



## CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

*CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.*

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### Teaching Reading: Comprehension Questions

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This is the second in a series of articles on the teaching of reading to students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The articles provide descriptions of the four most common ways in which EFL reading is generally taught. I describe the prominent features of the four approaches, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

The first article discussed *grammar translation*, in which students are taught to read texts written in English by translating them into the students' first language. I concluded that article by claiming that is important in teaching EFL to make a distinction between translation and reading. Often both are important skills for English as a foreign language (EFL) students, but they learn only one, translation.

In this article I focus on a second common approach to teaching foreign language (FL) reading, *comprehension questions and language work*. This approach centers on a textbook containing short passages that demonstrate the use of foreign-language words or points of grammar. These texts, short enough to encourage students to read them word-by-word, are followed by comprehension questions and exercises.

In class, the teacher introduces the text to be read, and usually pre-teaches any new vocabulary. The text is then assigned for reading as homework, together with the comprehension questions from the textbook. In the next class, students read the text out loud, with the teacher correcting pronunciation mistakes. This is followed by students being called on to answer the comprehension questions. Various grammar and vocabulary exercises from the textbook are worked through. The purpose of using language exercises and texts that exemplify points of language is, like grammar-translation, the teaching of the foreign language. The purpose of the comprehension questions, the heart of this approach, is, however, less clear. Eddie Williams and Chris Moran wonder if they are "meant to check comprehension, facilitate comprehension or simply ensure that the learner reads the text" (1989: 225). Most likely it is all three.

Like grammar-translation, a comprehension question-based approach to teaching reading is attractive because it prepares students for examinations. Short reading passages followed by questions are characteristic of many local language examinations, as well as international ones like the TOEFL. Also in common with grammar-translation, with this approach a knowledge of the foreign language is sufficient background for teaching it. Little, if any, knowledge about the nature of reading or the teaching of FL reading is required.

Even though it continues to be widely used, comprehension questions and language work is not considered by reading experts as a viable approach to the teaching of FL reading. For example, the approach is not even mentioned in general reports of reading theory and pedagogy such as Sandra Silberstein's "Let's Take Another Look at Reading: Twenty-Five Years of Reading Instruction" (1987) and Eddie Williams and Chris Moran's "Reading in a Foreign



Language at Intermediate and Advanced Levels with Particular Reference to English" (1989). The lack of attention is both because the approach confounds the teaching of the foreign language with the teaching of reading, and because it is based upon tradition rather than a theoretical foundation.

In practice, comprehension questions and language work is often combined with a grammar-translation approach. This is unfortunate, if the goal is for the learners to become readers in the foreign language. As I explained in the article on grammar translation and the teaching of reading, students learn to read by reading. Neither the grammar-translation approach nor the comprehension question and language works approach gives students the opportunities to read that are needed to become readers.

### **References**

- Silberstein, S. (1987). Let's take another look at reading: Twenty-five years of reading instruction. *English Teaching Forum*. 25.4.28-35.
- Williams, E. and C. Moran. (1989). Reading in a foreign language at intermediate and advanced levels with particular reference to English. *Language Teaching*. 22.4.217-228.

*Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!*

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