



## Keep them Engaged: Lecturing through Low-pressure Comprehension Questions to Maintain Student Attention during Lectures in University EFL Classrooms

Todd Hull

Associate Professor, Department of English, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, South Korea

**\*Corresponding Author:** Todd Hull, Associate Professor, Department of English, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, South Korea

**Abstract:** Keeping students engaged throughout the lecture portion of a university class is a challenge for both educators and learners. While lectures are not the only—or frequently even the primary—means of providing knowledge to students learning another language, they can play a vital role in the classroom. One method teachers use to keep students attentive is to ask comprehension questions. This article will address what types of questions are most effective and how to elicit answers to them. The method advocated here is to formulate comprehension questions so as to increase student engagement in lectures in addition to facilitating their comprehension. To this end, comprehension questions should be low-pressure (lowering the “affective filter”), such as fill-in-the-blank or simple yes-no questions that students can easily answer. This increases motivation and also decreases the likelihood of embarrassment. And where culturally appropriate, classes will be encouraged to answer questions in unison to reduce pressure on individual learners.

**Keywords:** Classroom Lectures; Student Engagement; Classroom Participation; Scaffolding; Motivation; Affective Filter

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Through all the pendulum swings between trends in EFL language instruction, from the teacher talking all the time and the students being expected to “absorb” all the information to educators giving almost no explicit instruction, there has always been a need for input and guidance from classroom instructors in order to facilitate the language acquisition of the learners under their tutelage. And in the university classroom, this often takes the form of a lecture. There are diverse opinions about the efficacy of lectures in the EFL classroom, but it will be the contention here that lectures can play a positive role in furthering learning. What this paper will stress is that the type and form of lecture used in the classroom is important to student engagement with the material, which ultimately matters for student mastery of the material. The type of lecture that will be discussed in this paper differs from traditional lectures in which the educator presents material and learners listen and take notes. Instead, this paper will advocate lectures that revolve around comprehension questions answered by students about the material that will be presented in class. In this type of lecture, the teacher elicits answers to comprehension questions about the material from students and then elaborates on the points therein. The major advantage to this format is that learners are continually asked to engage with the material, which continually brings their attention and focus to it, thus keeping them engaged with the material throughout the lecture.

The primary goal of language instruction is of course to develop communicative competence. So before presenting a model for classroom lectures through comprehension questions, I will outline what constitutes language competence and the communicative approach to teaching that seeks to develop communicative competence. After that I will describe the importance of linguistic input and of comprehending that input. I will then get to the main thrust of this article, a classroom the model for lectures through comprehension questions.

## **2. WHAT CONSTITUTES LANGUAGE COMPETENCE?**

Everyone has an idea of what speaking a language well means. But when it comes to teaching a language and assessing learners' competence and performance, scholars and educators need to be more precise in order to foster learning throughout a broad range of the constituents of communication. An often cited and still relevant rubric of language competence was formulated by Canale and Swain (1980). They proposed four competencies: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic. Grammatical competence is relatively straightforward—students being able to produce grammatical language. Discourse competence includes aspects such as using registers that are appropriate to the situation in which language is used, for example using formal language in contexts in which it is appropriate and less formal language when it is called for. Sociolinguistic competence involves the ability to tailor one's language to different social situations in which one might find oneself. And strategic competence entails strategies speakers of a foreign language use to communicate when their linguistic repertoire falls short of their communication requirements.

Lyle Bachman (1990) had only two categories of competence—organizational and pragmatic—but went into more detail by dividing each of those overarching competencies into subcategories such as grammatical, textual, illocutionary, and sociolinguistic competencies.

Whichever rubric of competence one chooses, it is important for educators to have it as a framework in setting goals for what learners should be able to accomplish through study in a specific context.

## **3. WORKING TOWARDS COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH**

How do educators go about developing communicative competence in the EFL classroom? Currently, the most widely used approach is the communicative approach. The British Council has one of the better general definitions of this approach, stating that it is “based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning.” This means that “when learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language.” (British Council 2017) In short, learning through doing. In the communicative approach, students are actively engaged in real communication in the classroom rather than rote drilling and memorization. This is the main component of maintaining student engagement in an EFL context. But what about the inevitable times when teacher talking time is necessary, such as in content-based university courses where not only is language development the goal, but also learners engaging with the academic topics of secondary learning classrooms across the globe? How do educators maintain student engagement during the input phase of learning?

## **4. THE IMPORTANCE OF INPUT TO CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS**

Before addressing strategies for keeping students engaged while teachers are giving them the knowledge they need to achieve classroom goals, I will briefly outline the importance of input to thinking critically. In order to learn, students need information. And the information the learners need is input, the building blocks of communication. Rod Ellis (2005) states that “successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.” How does one use that input to build communication skills? One effective method is by fostering thinking skills and then giving students opportunities build those skills by communicating their thoughts in the target language. Daniel Willingham (2021) cites research showing that thinking is more than just analytical skills. Thinking is not possible without knowledge of facts and that wholesale rejection of acquiring facts such as criticizing rote memorization is misplaced. What is thinking then? Willingham defines it as “combining information in new ways.” And critical thinking has been defined as “a kind of thinking in which you question, analyze, interpret, evaluate and make a judgement about what you read, hear, say, or write.” (What is critical thinking? n.d.) Acquiring information is thus fundamental to being able to think critically and competently. “Thinking well requires knowing facts,” he states. And “critical thinking processes such as reasoning and problem solving...are intimately intertwined with factual knowledge. Higdon & Huff (2022) add that “the first dimension of critical thinking is the acquisition of knowledge.”

## **5. COMMUNICATION THROUGH CRITICAL THINKING**

As mentioned before, the goal of the teaching mentioned in this paper is communication. And the most effective methodology to achieve that goal is the communicative approach. Fostering learners' critical thinking skills is useful not only to language acquisition but also for life. The communicative

approach has learners using the input and skills they have acquired in actual communication. The actual educational activities that will further this goal vary with the teaching context. The most fruitful framework for assessing learner needs and crafting curricula tailored to those needs was laid out by James Brown (1995) and involves a six-step process that includes learner needs analysis, setting of goals and objectives based on their needs, and creating materials that will achieve those goals and objectives.

In the EFL classroom this means providing learners with input that tests their critical thinking capacities and then have learners communicate their assessments of that material in the target language. For example, students could be given a newspaper article (or part of one) and they have to go through the steps of questioning, analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and judging the content. They then engage with other learners' ideas about the article. This not only helps to develop critical thinking skills but also follows the mandate of the communicative approach in requiring students to communicate their ideas in the context of authentic interactions in the target language.

#### **6. LECTURING THROUGH COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS KEEPS LEARNERS ENGAGED**

But before any of this can happen, learners need to be able to understand the content, the input, that is provided for them. That is the purpose of comprehension questions. But the challenge of presenting content to learners is doing so without losing their attention. A straight lecture will be followed by the most diligent students. A strategy to keep the other students engaged is to impart the contents of a lecture not just through a lecture but through having the class answer comprehension questions about the input. But this, too, if not done interactively, can allow students' attention to wander. If educators just read out the answers to the class, students' attention can wander and cause them not to comprehend the input. The strategy advocated by this paper is checking comprehension simultaneously with keeping learners engaged by presenting the content of the lecture by having students answer comprehension questions *out loud*. If students know they will be required to answer comprehension questions out loud in class, it will both motivate them to do the comprehension questions before class and remain attentive in case they are called on.

#### **7. STRUCTURING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS THAT KEEP STUDENTS ENGAGED AND CONFIRM THEIR KNOWLEDGE**

The next question is how to structure comprehension questions. The most important thing is to strike the right balance between formulating questions the answers to which give learners the main points of the contents of classroom material but which are, while challenging, are at a level such that all learners in a class will be able to answer them when called on. This of course means the questions cannot be too difficult (or too easy).

Another consideration is how long it takes students to answer the questions. This is in relation not only to how much class time there is but also in relation to how much time educators deem necessary to spend on lecturing since the goal of classes conducted under the communicative approach is communication. Twenty comprehension questions that require students to quote paragraph-long passages of text will clearly waste time.

Also important is the level of the learners. One of the better types of questions for the lowest level of learners is fill in the blank. Multiple choice are good for learners at a bit higher level.

Questions asking students to do something like interpret on the spot the symbolism of a passage from a poem should be reserved not only for the highest levels but also for classes that have a high level of extroversion. Questions that require these relatively lengthy answers also need to be weighed against both time and student engagement. Other students' attention can easily wander if one student is asked to expound at length in response to a question (or does so extemporaneously). For these reasons, I would generally avoid these types of questions except in the circumstances mentioned above.

The most complex questions I would recommend would be answers of one or just a couple sentences that relate factual information about the input. These can challenge learners but do not present the pitfall of unduly throwing them with more interpretive questions.

It is also good to keep questions clear, concise, and as free as possible of "academese, bureaucratese, corporatese, legalese, officialese, and other kinds of stuffy prose" (Pinker 2014) adhering as closely as possible to what Noël and Turner (2011) call the Classic Style which prioritizes clarity and ease of understanding.

There are other considerations as well. Instructors may want to incorporate recently presented vocabulary into their questions, one of many lexical acquisition strategies advocated by Paul Nation (2012). Teachers might tailor instruction according to what a learner's first language is. For example, most languages in the Austronesian family liberally use infixes (Pereltsvaig 2017). Soinstructors may want to formulate questions and answers that allow students to practice prefixes and suffixes. This would be in line with Ellis (2003, 2005) and who advocate at least some explicit focus on specific linguistic forms in a communicative classroom, though others differ, for example Krashen (1982), Pienemann (1989, 2012), Pienemann & Lenzing(2015), and Lightbown, & Spada (2013). But those issues should be considered only after the concerns specific to the formulation of comprehension questions outlined here of complexity and time have been factored in.

## **8. EXAMPLES OF COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS FOR VARYING STUDENT LEVELS**

An example of a comprehension question for lower level learners might be a fill in the blank question like (answers are in given here but would not occur in student copies of the questions):

- The two species of big cats mentioned in the article are \_\_\_\_\_ (*lions*) and \_\_\_\_\_ (*leopards*).

For slightly higher levels, multiple choice could be used:

- What two species of big cats are mentioned in the article?

\_\_\_x\_\_\_ 1. Leopards    2. \_\_\_\_\_ Tigers 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Cheetahs    4. \_\_\_x\_ Lions

More challenging would be questions that require students to write an answer, either in a word, phrase, sentence, or multiple sentences:

- What does the article say are the major reasons for the disappearance of big cats?

*Habitat loss and hunting.*

Instructors may want to have students practice writing full sentences and might require an answer like:

*The author says the major causes of the disappearance of big cats are habitat loss and hunting.*

A bit further up on the difficulty scale are questions that ask learners to infer or interpret.

For example, the article may not mention the reasons the author is concerned about the loss of big cats but might say that the author resides in the country the cats live in and cares deeply about the country. A question here might be something like:

- Why might the author be concerned about the disappearance of big cats?

Further up on the complexity level are questions that require students to draw on their own knowledge or search for answers from reference sources. For example:

What might be some conservation strategies to slow or halt the decline of big cats?

For the more complex questions, teachers need to consider how much class time they want to spend on comprehension questions and factor that in both to the complexity and number of questions. They also need to keep in mind that students will be answering the questions orally in front of the class and make sure to set learners up for success by designing questions that can be answered by the vast majority of students in the class to avoid counterproductive embarrassment of students in front of their peers. For this last consideration I have found it useful to have the class answer in unison when questions are fill in the blank, multiple choice, or require single word answers. This avoids putting any one student on the spot. For questions that require more than single-word answers, it can be better to call on individual students, remembering at all times to formulate questions that prioritize student success in answering them.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

Even in classrooms that use the communicative approach where learners are actually using the language for real world communicative goals, some teacher talking time is usually required. This is especially true for higher level classes or university classes in which not only is developing students

proficiency in a second language a goal but also getting learners to engage with academic topics. In many cases, lectures in some form are required to achieve this second aim. But traditional lectures where educators talk continuously and students are expected to absorb the information by notetaking or just remembering what the teacher said are often inadequate in classrooms where students are all native speakers of the language of the classroom and nearly always fail when the language of the classroom is foreign to the learners. One of the goals of these types of classrooms is to develop learner's critical thinking skills. To do that, students need knowledge. They need input from the course. An effective way to facilitate students' acquisition of that input is through comprehension questions that focus student attention on the main points of the contents of the lecture. Not all comprehension questions are effective, though, and consideration must be given to factors like the level of learners and the character of a class (outgoing or quieter). Questions must also be formulated in a clear and concise style to avoid distraction from the topic and student frustration. Once effective questions have been made, lectures can be given mostly through having the class answer comprehension questions rather than the traditional continuous talking of the teacher. Constantly having students answer out loud questions that are clear, on topic, and at their level keeps learners engaged by encouraging student participation in lectures that is geared towards their success.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Bachman, L. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. New York, NY: Oxford.
- [2] Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). A theoretical framework for communicative competence. *Applied Linguistics*, 1: 1-47.
- [3] Ellis, R. (2005). Principles of Instructed Language Learning. *Asian EFL Journal*, 7:3, 1-16.
- [4] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. New York, NY: Oxford.
- [5] Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- [6] Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned (Oxford handbooks for language teachers)* (4th ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Nation, P. (2012). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Thomas, F-N. & Turner, M. (2011). *Clear and simple as the truth* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [9] Pereltsvaig, A. (2017). *Languages of the world: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [10] Pienemann, M. (1989). Is language teachable? Psycholinguistic experiments and hypotheses. *Applied Linguistics*, 10, 52-79.
- [11] Pienemann, M. & Lenzing, A. (2015). Processability theory. In B. VanPatten, B. and Williams, J. eds., *Theories in second language acquisition. An introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- [12] Pienemann, M. (2012). Processability theory and teachability. In Carol A. Chapelle ed., *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- [13] Pinker, S. (2014). *The sense of style: The thinking person's guide to writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [14] *What is critical thinking?* (n.d.). <https://www.monash.edu/learnhq/enhance-your-thinking/critical-thinking/what-is-critical-thinking>

**Citation:** Todd Hull. "Keep them Engaged: Lecturing through Low-pressure Comprehension Questions to Maintain Student Attention during Lectures in University EFL Classrooms" *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 10, no. 9, 2022, pp. 17-21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1009003>.

**Copyright:** © 2022 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.