How can you know if students have understood the meaning of grammar during a lesson? Is asking them if they understand enough? This lesson gives you ideas on how to check grammatical meaning effectively by using clearly focused oral questions.

Task 1 – Susannah's explanation

Susannah: "I was teaching the difference between the past simple and the past perfect. I explained as clearly as I could and did lots of examples with them on the white board. They were nodding their heads in agreement and it seemed like they were getting it. Then I gave them this practice activity – a text gap fill – and they got everything wrong. At that point, a few students admitted that they hadn't really understood the grammar."

How could Susannah have checked students' understanding more thoroughly before students beginning the practice activity? Jot down your ideas on a note pad, then check the answer key below.

Task 1 Feedback

Susannah's approach is to give an explanation and look and see if students have understood. She may also have asked students directly if they had understood the difference in meaning between the two verb forms. However, for a teacher to make sure that students have genuinely understood, they need to ask more searching questions that focus explicitly on grammatical meaning.

Key Skill

Oral concept questions that focus on grammatical meaning are an effective way of checking students' understanding of new grammar items. They aim to 'unpack' the core concepts associated with grammar structures in such a way that students can gradually develop a deeper understand of grammatical meaning.

Task 2 – Some core concepts

Numbers 1 to 8 outline some core concepts associated with different verb forms in English. Letters a to h give the names of these verb phrases, with an example sentence. Match the concepts to the verb phrases.

Core concepts of verb forms	Verb phrases
1. time reference	
2. degrees of obligation	
3. relationship between actions and periods of time	
4. intention	
5. degrees of possibility	
6. identifying the 'agent' (or 'do-er') of an action	
7. duration	
8. reality versus hypothetically	

Names of verb phrases & example sentences

a. **modal auxiliary verbs may, might etc.** e.g. *It looks like it might rain tomorrow.*

b. **future forms** e.g. *We're going to meet up with them after dinner.*

c. **present and past tenses** e.g. *He left school five years ago.*

d. **conditional structures** e.g. *If I were the Prime Minister, I'd pay more attention to ecology.*

e. **passive forms** e.g. *The book was written by an unknown writer.*

f. **perfect verb forms** e.g. *I've had this car for about three years now.*

g. **modal auxiliary verbs must, should etc.** e.g. *You should really see a doctor.*

h. **continuous (or progressive) verb forms** e.g. *I was waiting at the bus stop when he drove by.*

Check your ideas in the answer key.

Key Skill

Grammar concept questions focus on key ideas of grammatical meaning. Some grammar forms have different uses and when checking grammatical meaning you should check only one use at a time. Normally this will be related to the context you have used to teach the grammar.

Task 3 – Which questions?

Numbers 1 to 5 are example structures from the previous task. Letters a to o are concept questions (and answers) that relate only to the <u>underlined</u> grammar structures in the example sentences. Each structure needs 3 concept questions.

a) Match the concept questions (and answers) to the example structures.
b) Put the concept questions in the best order.

Example structures	Concept questions
1. I'<u>ve had</u> this car for about three years now.	
2. We'<u>re going to</u> meet up with them after dinner.	
3. I <u>was waiting</u> at the bus stop when he drove by.	
4. You <u>should</u> really see a doctor.	
5. It looks like it <u>might</u> rain tomorrow.	

Concept questions with answers (in brackets)

a. Did you decide to do this before speaking or when you were speaking? (before)

b. Is it only a possibility? (yes)

c. Do you want the other person to do this? (yes)

d. When did you buy it? (3 years ago)

e. Did the action happen in the past? (yes)

f. Is the speaker talking about now or the future? (now)

g. Did you own it all that time? (yes)

h. Is the action in the present or the future? (future)

i. Did it begin before or after the second action? (before)

j. Will it definitely happen? (no)

k. Do you think this is a good idea? (yes)

l. Do you still have it? (yes)

m. Did it continue after the second action? (yes)

n. Is the speaker sure about the action? (yes)

o. Do you feel very strongly that the other person do this? (no)

Check your ideas in the answer key. 🔑

Key Skill

Most structures need at least 3 questions in order to pinpoint the concept. More complex structures may need more than 3 questions. The language should be simple and avoid as much grammar terminology as possible. When you write a concept question, you should also write what answer you expect students to give you.

Task 4 – Writing concept questions

Below are 5 sentences with <u>underlined</u> grammar structures. Write concept questions and their answers for each structure. Write a *maximum* of three questions for each structure. Jot down your answers on a note pad. The feedback provides *suggested* answers and variation is possible.

Sentences

a. I'm sorry but I<u>'ve lost </u>my student card. Can I get another one?

b. When I was a child, I <u>used to</u> play the piano.

c. He<u>'s working </u>part-time at the moment and won't be here until later.

d. I <u>wish</u> I <u>had</u> an iPod.

e. It <u>can't</u> be John at the door – he's gone overseas.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 🗝️

⮑ Thinking about your teaching …

Some grammatical concepts will be more difficult to check for some students than others. The students' first language may play a role in the degree of challenge they find with some concepts, or your questions may be too difficult. Make a note of any concepts students seemed to find very challenging. Discuss this with your colleagues and see if they have had similar problems. If you fear that your concept questions are too difficult, give them to a colleague to review and see if they can make suggestions to make them easier to understand.

⮑ Taking it to the classroom …

When concept checking structures that you think your students will find particularly difficult, you could try giving them written concept questions that they can think about and discuss the answers to in pairs, followed by feedback. This will give students a bit more thinking time.

⮑ Want to find out more … ?

On pages 219 - 221 of *Learning Teaching (2nd Edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is further reading on concept questions for grammar.

See also section 6 of *Language Teaching Classroom Practice DVD & Workbook* by Heather Richards and Karen Wise (AUT University 2007).

⮑ Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to the teaching of grammar:

- **Unit 4 d) Teaching Grammar 1: Different approaches**
  (looks at a variety of approaches to teaching grammar)
- **Unit 4 e) Teaching Grammar 2: Grammar from texts**
  (outlines a procedure for a text-based approach to grammar lessons)
- **Unit 4 f) Teaching Grammar 3: Grammar through communicative activities**
  (looks at how to use communicative activities to focus on grammar)

| **Answer Key** | 🔑 |

Task 2 – Feedback

1) c
2) g
3) f
4) b
5) a
6) e
7) h
8) d

Task 3 – Feedback

1) d, l and g
2) h, a and n
3) e, i and m
4) k, c and o
5) f, j and b

Task 4 – Feedback

a. I'm sorry but I've lost my student card. Can I get another one?

question 1. *Did you lose the card in the past or the present? (the past)*
question 2. *Do we know exactly when? (no)*
question 3. *Is the result in the present? (yes)*

b. When I was a child, I used to play the piano.

question 1. *Are you talking about the past or the present? (the past)*
question 2. *Did you play piano once or often? (often)*
question 3. *Do you play the piano now? (probably not)*

c. He's working part-time at the moment and won't be here until later.

question 1. *Does he usually work part-time? (no)*
question 2. *Is working part-time something temporary? (no)*
question 3. *Is he working as we speak? (no)*

d. I wish I had an iPod.

question 1. *Do you want an iPod? (yes)*
question 2. *Do you want it very much? (yes)*
question 3. *Do you want it now or did you want it in the past? (now)*

e. It can't be John at the door – he's gone overseas.

question 1. *Is the speaker talking about now or the future? (now)*
question 2. *Is the speaker certain or does he think it's a possibility? (certain)*
question 3. *Is he 100% certain or more like 95%? (more like 95%)*