

Checking for Understanding

Assessments for Learning Strategies and Tools

Using Oral Language to Check for Understanding.....blue
Using Questions to Check for Understanding.....pink
Using Writing to Check for Understanding.....green
Using Projects and Performances to Check for
Understanding.....white

Adapted from Checking for Understanding, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

Using Oral Language to Check for Understanding

There are a number of ways that teachers can use **oral language**—speaking and listening—to check for understanding. Through careful planning and analysis of student responses, teachers can close the gap between what students need to know and what they already know.

Nonverbal Cues

While it may seem a stretch to include nonverbal cues in typical oral language interactions, remember that a significant portion of our communication comes from facial expression, eye movement and such (see Calero, 2005).

Nonverbal – Reactions you might notice when they understand	Nonverbal – Reactions you might notice when they don't understand
high fives	glazed/puzzled look
throwing hands up in the air in triumph	facial expression
facial expression	inattention

Value Lineups (Taco Fold)

Students are asked to evaluate a statement.

Students form a single line according to their degree of agreement or disagreement with that statement.

The line is then folded in half, like a taco, so that the students who most strongly agreed and disagreed with one another are now face to face.

Students then discuss their reasons for their positions and listen to the reasons of their partners.

Retellings

Inviting students to retell what they have just heard or read is a powerful way of checking for understanding. (Hansen, 2004, Shaw, 2005).

Students need to be explicitly taught the procedures of retelling.

Variations on Retellings	
Oral to Oral	Listens to a selection and retells it orally
Oral to Written	Listens to a selection and retells it in writing (summary)
Oral to Video	Listens to a selection and creates a video or acts it out
Reading to Oral	Reads a selection and retells it orally
Reading to Written	Reads a selection and retells it in writing (summary)
Reading to Video	Reads a selection and creates a video or acts it out
Viewing to Oral	Views a film and retells it orally
Viewing to Written	Views a film and retells it in writing (summary)
Viewing to Video	Views a film and creates a video or acts it out

Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share is a cooperative discussion strategy that allows students to discuss their responses with a peer before sharing with the whole class.

Three stages of student action:

- 1. Think.** The teacher engages students' thinking with a question prompt, reading, visual, or observation. The students should take a few minutes (not seconds) just to *think* about the question.
- 2. Pair.** Using designated partners, students pair up to discuss their thinking/responses. They compare their thoughts and identify the responses they think are the best, most intriguing, most convincing, or most unique.
- 3. Share.** After students talk in pairs for a few moments, the teacher asks pairs to *share* their thinking with the rest of the class.

Whip Around/Statement Stand-up

The whip around is a useful instructional tool teachers can use to check for understanding in a group setting. While the whip around may not provide individual, student-level information about understanding, it is useful in helping teachers determine if they need to re-teach content to the group.

- 1. The teacher poses a question or a task.** Example: Make a list of characteristics that distinguish insects from other creatures earth.
- 2. Students individually respond on a scrap piece of paper.**
- 3. When they have done so, students stand up.**
- 4. Teacher calls on a student to share one of his/her ideas from the paper.**
- 5. Students compare any items that are said by another student and sit down when their idea(s) has/have been shared with the group, whether or not they were the one to share them.**
- 6. The teacher continues to call on students until they are all seated.**

Using Questions to Check for Understanding Questioning

Well-crafted questions are a great way for teachers to determine what their students know, need to know and misunderstand. There are a number of effective approaches to questioning, both at the individual level and at the classroom level.

Response Cards

Response cards are index cards, signs, dry erase boards, magnetic boards, or other items that are simultaneously held up by all students in the class to indicate their response to a question or problem presented by the teacher. Using response cards, the teacher can easily note the responses of individual students while teaching the whole group. Additionally, response cards allow for participation by the whole class and not just a few students who raise their hands to respond.

Hand Signals

Students can use hand signals to indicate their understanding of content information. Similar to response cards, hand signals require engagement from the whole group and allow the teacher to check for understanding large groups of students.

- Thumbs Up, Thumbs Side-ways, Thumbs Down
- How Many Fingers? Five fingers mean you have a deep understanding, one finger means you do not yet understand, two-four fingers indicate varying levels of understanding.

Developing Authentic Questions

It is important to ensure that the questions engage students in deeper thinking and not merely prompt them to recall information that they have read or been told.

Sample Questions

- How is _____ similar to/different from _____?
- What are the characteristics/parts of _____?
- In what other way might we show/illustrate _____?
- What is the big idea/key concept in _____?
- How does _____ relate to _____?
- What ideas/details can you add to _____?
- Give an example of _____.
- What is wrong with _____?
- What might you infer from _____?
- What conclusions might be drawn from _____?
- What questions are we trying to answer? What problem are we trying to solve?
- What are you assuming about _____?
- What might happen if _____?
- What criteria might you use to judge/evaluate _____?
- What evidence supports _____?
- How might we prove/confirm _____?
- How might this be viewed from the perspective of _____?

- What alternatives should be considered?
- What approach/strategy could you use to ____?
- How else might you say_____?

Audience Response Systems

(Clickers)

Enables teachers to gather students' responses to interactive questions in real time through handheld devices (e.g., remoter controls) that allow each learner to respond to questions individually.

Ask your facilitators for more information.

Using Writing to Check for Understanding

Writing offers an excellent pathway for brainstorming, clarifying, and questioning. There is evidence of increased student performance when writing is used as a tool for thinking. Writing clarifies thinking. For that matter, writing is thinking.

Using writing across the curriculum as an assessment tool and not the teaching of writing for writing's sake demonstrates writing for learning.

Interactive Writing

Interactive writing allows students to share the pen with the teacher. This strategy can be used with individual students, small groups or the whole class. After agreeing on a message orally, students take turns writing on the dry-erase board or on chart paper. The idea is that interactive writing flows “from ideas, to spoken words, to printed messages” (Clay, 2001, p.27).

This strategy allows teachers to identify errors, misunderstandings or next steps for learning through checking for understanding.

Read-Write-Pair-Share

Students read (or view, in the case of videos or DVDs) the material.
Write in response to the information gained from reading or viewing.
Engage in a partner conversation about what they've read and written.
Share their ideas with the whole class.

Summary Writing

Summary writing provides the teacher with insight into how learners condense information and serves as a way for students to demonstrate their ability to recapitulate what they have read, viewed, or done. There is evidence that the act of summarizing new knowledge in written form can lead to higher levels of understanding.

RAFT

The RAFT strategy was designed to help students take different perspectives in their writing and thus their thinking (Santa & Havens, 1995) RAFT provides a scaffold for students as they explore their writing based on various roles, audiences, formats, and topics (Fisher & Frey, 2004).

The **RAFT** strategy asks students to consider the following questions:

Role: What is the role of the writer?

Audience: To whom is the writer writing?

Format: What is the format for the writing?

Topic: What is the focus of the writing?

RAFT can be used as in conjunction with texts that students read.

Using Projects and Performances to Check for Understanding

Tasks associated with application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are frequently designed as projects or performances. Ultimately, we must witness how our students choose and use information while taking part in a meaningful activity. We gain insight as we witness the extent of students transferring their learning to new situations.

Reader's Theatre

A way to use Reader's Theatre is to have small groups of students take a piece of text and turn it into a script. This allows the teacher to determine if the group (or individual students, for that matter) understands the main ideas of the texts. Alternatively, teachers can check students' understanding of specific content information using this method.

Multi-Media Presentations

Multimedia presentations provide learners an opportunity to share what they know as they combine text, graphics, video, sound, and even animation. The digital revolution has provided students with new ways of demonstrating their knowledge and has given teachers new ways of checking for understanding (Armstrong & Warlick, 2004). Using this strategy will allow teachers to provide feedback on the content, common misconceptions, and their developing language skills.

Electronic and Paper Portfolios

A portfolio is a collection of items intended to reflect a body of work. They are designed to reflect a student's process of learning (Tierney, 1998).

Visual Displays of Information

Visual displays of information require students to represent knowledge in a nonlinguistic fashion, typically using images or movement to do so. There is evidence that students who generate visual representations of a concept are better able to understand and recall the concept (Ritchie & Karge, 1996).

- Graphic Organizers
- Inspiration (software program)
- Foldables (Zike, 1992)-<http://foldables.wikispaces.com/>
- Dioramas

*For more information on any of these strategies contact your facilitator.

Public Performances

Performances are an underused but critical method of checking for understanding. These displays offer students an opportunity to use new learning to create original works, allowing a transfer of learning to occur.

