

# Comprehension Questions in ESL Textbooks

by Joselito W. Lalas

One area of current interest in reading comprehension is the role of questions in enhancing what a reader learns (Durkin, 1980). Ryan (1973) showed that the use of high-level questions can result in high-level achievement. However, Andre (1979) in his review of research on levels of questions reported that studies on the facilitative effects of higher-level questions yielded inconclusive results. On the other hand, Durkin (1980) asserted that research has indicated that questions have positive effects because they direct readers' attention to relevant and related content when answering them. Furthermore, results of the study conducted by Raphael and Pearson (1982) indicated that fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade students and skilled adult readers who were trained to recognize textually explicit, textually implicit, and scriptally implicit questions exhibited superior performance in identifying questions by type, selecting a question-answering strategy, and producing a complete and accurate response.

A number of recent studies have focused on the type of questions found in basal reading series and standardized tests (Hare 1982; Crowell, Au, and Blake 1983). The study reported here examined the nature of comprehension questions in ESL reading textbooks. The implications of the results concern the role of such questions in second language development and the evaluation of ESL students' reading comprehension.

## Levels of Comprehension

In this study, Pearson and Johnson's (1978) taxonomy was used to evaluate the nature of questions in selected ESL reading textbooks. This taxonomy classifies comprehension questions into three levels: textually explicit, textually implicit, and scriptally implicit.

**Textually explicit** comprehension questions require answers that come directly from the text. There is no inference involved, and the reader can actually point to the answer on the page. In essence, the reader is "reading the lines" at this level of comprehension.

**Textually implicit** comprehension questions require answers that involve both the reader's background knowledge and what is on the page. The reader needs to infer the answers because they are not explicitly stated by the author. Therefore, answers are drawn from the factual information presented by the author and the additional knowledge from the reader's experiential background to derive an implicit relationship. In essence, the reader is "reading between the lines."

**Scriptally implicit** comprehension questions require answers that are not directly derivable from the text. Answers are drawn from the reader's previous experience and knowledge; hence the reader is involved in "reading beyond the lines."

In short, the main distinction really lies in the *information source* of the answer—

Textually implicit questions=factual information from text + reader's additional background knowledge.

Scriptally implicit questions=reader's previous background knowledge regardless of the factual information presented.

An example of this distinction may also be helpful. Here's a simple story:

Billy had been out skateboarding. His mother warned him not to go down Beacon Street because it was too dangerous. Billy headed for Beacon Street anyway, remembering how great the wind felt through his hair. He jumped on his skateboard and took

off. Just as he turned the last corner, he discovered men working on the sidewalk. It was too late to stop and he crashed through the barricades. Later in the bathroom, Billy's sister Barbara helped mend his knee. Barbara said, "You shouldn't have been on Beacon Street. Wait until Mom finds out."

Textually explicit questions:

Who had been out skateboarding? (Billy)

Why had Billy's mother warned him not to go down Beacon Street? (because it was too dangerous)

Textually implicit questions:

What did Billy feel when he crashed through the barricades? (maybe he was scared or nervous)

What did Barbara mean when she said, "Wait

until Mom finds out"? (Mom will be angry; Mom will be sad and cry.)

Scriptally implicit questions:

Where is it safe to go skateboarding? (school playgrounds, basketball courts, driveways, gymnasium)

If you were Billy, what would you do when your Mother came home? (hide and convince Barbara not to tell Mom what happened; talk to her about the incident and promise not to disobey again)

### A Textual Analysis

This study involved six ESL textbook series designed for use in elementary and secondary schools. The names of the textbook series and the text features relevant to the study are described in Table 1.

It can be seen from Table 1 that three levels of books from each textbook series

Table 1. ESL Textbooks, Levels of Books, Number of Selections, and Number of Comprehension Questions Used in the Study

Textbook Series	Levels of Books	Number of Selections	Number of Questions Analyzed
Elementary			
A. Santillana Reading Program	Galloping (1) Lickety Split (2) Able to Read (2)	7	71
B. Steps to English	2, 3, 4	9	225
C. I Like English	2, 3, 4	9	27
Secondary			
D. English This Way	10, 11, 12	9	120
E. Easy Reading Selections	-----	3	90
F. New English Course	4, 5, 6	9	84

were selected for analysis, with the exception, of *Easy Reading Selections*, and three stories were randomly selected from each of the book levels. A total of 321 questions from the elementary textbooks and 294 from the secondary textbooks were analyzed. All these questions were drawn from the comprehension sections of the reading selections

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that were read and analyzed. Interrater reliability between the researcher and a colleague in categorizing questions by the Pearson and Johnson taxonomy was .92.

The percentages of questions requiring responses based on information that was textually explicit, textually implicit, and scriptally implicit in the reading selections are shown in Table 2.

It can be seen from Table 2 that literal comprehension questions abound in all the textbook series analyzed, with the exception of Textbook A from the elementary level and Textbook F from the secondary level. In textbook A, 44.34% of the questions require responses based on textually implicit information and 11.30% of its questions require scriptally implicit answers. In textbook F, 42.85% of its questions require responses based on textually implicit information, and 38.09% require scriptally implicit information.

### Implications for Assessing Comprehension

Given the predominance of textually explicit questions in ESL textbooks, teachers should not evaluate comprehension entirely on the basis of students' responses to these literal questions. They should provide textually implicit and scriptally implicit questions also. Teachers should be aware that ESL students' performance on less cognitively demanding tasks (recall and recognition) does not guarantee success in such cognitively demanding tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The ability to use a second language in social communications is not the same as the ability to use it in academic tasks that require higher thinking skills (Cummins, 1982; Chamot, 1981). Perhaps incorporating more "reading between the lines" and "reading beyond the lines" questions could enhance

Table 2. Percentages of Questions in ESL Reading Selections Requiring Responses Based on Information that was Textually Explicit, Textually Implicit, or Scriptally Implicit in Stories

	Elementary Level			Secondary Level		
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Textually Explicit	44.34	99.10	92.59	85.55	83.33	20.23
Textually Implicit	44.34	0.90	0.00	12.22	14.16	42.85
Scriptally Implicit	11.30	0.00	7.40	2.22	2.50	38.09

ESL students' internalization of the second language and their ability to think in the language being learned. The ESL students' performance in answering textually implicit and scriptally implicit questions would provide teachers with an assessment of how students can handle more cognitively demanding tasks.

This study found an abundance of textually explicit or literal questions in ESL textbooks. It is the responsibility of teachers to enrich the reading materials for evaluation and instructional purposes by incorporating textually implicit or inferential questions and having the students relate the subject matter presented in the reading materials to their prior experiences. Balancing the types of comprehension questions used in the ESL classroom, perhaps, is one of the instructional strategies that can develop students' language proficiency and comprehension in various ESL tasks.

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