Writing questions for comprehension assessment instruments

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About this advice
This advice is intended to help teachers implement the syllabus in their school setting. It provides information about the following:

- Developing assessment items that demonstrate all aspects of the syllabus criteria and standards.
- Designing assessment instruments that cover the dimensions of the general objectives.
Designing assessment instruments

Writing comprehension questions

When writing items for assessment instruments that assess comprehension, teachers should:

- use the syllabus criteria and standards
- select texts that allow the standards to be demonstrated.

This document deals with writing questions that allow the standards to be demonstrated.

The syllabus criteria and standards are organised under two dimensions:

- knowing and understanding
- reasoning and responding.

Questions need to cover these two dimensions.

Many types of questions may be written, but the text and the dimensions determine the appropriateness of a particular approach. For example, questions such as:

1. What is Sally doing at the moment?
2. Where is she going tomorrow?
3. Who is she going with?
4. Why is she going there?

may assess knowledge and understanding if that information is stated in the text. These questions may also assess reasoning and responding if the information is not explicitly stated but is implied and can be concluded by reading other information in the text.

One weakness in the questioning approach above is that information about the text is revealed in questions. Information in questions should not assist students in:

- understanding the text
- answering other questions
- comprehending the narrative structure of the text.

The questions above reveal that the text is about Sally; Sally is doing something at the moment; doing something tomorrow; going somewhere to do it; and, is doing it with someone else. For a simple text, the questions would “scaffold” student comprehension and, consequently, there may be little left for the student to do but match four items of information to the clues given in English. This could mitigate the demonstration of the syllabus criteria and standards at the A and B standards. However, the questions could be reworked to avoid these issues. For example:

1. What is the text about?
2. Describe the main things that happen.

These two questions would only cover the descriptors to do with knowing and understanding.
Other approaches to writing questions

There is no single approach that will be appropriate for all assessment instruments, therefore it is important that the types of questions elicit a response that can be matched to the criteria and standards.

The two dimensions are best demonstrated when the assessment item:
- covers reasoning and responding explicitly,
- requires *knowing and understanding* as part of the justification of a response.

Below are two approaches to demonstrate this:

**Approach one**

1. What information is revealed in the text about the island of Hokkaido?
2. What are the particular things that would make a tourist want to go there?
3. What information is revealed about the South Island of New Zealand?
4. If you were going on a ski holiday, to which place would it be better to travel? Justify your response using information in the text.

**Approach two**

1. Compare and contrast the features of the two places discussed in the text.
2. Which would make a better holiday location? Justify your decision using information from the text.

**Approach one** is a valid way to cover the dimensions as it allows gist, main points, details, analysis, evaluation, decisions and justification to be demonstrated. However, it does reveal to the student that the text is about the comparison of Hokkaido and the south island of New Zealand and that the information about those two places will inform a decision about which is a better skiing location. It would be possible to begin to answer these questions without reading the text.

**Approach two** is also a valid way to cover the dimensions as it also allows gist, main points, details, analysis, evaluation, decisions and justification to be demonstrated. However, it does not reveal to the students information from the text and it would not be possible to answer the questions without reading the text.

A teacher would prefer to use one approach to the other based on the capacity of the students and the learning experiences offered in class. Approach one scaffolds student understanding of the text which is advantageous to the students. Approach two requires the students to deconstruct the text for themselves. This is a more complex cognitive process, demonstrates greater student independence and is more advantageous to students in developing the skills necessary for life-long learning. It may be argued that approach two is an assessment task, however that contention would need to be more fully examined and that is beyond the scope of this document. Approach two is closely related to the languages inquiry process where students investigate and solve problems in the target language and intercultural contexts.

It is important to note that, for either of these approaches to be valid, there must be information in the text that allows a decision to be made and justified using evidence from the text, not personal opinion or preference.
Using more than one text

Other approaches to creating assessment instruments may involve the use of more than one text. This approach may provide more opportunities to:

- achieve coverage of a range of text-types and topics
- demonstrate the standards
- gather evidence for teachers to use when making and substantiating judgments about student achievement
- write questions to demonstrate the dimension reasoning and responding.

The difference between an assessment instrument and an instrument item needs to be explored if the limitations of using a single text are to be appreciated. Many assessment instruments used by language teachers have a single text and a number of questions covering that one text as the only opportunity for students to demonstrate the syllabus standards descriptors. There are other approaches including using more than one text with:

1. sets of questions about each text
2. sets of questions about one text and single questions about others
3. a single set of questions that require information to be used from across the texts
4. a task related to the range of texts.

All of these approaches can be part of a single assessment instrument. Rather than cover all standards descriptors in a single text in one assessment instrument, opportunities may be more easily provided to students by designing an assessment instrument that has a number of texts and a range of differing assessment items and techniques.

For an example of an assessment instrument that covers some of these approaches, consider approach two from page two and approaches three and four from the list above. If, in approach two (page two), there were two separate texts, one about Hokkaido and one about New Zealand, and the questions/task required students to compare and contrast the two places in order to decide which was the better place for a holiday (based on point-at-able information in both texts), then both approaches three and four from the list above may be demonstrated.

Conclusion

A range of approaches should be used to develop assessment instruments that allow students to demonstrate knowing and understanding and reasoning and responding. These approaches should cover a range of techniques and allow for increased student independence and opportunities to develop the complex cognitive processes that are the attributes of a life-long learner.