it is a 1,600% difference. A student that reads regularly may know more than 16 times as many words as the student that does not read often. Our students may be at the extreme ends of the bell curve, but there will still be amazing variability among them, and we need to have tools to deal with this reality. Differentiated comprehension check questions are one of those tools.

Vocabulary size can often correlate with how well students understand language in general. And as Pinker suggests, the understanding of how language works and what it means is plastic; it is very variable. There is more variety in language ability than in almost any other area.

We need to deal with the challenge of different student ability levels with specific tools. Differentiated comprehension check questions can help us to do that.

OBJECTIVES:

- Understand the benefits of differentiating grammar instruction
- Enhance awareness of how language acquisition works in students
- See how short, focused questions are more efficient than long explanations and “practice.”
- Learn ways to facilitate grammar proficiency quickly and with minimal interruption

DESCRIPTION OF THE TECHNIQUE

- This technique was developed over several years by teachers across the country and at one time was termed “**Pop-Up Grammar**” by Michigan teacher and author **Kristy Placido** because each question takes only seconds. The question and explanation pop up like a quick on-line ad and then disappear.
- There are many variations on this idea. This is a structured technique that works. I have taught it to student teachers, and they have also been able to master it with focused practice during their student teaching experience.
- Students are held individually accountable for grammar questions about language that was used in the classroom just seconds before—but at different levels.



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: *Do not assume all students understand everything you are saying. Acquisition is not taking place without comprehensible input. You only know it is comprehensible if you are checking.*

ASK YOURSELF

How often do you check for understanding per class period?

- If you are not checking for understanding you do not know if students are getting it.
- If they do not get it, what you are saying does not count. It is not comprehensible input.
- You need to check for understanding several times each class with this technique.
- Ask a quick set of the three levels of questions at least 5 times per class period.



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: *Assign a student to count the number of questions you ask per class period. As you become aware of how many you are asking and more skilled in the technique, increase the number of differentiated questions you*

Why do you need to check for understanding so often?

- Because students get good at pretending they understand
- Because instructors deceive themselves into thinking all of their students get it
- To be sure all students really understand what you are saying
- To identify misconceptions of how grammar works
- To identify misunderstanding of shades of meaning in vocabulary
- To model good thinking about learning
- To let students know it is OK to ask for clarification of meaning

Your C.I. angel observing your class for 30 minutes and not seeing a single comprehension check.



BryceHedstrom.com 



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: Encourage your students to take risks by praising them for letting you know when they DO NOT understand rather than praising only those that comprehend quickly.

THE BENEFITS

- Allows for more precise checks for understanding
- Differentiates between levels of students
- Lower-level students are not left behind
- Higher level students are challenged
- Provides a short brain break
- Interrupts the flow of communication in the TL only briefly (less than 30 seconds)
- Trains students to reflect on their learning at higher levels

THE PROCEDURE

• ASK QUESTIONS TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS.

Ask quick differentiated comprehension check questions to individual students. If you normally ask for choral responses, use your body language, a verbal cue or a procedure to indicate that only one specific student is going to answer this question because it is different. I simply ask the questions in English. Since almost all other language in the class (at least 90%) is in the TL it is instantly obvious that a different thing is happening here. Students recognize that this is a different type of question with a different goal than normal questions. If you like to use the TL for everything, you will need to establish a clear signal that you are asking a differentiated comprehension check question.



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: Classic classroom questioning where students raise their hands to give an answer is ineffective in modern language classes where the goal is interactive language that is engaging and comprehensible to all.

WHO ARE THESE QUESTIONS FOR?

These three types of questions below can be asked one after the other about the same content. If this is done artfully and done often, the understanding of all students in the class will increase.

With differentiated comprehension check questions, **the teacher will know that:**

Slower-Processing Students are getting the meaning. It will be obvious that they are following the narrative or the conversation.

If all students understand, our teaching qualifies as comprehensible input, and they will acquire the language. If they do not understand it is not comprehensible input. It is polite nods from the students and mumbo-jumbo from the teacher. It is a waste of everyone's time.

Average Students are aware of ways the grammatical structures can be used beyond the narrative. Most students in the class will be in this group. Ask more than one contrasting question here to address this larger group.

Faster-Processing Students are stretching themselves beyond the course level and thinking about how language can be used with more advanced structures—maybe even points of grammar that we have not modeled much yet, but that they have picked up by listening or reading.



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: *When you are starting off with Differentiated Questioning it may be helpful to make a chart of the students in each class to help yourself think through the process and decide which type of questions you will ask each student. Which students are likely to be low/average/high? This is not permanent labeling or stereotyping. It is a temporary aid to help you teach them as well as you possibly can. Slower students often appreciate the help and faster students need to be challenged so they don't tune out.*

If you are not sure who's who in your classroom, make a seating chart and start by guessing. You will refine and adjust your guesses as the course unfolds. Subtly mark each student with a color or a secret code. Check to see which kind of question you should ask to which students. Experiment and adjust until you get it about right. Students will change as they progress and some will be faster with different topics, so you will have to change your template often, but at least give yourself a place to start so that you can get going with the technique.

A NOTE ON "SLOW", "AVERAGE" & "FAST": This is not discriminating against slower students in a negative sense. Slower does not mean inferior and faster does not mean superior. Slow in this sense means that they are not picking up the meaning or making connections as quickly as the average student right now. Mental processing speed is not destiny. Early results do not determine final results. A student that starts slowly may well end up much more fluent later. Noticing that a student is a slow processor does not mean that they cannot eventually learn as well, or even better, than a student that initially seems to be getting it quickly. With time and effort by the student and with skilled questioning by the teacher slower students can flourish.



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: *Know your students. Be prepared to tell your evaluator what you are doing in the lesson you are teaching right now. What are you doing to help slower students to learn? How are you challenging faster students?*

It may also help teachers to realize that the students already know who's who. You are not broadcasting it or labeling students publicly, but they know. The slower students know they are slow. They are almost always overlooked and very few teachers know what those students don't understand or why. These students frequently appreciate the attention and the help when certain questions are focused on them. The faster students also know they are different. We need to challenge them by asking about the class content in a different way, a way that will stretch them.

DIFFERENT QUESTIONS FOR DIFFERENT STUDENTS

1. **Slower-Processing Students** · *Understand meaning* · *Demonstrate comprehension of phrase*

“What does ___ mean?”

“What did I just say?”

“Tell me, what did you hear me say?”



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: *Ask more of these lower level comprehension questions than the other types of questions. Basic understanding is crucial.*

- These questions are directed to one student to see if he/she understands the meaning of a sentence.
- These types of questions might be directed to the entire class at the beginning of a lesson, but once the class seems to be getting the focus structures, switch from the whole class to individual students because students must understand the meaning of phrases if they are to advance in the language. We cannot leave anyone behind.
- Show students that you are asking one particular student a question rather than the whole class.
- Focus these questions on low performing students. They are not for the whole class.

According to the ACTFL guidelines, most speech (at least 90%) in a language class should be in the TL. But these differentiated questions are asked in English to indicate to students that something else is going on. This language shift immediately shows students that we are not discussing the content in the TL like we usually do. Here we are focusing on understanding a particular aspect of meaning or grammar in a sentence that was just used.

- Do not broadcast a low-level question to the entire class. If you do, you will not be able to tell if your slower processors are getting it. You will be deluded by the majority into thinking that *everyone* is getting it. You will be leaving the slower students behind. Don't do that anymore.
- Teacher gives prompt in English about a phrase that was just said in the TL: "What did I just say?"
- The student responds in English. This can be a whole sentence or a phrase that was just used a moment before.
- The question for slow-processing students is a pure check for understanding. There is no elaboration and no added commentary.
- It can be as simple as asking for a translation of a word or phrase that is already written on the board. The low performers may surprise you with how little they actually understand.

Remember that without comprehensible input there is no acquisition taking place. It does not count as comprehensible input if the student does not understand you. Do not allow students to kindly nod in front of you pretending they get it. Do not let them merely act like they understand. You have to check. Asking questions like this is how you know. Even though a word is already written on the board in front of them, they still may not get the sound/writing connection. If they cannot express the meaning quickly and confidently they do not know it well enough yet.

EXAMPLES FOR SLOWER-PROCESSING STUDENTS

Structure: **quiere comer** (*wants to eat*)

Instructor: *What does **quiere comer** mean?*

Student: wants to eat

Structure: **la casa de mi padre** (*the house of my father; my father's house*)

Instructor: *What does **la casa de mi padre** mean?*

Student: the house of my father

Instructor: *What else does **la casa de mi padre** mean in English?*

Student: my father's house

2. Average-Processing Students • *Describe the meanings of related forms*

"What is the difference between ___ and ___?"

- Teacher gives prompt in English
- Student responds in English
- Student shows she gets the difference between two words/phrases
- Most students will be in this group. Ask more than one contrasting question here.
- Compare and contrast what they know with the newer grammatical structure.



Structure: **quiere comer** (*wants to eat*)
 Instructor: "What is the difference between **quiere comer** and **quiero comer**?"
 Student: **quiere comer** means "wants to eat" and **quiero comer** means "I want to eat"

Structure: **la casa de mi padre** (*the house of my father; my father's house*)
 Instructor: What is the difference between **la casa de mi padre** and **la casa de su padre**?
 Student: "the house of my father" and "the house of his/her father"
 "my father's house" and " his/her father's house."

An alternative at this level is to ask for a specific decontextualized word in a phrase.

"What does ___ mean in that phrase?"

EXAMPLES FOR AVERAGE-PROCESSING STUDENTS

Structure: **quiere comer** (*wants to eat*)
 Instructor: What does **comer** mean in that phrase?
 Student: to eat
 Instructor: How do we know that it means **to eat** and not just **eats**?
 Student: the "r" at the end of the word

Structure: **la casa de mi padre** (*the house of my father; my father's house*)
 Instructor: What does **de** mean in that phrase?
 Student: of



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: There is no need to ask this sequence of questions in a row. Mix up the order and use as needed.

3. Faster-Processing Students

- *Create new utterances with the vocabulary*
- *Demonstrate understanding of grammar principles beyond the current course level*

"What if we wanted to say _____?"

- Teacher gives prompt in English
- Student responds in target language
- Student is producing the language, not answering a grammar question.

EXAMPLES FOR FASTER-PROCESSING STUDENTS

quiere comer (*wants to eat*)
 What if I wanted to say "**They want to eat**"?



What if I wanted to say “**He wanted to eat**”?

What if I wanted to say “**He is going to want to eat**”?

What if I wanted to say “**He wants his dog to eat**”?

An alternative is to ask a question that asks that student to explain the difference between two forms and how they are used:

“Why did I say ___ instead of ___?”

The high performing student briefly explains the reasoning behind the grammar.

Example: *Why did I say **quiere comer** instead of **quería comer**?*
*Why did I say **quiere comer** instead of **quiere que coma**?*

A NOTE ON FASTER PROCESSING STUDENTS.

It is crucial that the highest functioning students understand that actually *using* the language is the ultimate point of the class. Because they are able to think in abstract grammatical terms they often woo the teacher into focusing and expounding on points of grammar. But we are not teaching the language merely to give students theoretical grammar. Most students do not want to become linguists. They want to be able to use the language. They want to travel. They want to talk to native speakers. They want to be able to clearly talk about topics in class. Students are in a language class to learn to speak the language—to use it in everyday life.

Grammatical discussions, although well intentioned, can become a detour from the objective of learning to use the language. The running joke in our profession is that every conversation among language teachers eventually ends debating a point of grammar. That can happen between teachers and high performing students too—and it leaves the rest of the students unengaged. It becomes highly demotivating to the other 95% of the class.

Teachers need to understand the grammar of the language they teach well. T but most students are not studying the language to get explicit grammar instruction. They do not want to become linguists or teachers. They want to be able to use the language.

If our students do not get the messages we are sending them in the TL we are wasting our time. What we are saying is no longer comprehensible input. It does not count. It is just noise; frustrating noise. Using differentiated comprehension check questions is how to find out if we are getting through to students.

The average and slow processing students do not care about theoretical grammar; they just want to learn to speak the language. To keep class compelling, and not lose the low performing students, we should end with the message, not with a discussion about the grammar in the message. The meaning is the thing. That is what we are focusing on. All students can eventually get the meaning and use the language correctly, but not every student will be able to explain the grammar, apply it consciously and use it in forms that occur infrequently.

If useful grammar points are posted prominently in the classroom the teacher can highlight them with a pointer when that grammar is used so that all students can see how they are being applied.

With differentiated comprehension check questions, the fast-processing students get to shine but they don't get to hog the spotlight. We acknowledge that they are special and different, but not so long that we lose the rest of the class.



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: *Be sure that students understand what you are doing; that you are asking different types of questions to be sure everyone is following and to be sure everyone is challenged. You do not want a student to think he is being picked on or put on the spot. Make sure they know that language is acquired by "comprehended input" (Terry Waltz's term). If they do not understand you they are not acquiring the language. Let students know that these kinds of questions make sure everyone understands.*

HOW CAN TEACHERS BECOME SKILLED AT THIS TECHNIQUE?

PRINT REMINDERS FOR YOURSELF.

Print out the sample questions for each level and post them prominently in the back of your classroom so that you can see them and be reminded to use them often. The students do not need to see them.

PRACTICE.

Mastering any new skill requires deliberate, focused practice over a long period of time. As with any worthwhile skill, you will not be good at it at first. Plan to practice using differentiated comprehension check questions by writing them into your lesson plans. Think ahead. Imagine the lesson you will be teaching and write out the specific questions you will ask to specific students. This will be slow and mechanical at first, but the more you practice the more fluid you will get with the technique. Plan on asking at least five (5) sets of differentiated comprehension check questions each class period. Increase that number over time as you and your students get the hang of it and you become more fluid and skilled in asking them.

When I started this technique I kept 3 x 5 cards on a ring with me to flip through and ask during each lesson. It was a slow and ungainly process, but I eventually learned how to do it more fluidly and naturally. You will too.

KEEP PRACTICING.

Keep the differentiated comprehension check questions posted on the back wall of your classroom for as long as it takes until you internalize them and can use them confidently and without hesitation.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS.

You may think that students do not need all of these tiered questions. With the simplest grammatical structures they may not. But experiment with this technique and I wager that you will find, as I have, that students do not always get everything the way we think they do. Time and time again I think they all get it perfectly and then I am stunned to find out that some do not understand thoroughly.

If our students do not get the messages we are sending them in the TL we are wasting our time because speech they do not understand is not comprehensible input. It does not count. It is just noise; frustrating noise. And it gets worse: When they don't understand and we press on anyway, we are creating students that believe they are no good at language. The main thing they are learning when that happens is that they just don't get it. They think they cannot pick up a language; that it is only for special, gifted people. That is not true; they can all acquire another language. Being "no good at language" is a myth that stays alive as a result of our misguided teaching. We have to stop doing that. Keep the differences between student abilities and acquisition stages in mind and meet them where they are with differentiated questions.

If you have questions or comments email me at: contact@brycehedstrom.com