◼7◼ Checking learning and understanding

> *I keep asking 'Do you understand?' but I'm never sure if the answers they give me mean anything at all.*

Aim

To find out if learners have really understood and learnt something or not.

Introduction

An explanation or input of any kind that someone has not understood is patently useless. After any explanation, you need feedback of some kind to assure you that the message has been adequately conveyed and taken in. This feedback could be achieved in a number of ways, some more approximate, some more intuitive, some more precise.

Unfortunately, the classic teacher question, 'Do you understand?' is not hugely revealing, for the simple reason that students can say 'yes' when they don't understand, perhaps because of wanting to avoid looking stupid, because they *think* they understand, or for many other reasons.

We need more useful and more revealing ways of checking learning.

Techniques: Finding out if they 'got it'

1 **Notice reactions**   e.g. facial expressions that look positive or faces looking down at desks avoiding eye contact.
2 **Monitor close up**   If you ask students to take notes, wander round and have a look at what they write. If you ask students to do a task (e.g. 'Tick off each subject as I mention it'), look at what they are doing while the task is still going on (instead of waiting for the end).
3 **Ask check questions and concept questions**   See Chapter 4 Unit 6.
4 **Set listening tasks before each chunk of explanation**   It's very hard to judge understanding if students are 'just' listening. If you set a specific task, this not only helps to focus their listening, but also gives you a chance to see how well they are coping with understanding. For example, say, 'I'm going to tell you some different ideas for negotiating in business. Listen and note down three ideas that can help you to succeed in negotiation and one mistake you mustn't make.' At the end, you could let pairs compare their answers and then check in the whole class.
5 **Get students to summarise what has just been said**   e.g. 'So … how is the causative formed?' or 'So what are the most important things you need to think about when writing a formal letter?'

6 **Get students to recode the information**   Ask students to listen and draw a diagram (or fill in a table or complete a graph or sketch a picture) as they do (i.e. recoding the information from your explanation into a visual representation).

7 **Ask for a translation**   Find out if students can put a piece of language into their own language.

8 **Test**   Use a follow-on task to immediately find out if they have 'got it' or not. This could be a simple *True/False* or Multiple-choice exercise, a discussion task (that you can monitor to check what they are saying) or a more challenging activity that makes use of the explained content in some way.

9 **Encourage students to feel that getting things wrong is OK and normal**   Ideally I want to create an atmosphere in class where students feel that it is absolutely fine to try out sentences and not worry too much about whether they are right or wrong. You achieve this mainly by showing that your own attitude towards attempts, errors and successes is balanced and that you respond with a light touch. Don't criticise mistakes; enjoy them. Similarly, don't overpraise successes. Encourage a general atmosphere of experimentation: trial and error is a perfectly normal way to move forward.

Questions for reflection

• Which method of checking seems to reveal the most useful insights to you as a teacher?