

How can you know a particular task or lesson achieved its aim?

One of the best ways to immediately determine the success of a task or lesson is to check that your students have been able to grasp the essential elements of particular lesson aims. Concept checking allows you to do this.

What is concept checking?

Concept checking questions are simply targeted questions used at the end of an activity or lesson to gauge students' understanding of a concept or language point. For instance, at the end of a lesson about 'be going to for future plans' rather than asking a question like, "Do you know how to use 'be going to' for future plans?", which will not generate much useful information if any, you could go around the class and ask students what their plans are for the weekend.

For example:

Teacher: What are you doing this weekend Rodrigo?

Rodrigo: I am going to visit my grandparents.

Teacher: What are you doing this weekend Aluna?

Aluna: I go to shopping mall.

Here we can see clearly that Rodrigo has a better grasp of 'be going to' for future plans than Aluna does.

There are a few reasons why concept-checking questions should be employed in your teaching. Firstly, they are efficient and effective. Asking a question like, "Do you understand?" often results in the teacher, later on in the activity, realising that the students did not understand. This may require halting the activity and restarting from the beginning. Students will often reply yes because they may genuinely believe they have understood something when in reality, they have failed to grasp the concept. Students can also often be reluctant to answer the question honestly for fear of losing face. Therefore, it is necessary to be more strategic in the way you concept check.

Another advantage of concept checking questions is that they can be used in almost every lesson and are very versatile. They can be repeated to check the same or similar concept or teaching point and can be adapted to check other language concepts.

In addition to helping teachers measure their students' level of understanding, concept checking questions encourage students to actively participate in the lesson which is an important part of discovering and understanding new language. Through concept checking questions, students are called upon to convey their language knowledge in class, which then allows the teacher to clarify and enhance that knowledge. Concept checking questions are also a good way of informing the content of subsequent lessons.

Another benefit of using concept-checking questions is that in the process of preparing them, you will soon realise whether you have understood what you are teaching or not. Before asking concept-checking questions, it is necessary to prepare them as an integral part of the lesson planning process. This requires fully understanding the concept being taught, which means taking the time to examine the language point more closely. This may seem a little onerous, but this process can actually provide a useful catalyst for generating concept-checking questions as you will see later in the article.



While the preparation of effective concept-checking questions may seem daunting, there are some straightforward ways to approach them. Here are some tips for creating successful concept questions:

The questions should be easy to understand and contain no new or difficult language. Vocabulary is an important consideration when formulating concept-checking questions. The simplest of language points can become extremely confusing if the questions contain advanced or unfamiliar words. Therefore, try to stick to vocabulary that students have already covered in the course or is as close as possible to their current CEFR level. Also, the questions shouldn't contain the target language itself. A final point about language is that the questions should not require answers that contain complex language. Therefore, simple either/or questions, 'Wh' questions, or yes/no questions usually work quite well.

The questions should get the students involved in thinking about the basic concept of the target language regarding such things as tense and time. The questions should also clarify the form, function, or meaning of the language.

Try to ask as many concept questions as you can to cover the various aspects of the language and to get feedback from as many students as possible.

It is important to repeat the significance of avoiding questions like 'Do you understand?' Such questions will not give you any true insight into the students' understanding. Similarly, avoid general questions such as:

Incorrect: Do you understand how to use the present simple?

Correct: What do you like to do after school?

Incorrect: What does 'benefit' mean?

Correct: Tell me one benefit of learning English.

Incorrect: Do you know how to use prepositions?

Correct: Do we say 'at' Monday or 'on' Monday?

It is also helpful to remind students that clearing up misunderstandings are a part of everyday communication and an essential and unavoidable part of the learning process. Hence, try to make it clear to students that concept checking is not about embarrassing them, but it is about helping the students improve and helping the teacher teach more effectively.

Concept questions vary greatly due to the diversity of the English language. They are not only useful for grammar points and structures, but also vocabulary, functions, and idiomatic expressions.

Here are some examples of how concept questions might be used with present tenses:

Present simple: Harry lives in a one-bedroom apartment.

Information question: Who lives in the apartment?

Information question: How many bedrooms are there?

Yes/no question: Does Harry live in a house?

Yes/no question: Does Harry live there now?

Shared experience question: Does your family live in a one-bedroom apartment?

Present continuous: The students are taking an exam.

Yes/no question: Is the exam finished?

Yes/no question: Is the exam happening now?

Yes/no question: Are the students taking the exam tomorrow?

'Wh' question: Who is taking the exam?

Shared experience question: Do you enjoy taking exams?

An easy and practical way of formulating concept questions is by writing down all the elements of the concept, which can act as prompts from which to create your questions.

For example:

1. Jum has been exercising.

Concept: She isn't exercising now, and I didn't see her exercising, but I could guess she was exercising because she might be sweating, breathing heavily, or wearing workout gear.

Is Jum exercising now?

Could Jum be feeling tired?

Do you think Jum is wearing a school uniform?

2. Omar is going on holiday to Jamaica.

Concept: He is not in Jamaica now, he is probably flying there, and he is not going for work.

Is Omar in Jamaica?

Will Omar fly on a plane?

Does Omar have a business meeting in Jamaica?

If the students answer the questions appropriately, it shows they have understood the concept.

You can then move on to ask other types of concept questions. For example, in the first example above, you could follow up with a shared experience question such as, "What is your favourite type of exercise?"

Concept questions can also be combined with other methods to check understanding. Here are some other possible methods:

Paraphrasing or summarizing exercises. These are especially useful for higher-level students when teaching listening and reading. Accurate paraphrases and summaries require a solid understanding of the source material.

Activities that require the arrangement or categorisation of content are useful ways of checking understanding. For example, having students create timelines can be used to check their understanding of the difference in meaning between various tenses. Students can be asked to apply scales or grades to show their understanding of such things as adverbs of frequency – always (100%), usually (75%), sometimes (50%), occasionally, (25%), and never (0%). Arranging words into categories also works well. For example, students could be asked to arrange animals into categories such as pets, farm animals, or wild animals.

Worksheets or homework assignments that contain guided practice exercises are an easy and effective way of seeing what students have or have not grasped. In addition to Yes/No or Wh questions, teachers can ask negative checking questions such as, "Do I say, 'You was'?". Fun games such as '[Hot Seats](#)' are a good way to check students' understanding of new vocabulary as the students are asked to define words through both description and the use of synonyms without actually saying the word.

Concept checking can be used at any point during a lesson. However, avoid any temptation to overuse it as this can cause a lesson to get bogged down and lessen some of the positive energy an activity initially generated. Concept checking should generally be limited to the specific learning aims of the lesson. If used correctly, concept-checking questions provide a rich source of information from which to make your teaching more successful. They are also an effective way to help make lessons more participative and less passive.