

CONVEYING MEANING & CHECKING UNDERSTANDING

INTRODUCTION

An important skill for a language teacher is the ability to offer **clarifications** of the **meaning** and **use** of grammar structures, words and expressions. Many lessons specifically aim at raising awareness of new grammar or vocabulary, and in many more lessons new grammar or vocabulary just emerge from texts, conversations, etc. When learners can't fully grasp new language, some teachers use **definitions** and **explanations** as the default **strategy** to offer clarifications. They then follow up asking 'Do you understand?'.

Definitions and explanations can work for many language items (e.g. 'venison' is meat from a deer) provided learners are familiar with the vocabulary used in the definition (i.e. deer). However, they can be quite **confusing** if the definition (e.g. 'excited' is when you feel happy and enthusiastic about something) is complicated or contains words that learners don't know either (i.e. enthusiastic). Teachers may end up having to '**explain the explanation**', and confusing the learners even more. Other **techniques** may be more effective and efficient.

Asking the question 'Do you understand?' often results in no more than timid nods which teachers interpret as signs of understanding. However, this doesn't always reflect the truth. Which learner would be brave enough to admit in front of the class that he/she didn't understand? The question simply defeats its purpose.

TECHNIQUES TO CONVEY MEANING

The following are common **techniques** to convey the **meaning** of new **language items**.

- **Picture/drawing** (e.g. concrete nouns like 'chair', 'tiger', etc.)
- **Realia** (e.g. any word for which there is an object that can be brought into the classroom)
- **Mime/gesture** (e.g. actions like 'to stroll', 'to clap', etc.)
- **Definition/explanation** (e.g. any language item provided the definition is less complex than the new item)
- **Synonym/antonym** (e.g. words which have a similar meaning like 'big and large', or words which have a direct opposite like 'hot and cold')
- **Examples/types of the kind** (e.g. words that include the meanings of other particular words like 'cutlery', 'vehicle', etc.)
- **Anecdote/situational presentation** (e.g. abstract language items which need to be contextualized like 'frustrated', 'should', 'I will have finished', etc.)
- **Scale/cline** (e.g. words which express the amount, degree or level of something like 'never, hardly ever, seldom, sometimes, etc.)
- **Graph/diagram** (e.g. words which can be represented by a simple drawing made of lines like 'average', 'fluctuate', etc.)
- **Timelines** (e.g. any verb tense)
- **Translation** (e.g. any language item provided there is a direct equivalent)

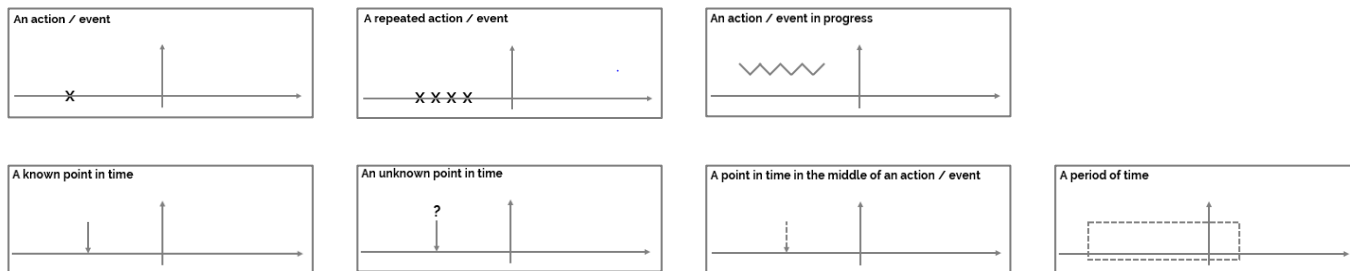
Sometimes, a **single technique** may not be sufficient to convey the meaning of a new language item.

A teacher recently tried to convey the meaning of the **word** 'shy' using a picture alone. Regrettably, the picture led the learners to believe that the meaning was that of 'embarrassed'. The same picture combined with an anecdote or situational presentation could have avoided confusion.

The same is valid for **grammar** structures. A teacher recently tried to establish the meaning of the 'Present Simple' using a timeline alone. The timeline correctly showed the same action (*go to school*) in the past, the present and the future to represent a routine. Regrettably, the immediate reaction from one of the learners was to say in his first language "That's easy! English has only one tense!". If the timeline had been supported by a contextualized situation with an example sentence, the learner wouldn't have made a wrong assumption.

Timelines are horizontal lines that represent the relationship between **actions** and **time**. They are often used to clarify the meaning of **verb tenses**.

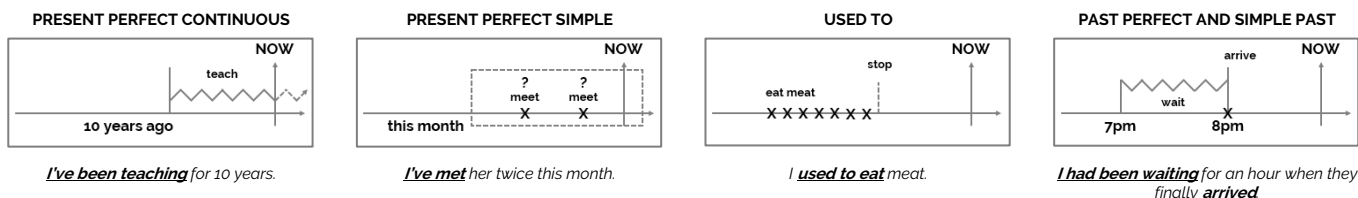
The following are examples of common **symbols** used. The timeline is read from left to right (past to future).



Adapted from: Workman (2005)

Timelines become clearer when the symbols are **labelled** with explicit **references** to the action(s) and the time.

Consider the following examples.



TECHNIQUES TO CHECK UNDERSTANDING

Using an appropriate technique to **convey** the meaning of a language item is no **guarantee** that learners will **understand** the meaning of a new language item. Teachers should try to collect **evidence** of understanding.

This evidence can be gathered by asking **referential questions** (i.e. genuine questions that seek unknown information) to encourage learners to make a sentence or give a personal **example** about the new item. A meaningful sentence or example should give evidence of understanding.

Consider the following examples.

LANGUAGE ITEM	TECHNIQUES TO CONVEY MEANING	REFERENTIAL QUESTIONS
Necklace	Give a definition using a gesture (<i>It's something you wear around your neck</i>) and draw a face with a necklace around the neck on the board.	<i>Is anyone wearing a necklace?</i>
Dangerous	Use the antonym (<i>It's the opposite of safe</i>) and give an example (<i>Boxing is a dangerous sport. You can hurt yourself and others.</i>)	<i>Does anyone know a dangerous sport?</i>
To shiver	Use a gesture.	<i>What makes you shiver?</i>
I've been teaching for 10 years.	Use a situational presentation (<i>I started learning French 10 years ago and I'm still learning now. I've been learning French for 10 years</i>) and draw a timeline on the board.	<i>How long have you been learning English?</i>
Should	Use a situational presentation (<i>The weather is pretty bad today and there are very dark clouds. I'm about to go out and my mother tells me: - You should take an umbrella with you.</i>)	<i>What should I bring if it's very hot and sunny?</i>

However, the learners' answer may not be correct and show full understanding of the meaning of the new language item, or the teacher may sense the need to investigate further into the level of understanding acquired.

Consider the following **responses** to the referential questions asked above, the teacher **assumptions** and the follow up **display questions** (i.e. questions for which the teacher already knows the answer) to further clarify more complex aspects of meaning.

LANGUAGE ITEM	RESPONSES	ASSUMPTIONS	DISPLAY QUESTIONS
Necklace	Q: <i>Is anyone wearing a necklace?</i> A: <i>Yes! (showing a bracelet).</i>	The learner is under the impression that you can wear a necklace around your wrist.	<i>Can you wear a necklace around your wrist? (No)</i>
Dangerous	Q: <i>Does anyone know a dangerous sport?</i> A: <i>Yes! Free climbing. Because you can die.</i>	The learner may be under the impression that 'dangerous' is only associated to death.	<i>Yes, that's right. How about a sport where you can just hurt yourself? Can football be 'dangerous'? (Yes)</i>
To shiver	Q: <i>What makes you shiver?</i> A: <i>When it's cold!</i>	The learner may be under the impression that 'to shiver' is only associated to feeling cold.	<i>Can something frightening make you shiver? (Yes)</i>
I've been teaching for 10 years.	Q: <i>How long have you been learning English?</i> A: <i>I've been learning English for 5 years.</i>	The learner provided a correct answer but I want to make sure he/she knows that the action is likely to continue.	<i>Did you start learning in the past? (Yes)</i> <i>Are you still learning? (Yes)</i> <i>Are you likely to continue learning? (Yes)</i>
Should	Q: <i>What I should do if it's very hot and sunny?</i> A: <i>Bring water.</i>	The learner provided a correct answer but I want to make sure that he/she is not under the impression that it's an obligation.	<i>Is bringing water an order or just a good idea? (A good idea)</i> <i>Is it ok not to bring water? (Yes)</i>

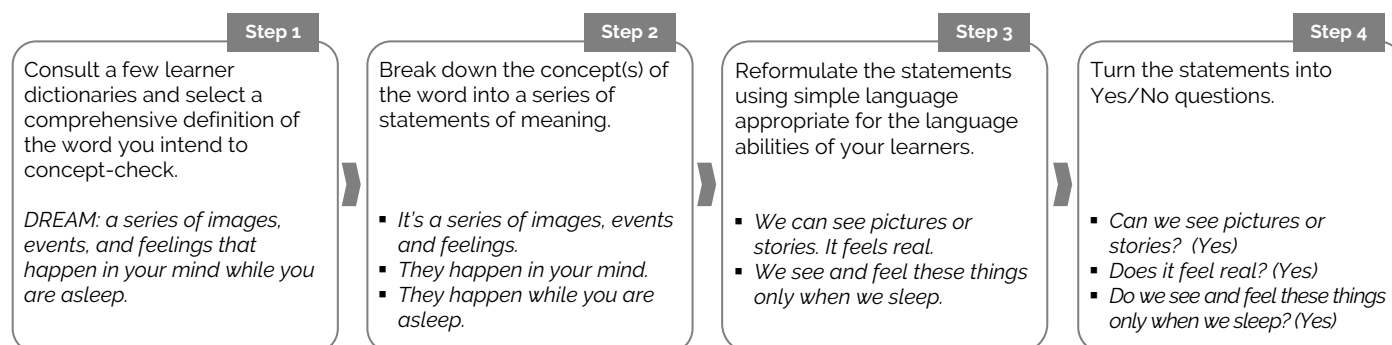
Display questions are often called **concept questions**, and they are designed to check language concepts in more detail. They can be a useful teaching tool when the teacher's assumption is that more evidence of understanding is needed.

Whereas **referential questions** may be more **spontaneous** and guided by **common sense**, the ability to come up with meaningful and well-focused **concept questions** requires accurate **knowledge** of the meanings, concepts, notions, uses, etc. of a particular **language item**.

The following are examples of the **process** that teachers can follow to **design** appropriate **concept questions**.

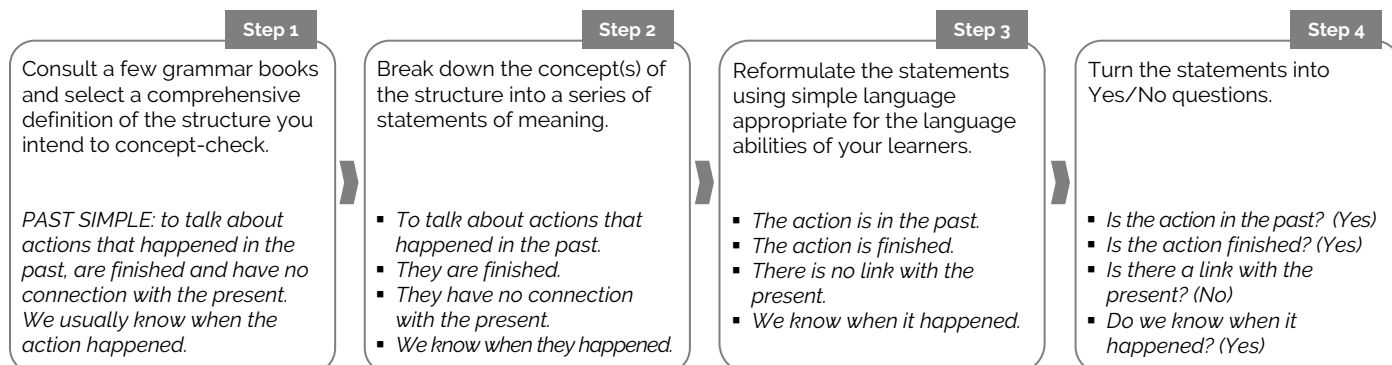
VOCABULARY

Let's imagine we want to **design** concept questions for the word 'dream' for elementary learners.



GRAMMAR

Let's imagine we want to **design** concept questions for the 'Past Simple' tense for elementary learners.



- The questions must be concise and simple, and should require a Yes/No answer.
- The language you use must be simpler than the language you are checking.
- The questions should not contain the target language.
- The questions should be presented in logical order.
- Write down the correct answers you expect the learners to give.



TEACHING TIPS

Timelines

- Present timelines in combination with a contextualized sample sentence.
- Indicate time references explicitly and write them on the timeline. E.g. NOW, PAST, FUTURE, 4pm, 2010, etc.
- Indicate actions explicitly, especially if the timeline contains more than one action. Write them on the timeline.
- Add drawings / images. This will simplify even further.
- Use color-coding to add clarity.
- Complement timelines with relevant questions to check understanding.
- Be consistent in the way you use symbols. E.g. a cross for a completed event or action, a wavy line for an action in progress, a question mark for an unknown point in time, etc.

Questions to check understanding:

- Remember to introduce new language in context: use real-life scenarios learners can relate to.
- Make sure questions are concise and simple.
- Try to ask close-ended questions which require a one-word answer (Yes/No, multiple choice, etc.).
- Make sure the language you use in your questions is simpler than the language you are checking.
- Avoid using the target language in your questions. E.g. (Used to) – ~~Did I use to eat meat?~~
- Present questions in a logical order.
- Avoid asking the same question multiple times if learners can't understand. Provide the correct answer, and simplify further with other examples.
- Avoid prompting the answers using facial expressions (e.g. nodding to prompt a 'Yes') or mouthing the answer. Use a genuinely quizzical look. Allow learners to think.
- Complement these questions with referential questions and ask learners to give you an example. This will give you further evidence of the learners' understanding. E.g. (Frustrated) – *So, when was the last time you felt frustrated?*
- Check the concept and NOT the context / situation. E.g. (Necklace) – ~~Is a necklace expensive?~~
- Plan your questions in advance and have a dictionary at hand to be able to deal with the unexpected.
- Avoid using unnecessary questions. E.g. (Chair) – ~~Can I sit on it?~~ Show a picture instead.

FURTHER READING

- Aitken, R. (2002). *Teaching Tenses*. Brighton: ELB Publishing.
- Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy. Second Edition*. White Plains, USA: Addison-Wesley Longman. Chapter 20(Grammar Techniques).
- Scrivener, J. (2010). *Teaching English Grammar. What to Teach and How to Teach it*. London: Macmillan Education.
- Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning Teaching. The Essential Guide to English Language Teaching. Third Edition*. London: Macmillan Education. Chapter 4(5). Chapter 12(6) + DVD (Concept questions, Timelines).
- Workman, G. (2005). *Concept Questions and Time Lines*. Kilchberg, Switzerland: Chadburn.