Do something different with your coursebook

Rachael Roberts continues her series on adapting your coursebook to suit your classes.

In this issue, she does something different with comprehension questions.

Over the last few years, people have been starting to ask, as Catherine Walter did in her presentation at IATEFL in 2008: Is teaching reading skills mainly a waste of time? Walter suggested that most learners already have perfectly adequate reading skills, which they can quite easily transfer across to L2. Do we, in fact, need to teach learners to skim and scan, or is it patronising and unnecessary?

In my experience, many learners do not actually have very good reading skills in their first language and, equally, many do not seem able to transfer them automatically. So I would still be in favour of activities which help learners to develop, or at least transfer, these skills.

I also believe that learners need to have a task or a reason to read, and that comprehension questions can, at least partially, provide this. And good comprehension questions can guide the learner through the text, helping them to make sense of it.

Having said this, it cannot be denied that coursebook readings tend to follow a fairly established formula:

1. Use a warm-up activity to introduce the topic.
2. Present a set of comprehension questions, using true/false, multiple choice or something else that isn’t too open-ended.
3. Get the students to read the text and answer the questions.
4. Conduct a follow-up discussion and/or do some language work.

Let me say now, I think that this is a perfectly good formula. It works, and I use it myself. However, while I understand why coursebooks want to present clear, unambiguous activities, which follow a set pattern, I think we can enliven our classes and engage students more by trying to do something a little bit different from time to time.

Alternatives to comprehension questions

One of the problems with comprehension questions is that they obviously only focus on specific parts of the text, chosen by the materials writer. Real-life reading, on the other hand, is highly personalised. No two people will understand a text in exactly the same way, because we all bring our own experience, knowledge, attitudes, and so on to everything we read.

So, what could we do with a text in the classroom that might reflect real-life reading more accurately?

Student-set questions

Let the students set their own questions before they start reading, based, perhaps, on the title and/or any illustrations. The obvious benefit to this is that it should increase their motivation to read. Of course, the answers to their questions may not, in fact, be in the text, but that actually reflects real-life reading pretty well, and while they’re looking for the answer, they’re reading.

Collaborative reading

Another possibility is to get your students to read collaboratively, in small groups. I’m not suggesting reading aloud (though there are some arguments for this), but reading one paragraph at a time and then discussing with the rest of
Using visuals
Depending on the kind of text the students are reading, you could also ask them to respond in a more visual way. For any kind of narrative, a good approach is to ask the students to highlight the main events and then work together to produce a time-line. Generally, they won’t entirely agree on the time-line – which is even better, as this means they will be forced to negotiate their answers, thus thinking more deeply about what they have read.

For a descriptive text, you could ask the students to draw a picture or diagram of what is being described: a scene, for example, or one of the characters. They can then explain their pictures to a partner, revealing how the picture relates to what they read in the text.

Alternatively, the students could draw a picture which has a deliberate mistake, such as making a character tall when the text describes them as short. The pictures can then be put on the wall and the students can go around identifying the deliberate mistakes.

Students sometimes feel embarrassed about displaying their drawings, and you could, of course, use pictures from the internet or magazines instead. However, it is nearly always much easier to produce a picture than to find one, and I find that, so long as I am relaxed about my own (very) amateur drawings, my students usually are too.

Using comprehension questions differently
As well as swapping the comprehension questions for a different kind of activity, you could still use the questions given, but do something different with them.

Predicting
Comprehension questions should always follow the order of the text and, as they are supposed to check comprehension of the main points, they usually provide a kind of summary of what the students are going to read. You can take advantage of this by asking the students to read the comprehension questions first and then use them to predict the content of the text. You could even ask them to write their own version of the text from these questions, before reading the original to compare with their ideas.

Rewriting
Comprehension questions are often written as true/false statements. Of course, this reflects a lot of English language exam tasks, but I’m pretty sure it’s also very popular because it doesn’t take up much space on the page! You could do something different by asking your students to rewrite true/false statements as questions before they read. This will have the benefit of encouraging them to think more carefully about the information they need to find, and the added bonus of working on question formation, which many students find tricky. Less confident students could write closed yes/no questions; more confident students could write open-ended wh-questions.

Alternatively, once the students have finished reading a text and answering a set of true/false questions, you could get them to rewrite the text so that the opposite is true. For example, imagine the true/false statement is Delilah was very happy about her present and the text says Delilah was absolutely delighted with her new car. The answer would obviously be true.

But as a follow-up, the students could then change the text so it reads, for example, Delilah was bitterly disappointed with her cheap second-hand car. This activity leaves lots of room for creativity, and also acts as a further check on comprehension of the text. You could limit it to rewriting a few sentences, or you could get the students to rewrite the whole text, which should then tell a very different story.

Whatever coursebook you use, there are likely to be a lot of comprehension questions. I don’t think you’re wasting time with them, but any activity done in the same way every time can become a little tired and shabby. Maybe it’s time to reboot your comprehension activities, rather than booting them out!

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