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## AN ATTEMPT TO ANALYSE COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS OF A READING PASSAGE

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### ABSTRACT

This brief study attempts to analyse a reading unit of a textbook used for teaching English as a foreign language in the light of Pearson and Johnson's (1978) taxonomy of comprehension questions. This article also presents an example of a successful reading activity which explores all types of questions listed by the Pearson and Johnson (1978). It aims at helping teachers of English as a foreign language to classify and balance the types of questions used in reading comprehension activities in order to make them more effective and interesting for the learners.

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### INTRODUCTION

Generally, the comprehension questions asked in reading activities of textbooks aim at verifying whether the learner is able to skim and/or scan the text for understanding its overall and/or specific meaning(s). However, some teachers are not aware of the types of questions being asked and what is the purpose of each question present in reading activities. Thus, the real objective aimed at by the activity is not achieved.

In this study, I attempt to analyse the comprehension questions of a reading unit taken from the textbook *Opening Strategies* used by teachers of English at the first level of the extra curricular course at

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UFSC in 1989. I intend to help teachers of English as a foreign language to classify these questions and even to give some suggestions on how to improve these questions and make the reading task more effective and interesting.

Thus, the aim of this research paper is to check whether the reading passage analysed contains the three types of comprehension questions suggested by Pearson and Johnson (1978). If they are present, I will check whether there is a balance among them.

Finally, if any incongruities are found, I will try to explain them and give other examples of questions to improve the activity as well as present another text taken from the textbook *HEADWAY Pre-Intermediate*, used in the Language Course at Universidade Federal de Goiás where I am currently teaching English, which shows the authors' concern with the different types of questions to be asked in reading activities.

In order to do this analysis, I will adopt Pearson and Johnson's taxonomy (1978) of comprehension questions which analyses these types of questions according to three main categories explained below. These authors state that the great use of questions for reading comprehension is no evidence of their quality, importance and appropriateness. Their main point is not whether to ask comprehension questions or not, but how, when and where to ask these questions. The authors approach the categorization of these types of questions through a different perspective, and offer guidelines for using comprehension questions in oral or written activities according to their own categorization scheme. Before introducing the categories, the authors present the general classification of questions: wh-questions, yes-no questions, tag-questions, and cleft questions. They observe that the wh-question type is the most numerous in discussions, tests and instructional materials.

According to Pearson and Johnson (1978), their question taxonomy is of great value because it captures the relationship between the information that is presented in a text and the information that has come from the reader's store of prior knowledge which is called 'script' or 'schema'.

The taxonomy is based on three question-answer relations: textually explicit relation; textually implicit relation; and 'scriptally' implicit relation.

According to this scheme, textually explicit questions have obvious answers on the page; that is, they have direct, explicit and precise answers in the text in which the readers engage literal comprehension.

Textually implicit questions have answers that are on the page, but which are not so obvious; that is, the responses are derived from the text. In this case, it seems that there is some inference involved in the process of answering the questions, which the authors call 'textually implicit comprehension'. It should be noted here that "while both question and answer were textually derived, the relation was textually implicit rather than explicit; hence it had to be inferred" (p. 160). Therefore, for the textually implicit category of comprehension there is at least one step of logical or pragmatic inferring necessary in order to get to the response of a question, being that both question and response are derived from the text.

At this point, the authors notice that in the inference process, two possible sources may be involved: one based on the reader's possible prior knowledge of subject presented in the text; or a second source, based on the text with a little nudge from prior knowledge.

The 'scriptally' implicit questions require from the readers the use of their 'script' to answer them. In this case, the answers for the questions come from the readers' fund of previous knowledge. In this kind of comprehension, inference is also involved, but differently from the textually implicit comprehension, the data base for the inference in the scriptal comprehension is in the readers' head, not on the page.

After explaining the three comprehension categories, Pearson and Johnson (1978) establish operational rules for determining them. Firstly, in the textually explicit question-answer relation, both question and answer are derivable from the text, so the relation is explicitly cued by the language of the text. This type of comprehension is considered by the authors as 'reading the lines'. Secondly, in the textually implicit question-answer relation, both question and answer are derivable from the text, though there is no logical or grammatical cue tying the question to the answer; in this case, the answer is plausible in the light of the question. This type of comprehension is considered as 'reading between the lines'. Thirdly, the 'scriptally' implicit comprehension occurs "whenever a plausible nontextual response is given to a question

derivable from the text” (p.164). This type of comprehension is considered as ‘reading beyond the lines’.

Finally, Pearson and Johnson (1978) observe that the most important point to be considered in this method of classifying question-answer relations is that they cannot be classified in isolation.

## THE DATA

### Reading

Win, 42, tells how she met her husband:

I remember I was about 19. I went to a dance at the village hall. I went with my best friend, Marjorie. Marjorie was very pretty and all the boys liked her. They all wanted to dance with her. I didn't enjoy dances much. I was always very shy.

I sat at a table in the corner of the dance hall. No one asked me to dance. After about an hour, Marjorie came up to me and said, ‘Go and ask one of the boys to dance! You can't just sit there!’

I was awful. I hated every minute of it. In the end she told one of her boyfriends to go and ask me for a dance. I was so embarrassed! Anyway, the boy came up and we danced. His name was Nick and he was very nice. He asked me to go to the cinema with him the next day. That was the start of it. I went out with him for a year, and then he asked me to marry him. My parents were a bit surprised. They liked him, but they said we were too young. They told us to wait. We waited nine months and then, on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, we got married. We now have three children and we're very happy. I still see Marjorie quite often. She always says, “You mustn't sit and wait for things to happen. You must go out and make them happen.” I think she's right!

Answer:

Where did Win meet her husband, Nick?

How old was she then?

Who was she with?

What was her friend like?

Why didn't Win enjoy dances?

Why wasn't she happy at first at this dance?

What did Marjorie tell her to do? Did Win do it?  
What did Marjorie do then?  
Who came up and asked Win to dance?  
Did he ask to see her again?  
What happened after a year?  
Why didn't Win's parents want them to get married?  
When did they get married?  
Are they happy now?  
What does Marjorie always says?

(Abbs, 1986, p.106)

## DATA ANALYSIS

The text used for the analysis was taken from the textbook *Opening Strategies*. As usual, the text is followed by the questions that the students are supposed to answer. In this activity, only three out of the sixteen questions are yes-no questions, the others being wh-questions. This only confirms the consideration made by Pearson and Johnson (1978) reported above concerning the great number of wh-questions present in instructional materials.

The questions from this text analysed in the light of Pearson and Johnson's taxonomy can be classified as follows:

Textually explicit questions, that is, those which answers are directly found on the page:

"How old was she then?"

"What was her friend like?"

"Who was she with?"

"What did Marjorie tell her to do?"

"What did Marjorie do then?"

"Who came up and asked Win to dance?"

"Did he ask to see her again?"

"What happened after a year?"

"Why didn't Win's parents want them to get married?"

"When did they get married?"

"Are they happy now?"

"What does Marjorie always say?"

Textually implicit questions, that is, those which require some inference from the reader to answer them:

“Where did Win meet her husband, Nick?”

“Why didn’t Win enjoy dances?”

“Why wasn’t she happy at first at this dance?”

“Did Win do it? (What did Marjorie tell her to do?)”

‘Scriptally’ implicit questions, that is, those which answers are nontextual and require inference from the readers are not found in this activity.

## COMMENTS ON THE ANALYSIS

Based on Pearson and Johnson’s (1978) comprehension question taxonomy, some conclusions can be drawn from this brief analysis.

First of all, there is no balance in relation to the number of types of questions, in other words, there are twelve textually explicit questions, four textually implicit questions and no ‘scriptally’ implicit questions.

Second, considering the great amount of textually explicit questions, it is possible to conclude that the main objective of the activity is that the students find the answers for the questions printed on the page.

Third, considering the small amount of textually implicit questions it is possible to conclude that the activity avoids requiring inference from the students to answer the questions.

The lack of ‘scriptally’ implicit questions may indicate that the activity does not aim at using the readers’ prior knowledge as a source to answer the questions.

The results of the analysis show the predominance of the textually explicit questions which only require from the reader to take the information directly from the printed page and answer them. It should be added that a reading activity which is limited to textually explicit questions may become monotonous and mechanical to a certain

extent as they do not require from the readers any kind of inference or use of their prior knowledge to answer them.

I believe that textually explicit questions may be part of the reading comprehension process, but not the whole process, which also involves textually implicit as well as 'scriptally' implicit comprehension.

So, in order to improve this reading activity and foster comprehension, other textually implicit and 'scriptally' implicit questions could be added. I would suggest here the following lists as examples of both types:

Textually implicit questions:

Why does Win think Marjorie is right?  
How does Win's parents react to her marriage?  
How did Win meet her husband?

'Scriptally' implicit questions:

Do you think she would meet Mick if she enjoyed the dance?  
What is the main point of this passage?  
What is your opinion about the attitude of Win's parents?  
Do you agree with Win's parents?  
Do you agree with Marjorie?

## **ANOTHER EXAMPLE**

In the following example taken from the textbook *HEADWAY Pre-Intermediate*, the authors succeed in exploiting all types of comprehension questions listed by Pearson and Johnson (1978). In order to do the reading, students should do a pre-reading activity and a vocabulary work. Before doing the reading, students should read the instructions below:

### **Jigsaw reading**

1. You will now read an article from the *Today* newspaper  
Look at the headline and the introduction.  
What sort of people is the article about?  
Why are they going to dating agencies?
2. Divide into two groups.  
*Group A* Read about the America, John Frantz.  
*Group B* Read about the English woman, Nicolette Morganti.  
Answer the comprehension check questions as you read.

### **Comprehension check**

1. What is his/her job?
2. Is it good job?
3. Does he/she own a house?
4. Where does he/she want to live?
5. What sort of person does he/she want to meet?
6. What sort of person doesn't he/she like?
7. Does he/she want to have children?
8. Who has he/she met already?
9. Was it a successful meeting?
10. What is he/she going to do?

When you have answered your questions, find a partner from the other group.

Compare your answers and swap information.

### **DESPERATELY SEEKING SOMEONE**

#### *The lonely high fliers trying to find love*

They have money, good looks and high-powered jobs, but in the fight to the top they forgot one thing - finding a partner.

Now over 30, they have no time to start looking. As a result, more and more lonely single people are asking others to help them find love. According to 'Desperately Seeking Someone', a four-part BBC documentary starting soon, dating agencies, social clubs, and



small advertisements in magazines are becoming a multi-million pound business.

*Today* reporter Margaret Morrison spoke to someone of the lonely hearts who told her about just who you meet when you pay for the introduction.

### **My girl must like me, not my wallet**

John Frantz 36

Divorced (Sales Manager)

AMERICAN John Frantz has a wonderful lifestyle and he wants to share it with an English girl.

At 36, he's the national sales manager for a big printing firm, earns £65,000-plus and drives a grey Cadillac. Home is a six-bedroom, five bathroom mansion in 1 1/2 acres of land near Washington DC.

'I want to stay in this house,' says John. 'I like exotic holidays, but I wouldn't like to live outside the US. 'Divorced five years ago, he now hopes to find a wife with the English Rose dating agency in Kent.

'Children aren't so important to me. I don't want to go to bars to meet women because in the US they are more interested in your wallet,' he says. 'I meet a lot of people through work, but I've got a strict rule of never dating women colleagues.

'I know a couple of British women at home and they have an air of independence that US women don't have. I'd like to meet someone who's intelligent and who has her own opinions. 'His first transatlantic phone call came from Sandy, a secretary living in Middlesex.

'We exchanged photographs, but when she called there was a bit of language problem. We didn't understand each other's accent! After that we got on well. I decided to come over London for 12 days.

'We went out for lunch and dinner a couple of times, and we're going sightseeing on Saturday.

'I'd like to see more of her but romance takes a while to develop. There are a couple of other women I'm going to see while I'm here.'

## **Nicky wants to be your English rose**

Nicolette Morganti 29,  
Single (News agency PA)

NICOLETTE Morganti's friends can't understand why she joined a dating agency.

She has a good job as a personal assistant with a television news agency, her own home, and a full social life. But the 29-year-old, who has a degree in English Literature, is so fed up with British men that she joined the English Rose dating agency to get in touch with single American males.

'English men are usually materialistic and have no imagination,' she says. 'I have spent years being bored by men who never do anything exciting.'

'I'm almost 30 now and I would really love to find a husband and have children. I'd like to live in London for six months of the year and in the States for the other six months.'

In her search for the ideal man, Nicolette once put an advertisement in a magazine for single people and had 400 replies.

But she says: 'I only met one or two of them. Most of the others sounded very boring.'

Nicolette joined English Rose about 18 months ago and has met 15 men since then.

She says: 'I find that American men are more romantic and considerate than British men. I rang one in the States, and afterwards he sent me 200 dollars to pay for the call.'

'I've met five so far but I'm looking for someone very special. I'd like to find a caring, well-educated, non-smoking animal-lover with a professional job and a sense of adventure.'

Nicolette is going to stay with English Rose until she finds her man.

'My friends have said some horrible things, but I think it's a great way to meet people.'

### **What do you think?**

1. Do you think John and Nicolette would get on if they met each other? Why/why not?

2. In your country, where do teenagers go when they want to go out in the evening? What about young adults?
3. In many countries, marriages are arranged by parents. If you come from one of these countries, do you think arranged marriages are a good idea?

If you come from a country where marriages are not arranged, would you like your parents to find a partner for you?

(Soars, pp.38-39)

The questions asked in the 'Comprehension check' activity are the 'textually explicit' questions of the example. They are asked before the students read the text, so that they try to find the answers while they read. This is due to the fact that students should have a purpose to read the text, thus the authors used the comprehension questions as a task to be performed during the reading activity.

In the section 'What do you think' the question number 1 can be considered a 'textually implicit' question whereas the questions number 2 and 3 can be considered 'scriptally implicit' types of questions.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would recommend that teachers bear in mind all these types of question-answer relations when preparing or choosing reading activities in order to balance the number of questions asked and also to promote comprehension that requires from the readers not only direct identification at the level of the printed page, but also at the levels of inference and the use of their prior knowledge.

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## RESUMO

Este estudo busca fazer uma análise de um texto usado como atividade de leitura para o ensino do inglês como língua estrangeira. A análise tem como fundamento a taxonomia de perguntas de compreensão sugerida por Pearson e Johnson (1978). O artigo também apresenta uma atividade de leitura na qual todos os tipos de perguntas de compreensão sugeridos por Pearson e Johnson (1978) são explorados. O objetivo deste trabalho é tentar ajudar professores de inglês, como língua estrangeira, a classificar e equilibrar o número de perguntas usadas numa atividade de leitura a fim de que esta se torne eficaz e interessante.

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