

## Introduction

When teaching English to non-native speakers, we've all explained something and then asked the class "Do you understand?" Some of them nod, some say "yes," some just sit there. Occasionally, some will even say "no." We might think we've found out whether they understand or not, but what has actually happened is this:

What I asked the students to do	What I found out about the students
Choose a word, either "yes" or "no," and please say it now.	Whether they chose the word "yes" or "no."

Many times the student will say "yes" just to get out of the spotlight. But we haven't actually found out whether they understood anything.

We can do much better and find out far more about what the students actually know simply by asking them to do something other than saying "yes / no."

## Ways to Know What Your Students Know

**Note:** Almost all of these can be done by calling on single students, calling on the whole class for someone to volunteer a response, or with their partners or in groups and you can walk around monitoring.

What We Can Ask the Student(s) to Do	Example Teacher's Prompt
Ask a Question	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To a student</li> </ul>	Lucy, ask Tina a question about the doctor.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To the teacher</li> </ul>	Lucy, ask me one question about my hometown.
Answer a Question	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From a student</li> </ul>	Tina, please answer Lucy's question.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the teacher</li> </ul>	Bobby, what page are we talking about today?
Give an Example	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To check understanding of vocabulary<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	Tina, please tell us an example of a "dessert."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To check understanding of a concept<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	Tina, please tell us an example of a "false friend" or "false cognate."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Story</li> </ul>	Tina, please tell us about the last time you went to see a doctor.
Make a Sentence	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using pronunciation</li> </ul>	Make a sentence using "usually."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using grammar</li> </ul>	Make a sentence using "I never...when I am..."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using vocabulary</li> </ul>	Make a sentence using "straighten."
Read Aloud	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the blackboard</li> </ul>	Say this. (Point to something on the board.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the book</li> </ul>	Tina, please read Question 2.
Repeat	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student's utterance</li> </ul>	Bobby, what question did Lucy just ask Tina?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher's utterance</li> </ul>	Bobby, can you repeat what I just said?

<sup>1</sup> The assumption is that everyone knows what a dessert is but simply might not know the English word for it.

<sup>2</sup> This is used for new concepts. In other words, the student might not be able to answer this question in their own native language.

<b>Minimal Pairs Practice (for pronunciation)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Say 3 numbers</li> </ul>	"Beat" is number 1, "bit" is number 2. I will say three words and you tell me what you hear. Ready? Beat, beat, bit. 1. 1. 2. Correct!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Say 3 words</li> </ul>	Now you say three words and I will tell you what I hear.
<b>Retell / Paraphrase</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instructions</li> </ul>	Turn to your partner and tell him/her everything you know about the final exam for this class.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Story</li> </ul>	Bobby, please retell Tina's story about the doctor.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocabulary</li> </ul>	Using a lot of simple English words, please explain "cafeteria?"
<b>Translate</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English to Chinese</li> </ul>	Go ahead and say your question in Chinese so everyone can hear.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chinese to English</li> </ul>	Who can help him translate that question into English?
<b>Actions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Laugh</li> </ul>	Raise your hand if you are not here today. (Laughter might mean they understood.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number with finger</li> </ul>	5 means "everything," 4 means "most," 3 means "some," 2 means "not much," 1 means "almost nothing," fist means "nothing." How much did of Tina's story did you understand. Show me with one hand.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open book</li> </ul>	Open your book to page 25. (We'll be able to walk around and see if the book really is on page 25.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Point to the blackboard</li> </ul>	Anytime you want me to write a word, just point to the blackboard.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Point to something else</li> </ul>	Point to some glass in this room. Now point to grass. (Point outside.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Raise hand (and then inverse)</li> </ul>	Raise your hand if you are from Guangdong Province. Now raise your hand if you are NOT from Guangdong Province.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rate with thumb</li> </ul>	Thumbs up means you like it, thumbs down means you don't like it, thumb here in the middle means you don't care. Everyone, do you like karaoke? Show me with your thumb.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stand up</li> </ul>	Everyone who is from Guangdong Province please stand up.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sit down</li> </ul>	Everyone please stand up. If you already signed up for a presentation you may sit down. Everyone else, please come sign up for a presentation now.

Are there any other things you ask the students to do that give you insight into what they know or what they can do?