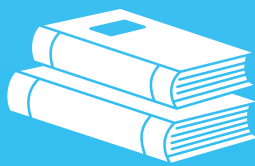
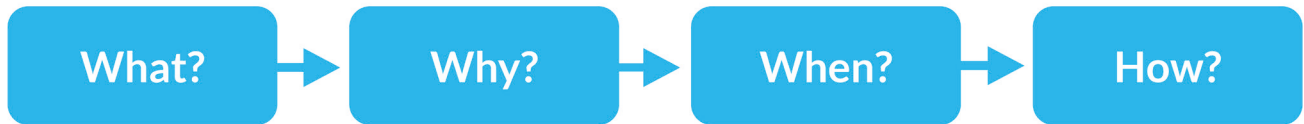


Theory Guide:



Checking for understanding

Checking for understanding: Overview



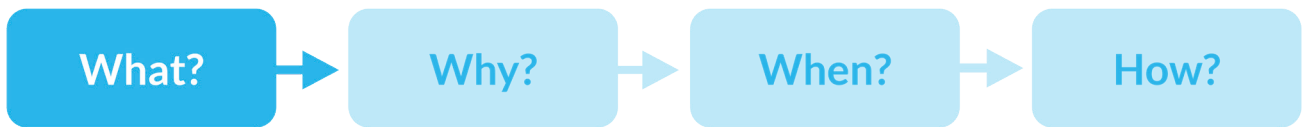
In this theory guide you will understand:

- what checking for understanding is
- why it is so important for teachers to check for understanding
- when checking for understanding should be used
- how teachers can check for understanding



Checking for understanding:

What is checking for understanding?



Checking for understanding is part of the formative assessment process where teachers check students' understanding of key processes and ideas and adjust their instruction accordingly (Wiliam, 2011). This is only possible against the backdrop of carefully conceived learning goals and tasks designed to elicit the information teachers need to know. In short then, checking for understanding is about designing tasks that cause students to demonstrate how well they have grasped key ideas and processes they have been taught. This provides 'feedback' to the teacher on how to act to better support student learning. It is important to remember that students' responses are an indicator of what they have understood and the teacher can only make inferences about what they have learned.

Learning is invisible and teachers are only really seeing performance, especially in the immediate term. Learning (the enduring, meaningful type) is best inferred over the long term.

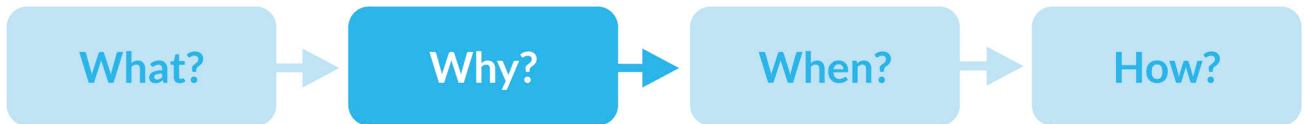
Checking for understanding can come in many forms and how best to do it will depend on the content itself and the students. For example, a teacher might opt for a multiple-choice question when they want to quickly see if students have a common misconception about a topic. They have a multiple-choice question routine with students where students see the question, silently think for 30 seconds and when the teacher says go, they vote on their fingers for the answer.

The same teacher might ask a short answer question where this lends itself better to the content, i.e. they need longer answers from students to infer their level of understanding. There are therefore a lot of things for teachers to consider when planning and delivering checks for understanding:

- ***What knowledge/skills do I need to check?***
- ***What questions/tasks do I use that suit the content and get the information I need?***
- ***How do I check students' answers in depth?***
- ***How do I make sure all students have to think so I get their best answers?***
- ***How do I get answers from all students?***

Checking for understanding:

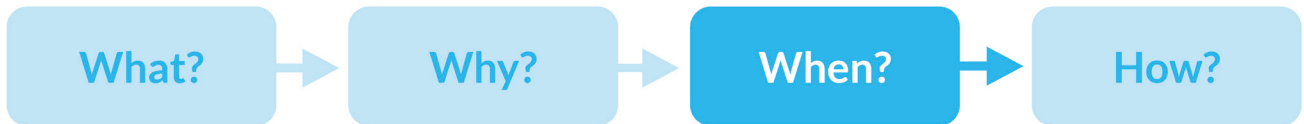
Why is it so important for teachers to check for understanding?



“The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly.” (Ausubel, 1968, vi). This enduring message speaks to a very important principle of learning: build on what the learner already knows. This is how meaningful learning happens and meaningful learning is how students learn the vast bodies of knowledge they need in the variety of subjects they are taught. Finding out what students know and adjusting teaching to this is essentially formative assessment. Checking for understanding is therefore a fundamental part of meaningful learning.

Formative assessment (of which checking for understanding is a part), done well, can have a significant impact on learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). So it is important teachers invest time learning how to check for understanding in the best way for the content and students they are teaching.

Checking for understanding: When should teachers check for understanding?



Teachers should be checking for understanding across the lesson, i.e. regularly, although it is not advisable to prescribe how often this should happen because it will depend on the nature of the lesson.

However, there are probably some pinnacle points when it is advisable to do so:

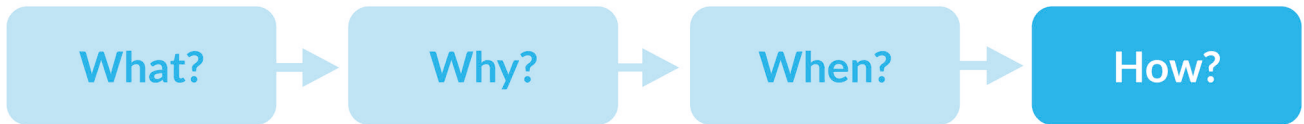
After or during teaching something new: anytime teachers teach something new to students, they can check their understanding before moving on to the next stage of learning, be that practice, or teaching another new idea. If what they are teaching is particularly challenging, they may pause to check students' understanding at different stages of their modelling, explanation or at different points in a text. It is particularly important to check students' understanding of ideas/processes that are new to them because when teachers explain something to students, they connect the new idea with their existing knowledge. Everyone's existing knowledge is different and therefore the teacher needs to check they have made the correct meaning or, if there isn't one right answer, they need to check that the meaning they have made is within an acceptable range. The teacher cannot simply teach something and move on because they may leave students with misconceptions that compound across the lesson. This stage of learning is susceptible to misconceptions and checking for understanding will allow the teacher to adjust their teaching responsively.

During independent practice: teachers can learn a great deal about what students have understood during portions of the lesson where students practise applying what they have been taught.

At the end of the lesson: checking what students grasped about the main ideas or processes they were taught at the end of the lesson can be an indicator as to how the teacher should plan the next lesson to best support student learning.

Checking for understanding:

How can teachers check for understanding?



Checking for understanding is such a vital and varied part of a teacher's practice that there are many ways to achieve it. Teachers must use their judgement based on what they are teaching, the information they need from students and their knowledge of the students themselves to make decisions about how to check for understanding. These are some key principles from the research and ideas we have summarised in the previous sections to underpin their decisions:

Plan appropriate checks for understanding into lessons: checking for understanding well depends on the quality of the tasks used to elicit important knowledge from students. This requires careful planning based on the learning goals for the lesson.

Design tasks to get the depth and breadth of answers needed: checks for understanding can be done in multiple ways. Teachers must think carefully about what they need to know and how many answers they need to make inferences about students' understanding.

Check for understanding regularly and at important junctures: finding out what students seem to know and adjusting teaching accordingly is a vital part of the learning process. Teachers must incorporate these checks or risk leaving students behind. There are points in the lesson such as during/after teaching new ideas, during independent practice and at the end of the lesson that are good places to start when planning checks for understanding.

Any technique will only be effective if it is linked to a well-understood problem. Reflect on and define the problem you are trying to solve or do so with your coach. Then, you can use our decision tool for suggestions as to techniques you can adopt, adapt and test.

Problems related to this area:

- *How do I decide which knowledge/skills to check?*
- *How do I design questions/tasks to suit the content and get the information I need?*
- *How do I check students' answers in depth?*
- *How do I make sure all students have to think so I get their best answers?*
- *How do I get answers from all students?*

Define your problem. What do you think might be the cause? Why?

Checking for understanding:

References and further reading

Ausubel, D. P. (1968). Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. Assessment in Education: principles, policy & practice, 5(1), 7-74. Available [here](#).

Wiliam, D. (2011). What is assessment for learning?. Studies in educational evaluation, 37(1), 3-14. Available [here](#).

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Please click below to visit our Assessment and Feedback theory module.

Find out more