

DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION WITH QUESTIONS

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THE NEW* BLOOM'S TAXONOMY & LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

HELP LANGUAGE STUDENTS TO USE ALL OF THESE LEVELS OF THINKING
 We can give students experiences where they can think at all levels, even in beginning courses.

Level of Thinking	Key Question / Verb Examples	Examples of Comprehensible Input-Based Activities
<p>1. REMEMBER <i>(Lowest level of thinking)</i></p> <p>Retrieving, recognizing, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory.</p>	<p>Can the student <u>recall</u> the information?</p> <p>arrange, define, label, list, match, memorize, name, order, recall, recognize, repeat, reproduce, restate, state</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Answer Yes/No questions · Answer True/False questions · Match characters to actions/dialogue · Information gap questions · Match L2 vocabulary to L1
<p>2. UNDERSTAND</p> <p>Constructing meaning from oral, written, and graphic messages.</p>	<p>Can the student <u>explain</u> ideas or concepts?</p> <p>classify, compare, describe, discuss, explain, express, give examples, give main idea, infer, interpret, paraphrase, report, review, select, summarize, translate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Answer Either/Or questions · Do gestures for TPR prompts · Restate main idea of story · Describe a person/place in the story · Translate text aloud to L1
<p>3. APPLY</p> <p>Carrying out or using a procedure.</p>	<p>Can the student <u>use</u> the information in a new way?</p> <p>apply, choose, demonstrate, dramatize, execute, illustrate, implement, interpret, outline, point out, role play, show, sketch, solve, use</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Correct Say it Wrong statements and Fill-in-the-Blank questions · Act out novel commands · Rewrite a story from a different point of view (POV) · Act out a story · Draw a story
<p>4. ANALYZE</p> <p>Breaking material into constituent parts, determining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose.</p>	<p>Can the student <u>distinguish</u> between the different parts?</p> <p>analyze, appraise, attribute, break down, categorize, compare, contrast, differentiate, dissect, distinguish, examine, organize, question, test</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Answer Who, What, When, Where, How many questions · Summarize a story in your own words · Use a VENN diagram to compare and contrast (characters, situations, countries, cultures, schools, etc.)
<p>5. EVALUATE</p> <p>Making judgments based on criteria and standards.</p>	<p>Can the student <u>justify</u> a stand or decision?</p> <p>argue, appraise, assess critique, check, conclude, compare, criticize, defend, estimate, evaluate, judge, justify, predict, rate, select, support, value</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Answer How or Why questions (when answer is indirectly stated or implied) · Break down the main actions of the story · Evaluate appropriate/inappropriate actions of characters · Compare cultures · Make inferences
<p>6. DESIGN <i>(Highest level of thinking)</i></p> <p>Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern.</p>	<p>Can the student <u>create</u> a new product or point of view?</p> <p>assemble, combine, compile, compose, create, construct, design, develop, devise, formulate, generate, invent, organize, plan, prepare, produce, propose, reconstruct, revise, rewrite, write</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Answer What Now? questions · Predict what's next in a story · Create and give novel commands · Write an original story · Invent new details for a story · Generate / Invent answers to hypothetical questions · Rewrite a story adding details &/or characters that were not in the original · Ask unique <i>Special Person</i> questions.

* Alan Bloom's classic 1956 learning taxonomy was revised and refined by Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl in 2000.

APPLYING BLOOM'S TAXONOMY WITH QUESTIONS

- **Yes / No**

Simple questions with only two options. Students answer yes or no in L2.

Q. *Does the girl have a cat?* A. Yes.

1. Students show they **REMEMBER** details with a simple recognition response.

- **Either / Or** *(Some studies indicate that Either/Or questions may be the most powerful types for acquisition.)*

Teacher states two choices. Students say which one is correct.

Q. *Does she have a cat, or does she have a dog?* A. A cat.

2. Students show they **UNDERSTAND** differences by producing a short answer.

- **Say it Wrong** (Also known as 3-for-1)

Teacher uses the structure 3 times—twice positively, and once negatively.

Q. *Ok, so, the girl has a dog...* A. "No!"

That's right, class. The girl does not have a dog. She has a cat.

3. Students show they can **APPLY** whether the misspoken word fits the facts.

- **Fill-in-the-Blank**

Students produce a one-word answer in the target language.

Q. *The girl has a ____.* A. a cat

3. Students show they can **APPLY** the missing word to the story.

- **Who? / What? / Where? / When? / How many?**

Students give short specific answers.

Who has a cat? What does she have? Where is the cat?

When does she look for her cat? How many cats does she have?

4. Students **ANALYZE** information.

↑ ----- ↑ ----- ↑ **Choral Answers** ↑ ----- ↑ ----- ↑

All students answer with one word or short answers. Checks general understanding.

↓ ----- ↓ ----- ↓ **Individual Answers** ↓ ----- ↓ ----- ↓

Several students answer, one at a time—competing for cute, creative or brilliant answers.

- **How? / Why?**

Students provide motivation, description and conjecture. There are many possibilities.

Why is she upset about her cat? How does she hold her cat?

How does she give food to her cat?

5. Students can **EVALUATE** based on criteria in the story.

- **What Now? / What is going to happen?**

Students make predictions or create a conclusion.

What is going to happen to the cat? What will the girl do?

6. Students **DESIGN** a continuation of the story by using the elements to create something new.

All levels of thinking are important, but we can get stuck asking questions at just one or two levels. That habit is easy to fall into. We need to ask different kinds of questions to prompt students to think at all levels. Low level questions can trap students at low levels of language.

**If we only ask questions that prompt low levels of thinking
we can give students the habit of low-level language use.**

QUESTION PROMPTS FOR THE TEACHER

To help you remember these levels of thinking and questioning, it is helpful to post a reminder on the back wall of your classroom. Do not make the mistake of just going down the list. Mix it up. Ask follow-up questions. The order of your questions should be logical and repetitive without seeming repetitive.

Y / N E / O

Say it wrong

Fill-in-the-blank

**Who? What? Where?
When? How many?**

↑ SHORT CHORAL ANSWER QUESTIONS FOR THE WHOLE GROUP ↑
TO TEST GENERAL COMPREHENSION

QUESTIONS THAT REQUIRE LONGER RESPONSES BY VOLUNTEERS
↓ TO LET THEIR BRILLIANCE, CREATIVITY OR "SPARKLE" SHINE OUT ↓

How? Why?

What's going to happen?

How to Use Levels of Questioning

1. **Keep Bloom's Taxonomy in mind** as you ask questions: If you only ask low level questions, your students may only use low-level thinking and low-level language.
2. **Ask more questions than you think students need** because they're not always paying attention—but do not let your questioning become meaninglessly repetitive. You need to repeat without it seeming repetitive. Remember:



3. **Simplify.** If students do not understand a more complex question or cannot answer it quickly and confidently, drop back to a simpler question level. It could be that the cognitive load is too much for the student right now. You may need to walk them through it. There will be specific techniques for doing this later in this document.
4. **Make it sound natural** and conversational, not formulaic, not mechanical. You are not just reading down a list.
5. **Keep asking questions** based on different levels of thinking.

If the class as a whole does not seem to understand the question, cannot answer adequately or cannot answer quickly, drop back to a simpler question level to guarantee success. If students do not understand a higher-level question, drop back to a lower-level question and build back up:

More sophisticated thinking is required at each question level. For the sophisticated questions (more than one possible answer), ask targeted individuals.

Broadcast that you are asking questions in different ways by using these body language and verbal prompts:

Question Type	Teacher Action
• For <u>choral answers</u> from the entire class:	<i>Both arms wide</i> “Class, ...”
• For <u>volunteer answers</u> from individuals:	<i>Raise right hand, as if volunteering</i> “Raise your hand, ...”
• For <u>differentiated comprehension checks</u> :	<i>Raise left hand and 1st finger</i> <i>The teacher indicates who is to answer.</i> “One person, ...”

See the next section for a fuller explanation of differentiated comprehension checks.



DIFFERENT QUESTIONS FOR DIFFERENT STUDENTS:

How Differentiated “Pop Up” Comprehension Checks
Can Help All Students Understand All They Can

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*, points out the enormous range in human vocabulary size. For 16-year-olds, it can range between a low of a mere **6,000 words** (these are non-cognitively impaired students that are non-readers—those who 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 a slight difference. It is multiples beyond an F and an A in a traditional school grading system—a 1,600% difference! In other words, a student that reads regularly may know more than 16 times (!) as many words as the student sitting in the next row that does not read often. You will have students at the extreme ends of the bell curve. There will still be amazing variability among them, and we need to have tools to deal with this spread in ability. *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 extremely variable. There is more variety in language ability than in many other areas of human performance.

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 instruction with questions
- Learn how to enhance awareness of how language works in students
- See how short, focused questions are more efficient than long explanations
- Learn ways to facilitate grammar proficiency quickly and with minimal interruptions

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: ***Check for understanding often.*** Do not assume that all students understand everything you are saying all the time. Acquisition is not taking place without comprehensible input. You only know it is comprehensible if you are checking. Two or three questions per minute is a good goal.

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 say does not count. It is not comprehensible input.
- You need to check for understanding several times each class with this technique.
- Start with a set of the three levels of questions at least 5 times per class period.

IMPLEMENTATION TIP: **Count your questions.** Assign a student the classroom job of counting the number of questions you ask per class period. As you become aware of how many questions you are asking and become more skilled in questioning techniques, increase the number and types of questions you ask.



Why do you need to check for understanding like this often?

- Because students get good at pretending that they understand
- Because instructors deceive themselves into thinking all 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
- Because it's not comprehensible input if students don't understand—and they will fool you into thinking they do unless you check for understanding often.

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



BryceHedstrom.com BH

IMPLEMENTATION TIP: **Encourage students to take risks.** Praise 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 and don't get frustrated
- Higher-level students are challenged and don't get bored
- Provides a short brain break
- Only briefly interrupts the flow of communication
- 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: ***Have students give you a gesture when they do not understand.*** 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.

• **SHOW STUDENTS THAT THESE ARE NOT NORMAL QUESTIONS.** Differentiated comprehension check questions are not normal questions. Normally the teacher will ask scores of questions each class period in the target language. These are not questions for students to raise their hand if they know the answer. They are also not general comprehension questions for the entire class where we expect choral answers. All students are not free to blurt out the answers to these kinds of questions because we will not know if certain students understand aspects of what we are teaching.



IMPLEMENTATION TIP: ***Develop gestures to indicate different types of questions.*** Use obvious body language cues to indicate the difference between whole class questions with a choral response, fishing for cute ideas, and targeted comprehension check questions where one specific student responds.

• **USE TO CHECK UNDERSTANDING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS.** These questions are specific checks for understanding of grammatical concepts at various levels. They are targeted at specific students and the level of each question depends on the predicted performance of particular students. You are trying to see if specific levels of students understand specific elements of what you are teaching.

You know the **WHAT:** Students need to comprehend the language to acquire it.

You know the **WHY:** Students acquire language at different rates.

This is the **HOW** of differentiated instruction that we need in a language class: Every one of these focused comprehension checks is an instantaneous formative assessment that you can use to adjust your instruction to individual students on the spot.

Every check for understanding with one or more of these questions is a formative assessment that you can use to make minor adjustments in your instruction during the lesson... but if you don't ask you won't know.

- **STAY TIGHTLY FOCUSED.** You are not giving a lesson or expounding on broad principles of grammar with these kinds of questions. You are just making sure that students understand what is going on with the one sentence that you are using right now in class.
- **ASK THESE TYPES OF QUESTIONS REPEATEDLY.** Ask Pop-Up Grammar questions several times per class period. Each question and answer should take only seconds, but it will reap great rewards because you finally have a way of knowing what students are actually getting.
- **USE THE FEEDBACK.** Take advantage of this real-time informal assessment to adjust your lesson. Alter the input and check again.

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: ***Be aware of the language aptitude of your students.***

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 a 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 mark. Check to see which kind of questions 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 adjust 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.

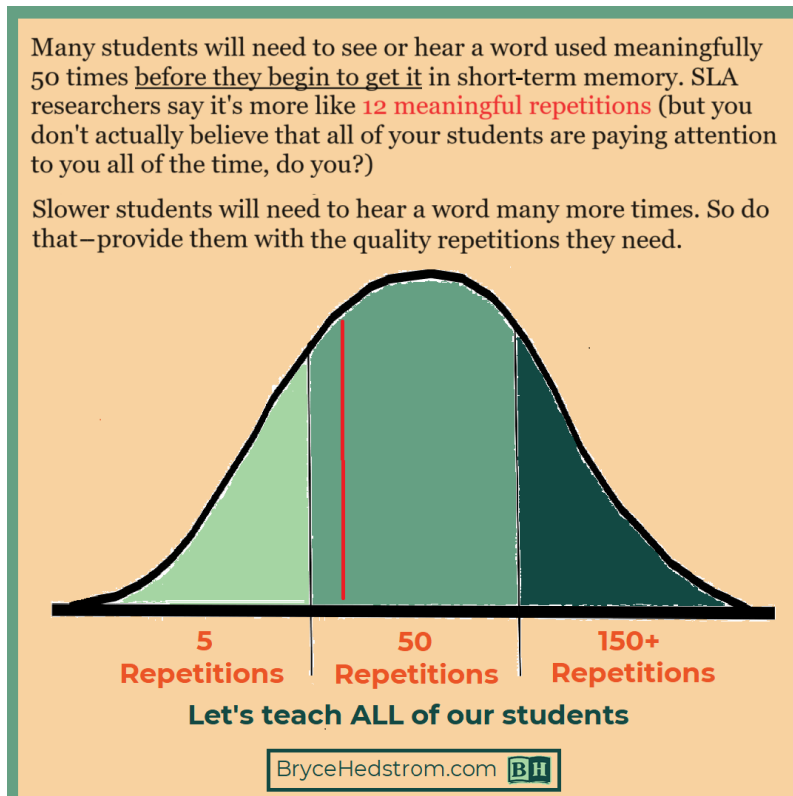


IMPLEMENTATION TIP: ***Know your students.*** *Be prepared to tell your evaluator what you are doing in the lesson you are teaching right now. What are you doing to help slower students to learn? How are you challenging faster students? How are you engaging average ability students?*

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 by teachers. Some of their teachers don't 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 faster students by asking about the class content in a different way, a way that will stretch them.

DIFFERENTIATING YOUR QUESTIONS

We need to use different questions for different students because they are not all the same. Some students will acquire language at a slower rate. When we ask differentiated questions, we can challenge **faster students**, reinforce the learning of **average students**, and give **slower students** more meaningful repetitions so they can get it. This graph is anecdotal, but it matches the experience of many teachers:



1. Slower-Processing Students

- *Understand meaning*
- *Demonstrate comprehension of phrase*

“What does ___ mean?” or “What did I just say?”

And when they don't know:

**Why didn't you show me you didn't understand? That's YOUR job—
to let me know if I'm doing MY job or not. OK?**

- 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.
- Show students that you are asking one particular student a question rather than the whole class.



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

- Focus these questions on low performing students. They are not for the whole class.
- 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 questions for slow-processing students are a just checks 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.

According to ACTFL guidelines, most speech (at least 90%) in a language class should be in the target language (TL), but you can check for understanding with L1 from time to time.

Differentiated questions are a meaningful brain break. They are asked in English to indicate to students that something else is going on.

This language shift shows students that with these questions we are not discussing the content in the TL like we do 90% of the time. Here we are focusing on understanding a particular aspect of meaning or grammar in a sentence that was just used.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR SLOWER-PROCESSING STUDENTS

Structure: **La chica le dice hola al chico.**

Instructor: *What does this mean?*

Student: The girl says hello to the boy.

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: *How else could we say **la casa de mi padre** in English?*

Student: my father's house

2. Average-Processing Students

- Describe the meanings of related forms
- Analyze differences of similar words

“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: **La chica le dice hola.**

Instructor: *What does the word **le** mean in that sentence?*

Student: to him

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

Instructor: *“What is the difference between **quiere comer** and **quiero comer**?”*

Student: **quiere comer** is “wants to eat” and **quiero comer** is “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?”

SAMPLE QUESTIONS 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: *Mix up the order of your questions. There is no need to ask this exact sequence of questions every time. Use as needed.*

3. Faster-Processing Students · Create new sentences 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.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR FASTER-PROCESSING STUDENTS

- Structure: **La chica le dice hola al chico.**
Instructor: Why do we say **le** in the phrase **le dice** instead of **lo dice** or **la dice**?
Student: Because she is saying something to the boy.
- Structure: **quiere comer** (*wants to eat*)
Instructor: What if we wanted to say **“They want to eat”**?
What if we wanted to say **“He wanted to eat”**?
What if we wanted to say **“He is going to want to eat”**?
What if we 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. They're learning the language, not just learning about the language. Because they are able to understand abstract grammatical terms and pick up language quickly, these students 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 speak the language. They want to travel. They want to make friends with native speakers. They want to be able to clearly talk about topics in class and outside of 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 up 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 that they teach explicitly and well, 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.

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 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.

If a few 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.

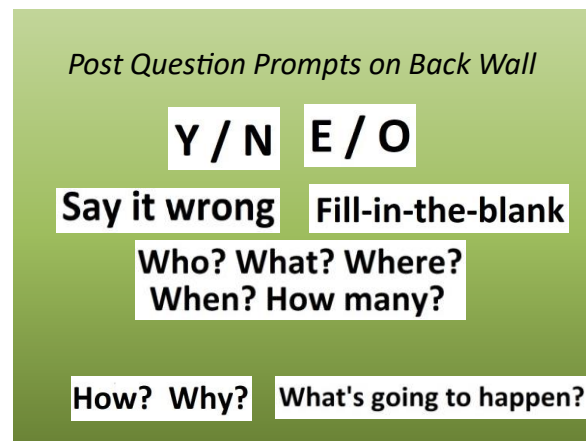
With differentiated comprehension check questions, the fast-processing students get to shine but they don't get to hog the spotlight. We acknowledge that they are special and smart and different, but not so much that we lose the rest of the class.

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 students to think they are 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.*

BECOMING MORE SKILLED AT THESE TECHNIQUES

PRINT REMINDERS FOR YOURSELF.

For The Thinking Level Questions: As stated above, print out the question types 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—you do!



A Review of Differentiated Questions:

“What did I just say?”

“What is the difference between ___ and ___?”

“What does ___ mean in that phrase?”

“Why did I say ___ instead of ___?”

“What if we wanted to say _____?”

PRACTICE.

Mastering any new skill requires deliberate, focused practice over a period of time. As with any worthwhile skill, you will not be good at it at first.

Plan on practicing 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 these kinds of questions.

When starting this technique, it can help to keep some 3 x 5 cards on a ring with you to flip through and ask during each lesson. You will eventually learn how to do it more fluidly and naturally.

WRITE OUT QUESTIONS IN ADVANCE.

Find or write a short paragraph in the TL for each level you teach, then come up with 15 questions about each paragraph for...

For **CHORAL ANSWERS from the whole class:**

- | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|
| 1) Yes/No | 4) Fill-in-the-Blank | 7) Where? |
| 2) Either/Or | 5) Who? | 8) When? |
| 3) Say it Wrong | 6) What? | 9) How many? |

For **INDIVIDUAL ANSWERS from volunteers:**

- | | | |
|----------|----------|-----------------------------|
| 10) How? | 11) Why? | 12) What's going to happen? |
|----------|----------|-----------------------------|

For **DIFFERENTIATED COMPREHENSION CHECKS from targeted students:**

- 13) (Low) What does ___ mean?
- 14) (Average) What is the difference between ___ and ___?
- 15) (High) Why did I say ___ instead of ___? *or*


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 these techniques and I wager that you will find, as I have, that students do not always get everything the way we think they

"I do not fear the opponent that has practiced 10,000 kicks. I fear the opponent that has practiced one kick 10,000 times." -Bruce Lee



What "kick" are you working on?
Which skill are you trying to get better at?

(Please don't say, 'Ending a question with a preposition.')

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 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, comments, or constructive criticism
email me at: contact@brycehedstrom.com*

We all get better when we work together. Help your fellow teachers.



**"Whatever comes out of these gates,
we've got a better chance of survival if we
work together. Do you understand? If we
stay together, we survive."**

—Maximus (Russell Crowe)
in the movie *Gladiator* (2000)

Support one another. 