ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT MEANING-MAKING

Early Literacy Initiative
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad

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Asking Good Questions to Support Meaning-making

Vignette[1]

Let's start with an anecdote of a conversation between a teacher and her students during a read aloud of the story *Under the Neem Tree* (Author: P Anuradha, Illustrator: A.V. Ilango; Tulika Publishers, 2009).

Under the Neem Tree is a story about a couple fighting over who should have more chapattis (*rotis*) (see Figure 1). In essence, however, the story is about a wife's struggle with her husband for equal say and space in the relationship.

There was a lot of energy in the class during and after the read aloud of this story. Here is a verbatim excerpt from the conversation around the book.

Teacher (T): Okay, so who do you think will win?

Child (C): Ookamma should win.

T: Why?

C1: Didi, because she does most of the work.

C2: She does work outside, and she works inside home.

C3: Didi, she has cooked the rotis, so she should be the one eating more rotis.

C4: Ookaiah is not a good man, so he should get less rotis.

T: But why is he not a good man?

C: Didi, he drinks and comes. Shouts at his wife.

C: Why can't he give roti on one day? Doesn't he get more rotis on the other days?

C: Why doesn't he make his own rotis if he wants to eat them?

Figure 1. Ookamma and Ookaiah go to bed after fighting about who gets more *rotis.*

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[1] This anecdote has been taken from my work with children at *Adharshila Learning Centre*, Sakad, Madhya Pradesh, where I was studying how children's literature can be used to have dialogues around gender with children.

T: Maybe he doesn't know how to cook them.

C: Then he should learn to.

T: Okay. What else do you think they can do?

C: Why can't they make six rotis and eat three-three each?

T: Well, maybe they don't have enough flour.

C: Then they should make four.

T: Well, then they will both remain hungry. How is that a better solution?

C: Didi, they should maybe share. They should divide the fifth roti in half.

Figure 2. An exchange around *rotis* from the story.

Now, let's step back from this conversation and try to understand what is happening in this class. As the facilitator (the teacher in this example), this conversation seemed to me a great example of free-flowing conversation. In many ways, it was. We started from a problem statement, about who will win. Through a series of authentic, honest and bold responses of the children, we reached a solution. What was my role in this, as a teacher? I raised several kinds of questions.

The children were responding without fear, were actively thinking of solutions to the problem posed in the text, and were engaging deeply with the text. As I reflected on the lesson, I concluded that if the purpose of my class was to help children critically engage with the text and provide them with a safe space while doing so, then, probably, I had succeeded. I had also succeeded in modelling a variety of questions to my students. But had I equipped children to raise such questions of texts, themselves, while reading it? Research shows (Duke

& Pearson, 2009; Palincsar & Brown, 1984) that good readers ask "teacher-like" questions to monitor their own comprehension while reading texts.

> I was the one who had raised most of the questions in this discussion. Often, questioning in classrooms is a one-sided affair, directed from the teachers or the textbook to the students. I knew from my reading of the topic that I would have to build on the base that I had established through my modelling of the strategy to equip students to use questioning successfully on their own.

The Early Literacy Initiative (ELI) has previously discussed comprehension strategies in two other practitioner briefs: the first provided an overview of comprehension strategy instruction; and the second on conducting a teacher-led think aloud. Readers are encouraged to consult these along with the current brief, since they discuss inter-related topics[2]. Readers can also refer to ELI's detailed blog piece on teaching different comprehension strategies (Sinha, 2018).

Comprehension strategies refer to ways of meaning making that readers use to actively construct meaning as they read (Pressley, 2001), such as *predicting* while reading, *summarising* a text, *visually organising* information in the text, and so on. Questioning is an important comprehension strategy that good readers use. Research shows that while some children (usually good readers) may pick up comprehension strategies on their own, seemingly without being taught how, many children benefit from having comprehension strategies modelled to them and from being coached explicitly on how to use them.

Duke and Pearson (2009) suggest that teachers need to follow a *Gradual Release of Responsibility* (GRR) model while teaching comprehension strategies. That is, they need to model (teacher does, children watch); collaboratively coach children in the use of the strategy (teacher does, children contribute; or children do, teacher supports); and eventually expect children to independently use the strategy (see Figure 3). Questioning is no exception. It is

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[2] To understand comprehension strategies in detail, readers can refer to ELI's briefs:
   a. Sinha, S. (2019). Teaching comprehension strategies, Part I: Introduction and overview. Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Retrieved from http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI_Practitioner_Brief-14_Teaching-Comprehension-Strategies_Part-I.pdf
   b. Pydah, A. (2019). Teaching comprehension strategies, Part II: Conducting a think aloud. Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Retrieved from http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI_Practitioner_Brief-15_Conducting-A-Think-Aloud.pdf

important that initially the teacher models the strategy extensively as I did in the excerpt described here. But to succeed, I would also need to collaboratively coach my students in using this strategy with my support and, eventually, on their own.
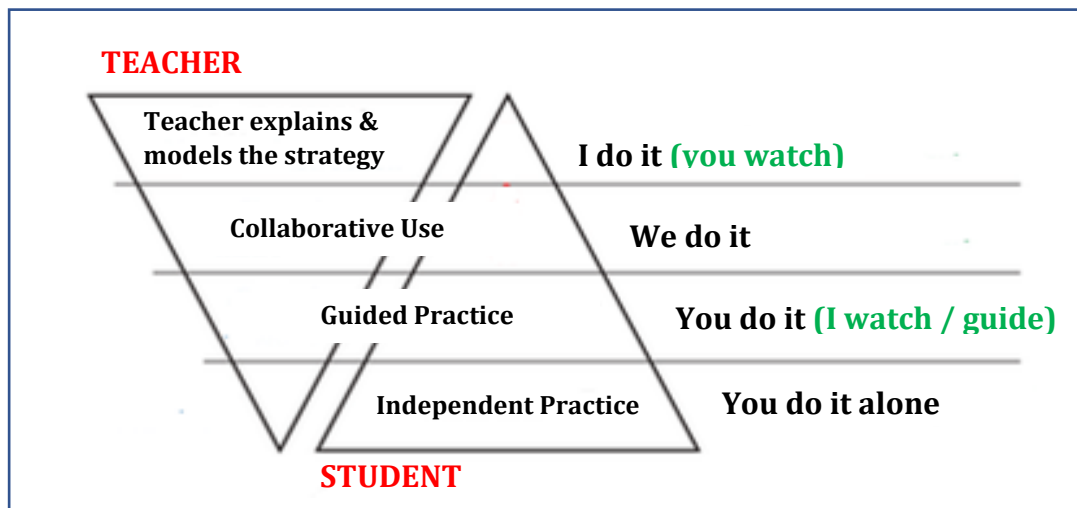

Figure 3. The *Gradual Release of Responsibility* Model for teaching comprehension[3].

In this practitioner brief, we will look at how to use questioning as a meaning-making tool in the classroom: to model extensively for students, as well as use it in collaborative practice with them. We will look at diverse types of questions that can be used to support comprehension in the classroom.

The Use of Questioning in Classrooms

Questioning is frequently used by teachers, in oral and written forms, to assess students' understanding of a text. In many Indian classrooms, questioning largely takes certain familiar forms.

> ➢ Oral question and answer led by teacher after reading a text. Many of these questions are simple, direct questions, such as *who*, *what*, and *where* style questions with a single correct answer.
>
> ➢ Answering the questions provided towards the end of the chapter. Many times, answers to these questions are dictated by teachers, or written on the blackboard and copied down by the students. Many of these questions are also direct and simple with a single correct answer.

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[3] Figure 3 has been adapted from www.literacycompanion.weebly.com

> ➢ Answering a set of short and long questions in periodically scheduled examinations. Often, the answers written are memorised from classroom notes.

Often, more than assessing students' comprehension, these questions require students to recall the facts they have read in a text (see Figure 4). Teachers seem to be unaware that they could ask a variety of questions, some of which require deeper thinking by their students. Before we move on to discuss the techniques and principles of teaching questioning as a strategy, let's look at the diverse types of questions available to us for use.
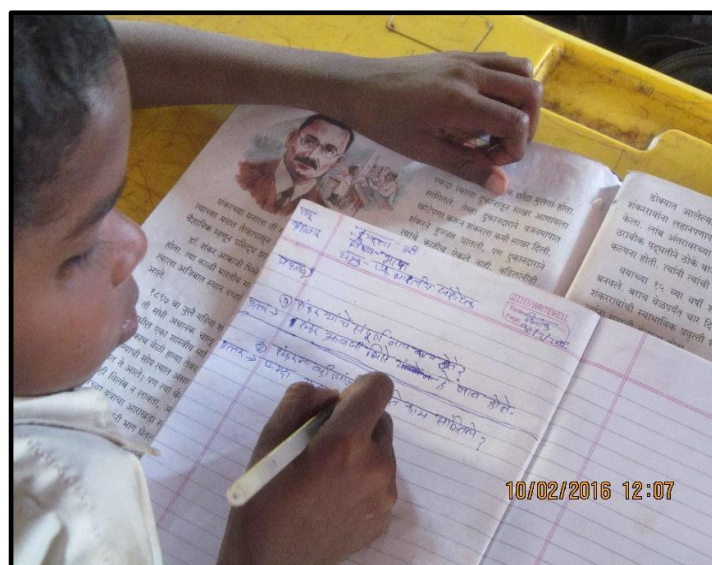

Figure 4. Child copy-writing answers from the textbook. **Image Courtesy:** Literacy Research in Indian Languages (LiRIL) Project.

Types of Questions. When we limit the kind of questions we ask in classrooms to explicit questions that have a single correct answer that can be found easily in the text, we are training students only to extract factual information from the text. We end up depriving them of experiences that compel them to think deeply, extend a story, critically analyse, hypothesise or imagine, build personal connections, and so on, which contribute significantly to their engagement with and deeper comprehension of the text.

As Steven Pinker (2016) points out, the word "understand" means to stand "under" (deeper) to get at the deeper meanings, and not the most obvious ones in the text. What are the kinds of questions that can permit this kind of understanding?

Raphael (1986, modified from Pearson & Johnson, 1978) described two broad categories of questions that can be raised after reading a text (Question Answer Relationship or QAR).

- *In the text.* Answers to these questions can be found in the text.
    - *Right there questions.* Most of the questions asked in Indian classrooms are "right there" questions. Answers to these are stated explicitly in the text and can be easily located.
    - *Think and search.* The answers to these questions can be found in the text, but may need to be inferred. That is, they may not be stated simply or directly. Students may need to "think and search" for answers.
- *In my head.* Answers to these questions are not in the text. The readers would need to find answers from their own heads. These kinds of questions could help children become critical readers.
    - *Author and me.* The readers are asked for their responses to the text. What should the character do? Would you have made the same choice as the character?
    - *On my own.* The reader is asked to draw upon their knowledge of the world to answer such questions. For example, in *Under the Neem Tree*, students could be asked whether they think women should eat a smaller share of the food than men, and to justify their responses.

Here is an example of these questions, using text from the story *Aunt Jui's Baby* (Madhuri Purandare, Pratham Books, 2012) (see Figure 5).
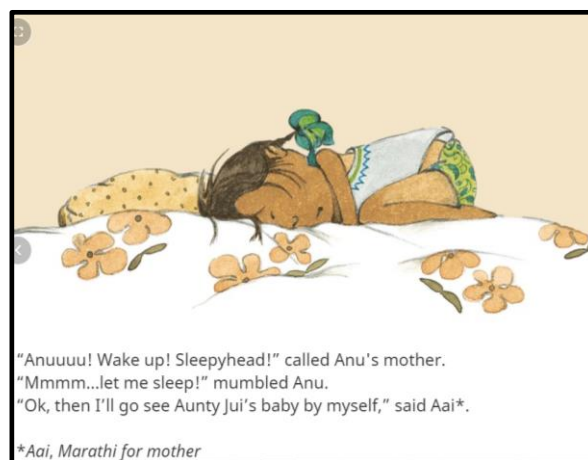

Figure 5. Picture from the book Aunt Jui's Baby**. Image Courtesy:** Storyweaver.

- **Right there.** Who called Amu a sleepyhead?
- **Think and search.** Why was her mother waking her up?
- **Author and you.** What do you feel Anu will do? Will she keep sleeping or hurry up?
- **On my own.** Have you ever had a little baby in the house? How was the experience?

While these two categories of questions (in-the-text; and in-my-head) are useful to keep in mind, the kinds of questions that could be spawned off from these categories are many. Table 1 provides a list of diverse types of questions. This list is not exhaustive and we encourage you to add to it. You should also keep in mind that some of these question types may overlap with each other.

Table 1.

Types of Questions

Questions	Example (following from *Under the Neem Tree*)
Closed-ended/factual questions. This category refers to questions with a single definite answer. Often used for extracting factual information.	What were the names of the husband and wife in the story *Under the Neem Tree*?
Open-ended/interpretive questions. These are questions where the answers aren't definitive, there can be more than one answer, and the question is open to interpretations.	Who, between them, do you think should get more *rotis*?
Extrapolatory questions. These questions extrapolate or extend a situation to seek further possibilities.	What if both of them shared the *rotis*?

Hypothetical questions. These are questions in which individuals imagine, think over, and respond to a hypothetical situation.	Suppose Ookaiah shared household responsibilities with Ookamma, how would their situation be different?
Justification questions. These questions seek justifications and evidences for a statement made.	Why do you feel that Ookaiah is a bad man? Show me what the author says that makes you feel that he is a bad man.
Clarificatory questions. These questions seek clarification or further explanation about something.	Could you please clarify what the word "lamenting" means?
Inferential questions. These are questions where the answers may not be readily available, and need to be found/reasoned using existing information and readers' prior knowledge.	Is it a better solution that both get to eat fewer *rotis*?
Critical questions. These are questions that seek to challenge dominant and problematic ideas, question the status quo, and help readers examine their own biases in and through texts.	Is it fair that the wife does all the work in the house while the husband comes back drunk every evening?
Text-to-reader questions. These questions help readers connect the text to their lives, emotions and prior knowledge to understand both the text and their lives better.	Who does most of the work in your house?
Text-to-text questions. These are questions raised by relating the content in two or more texts.	Now, that you have read this story, and you have read the story *Ismat ki Eid*, how are the families different in the two stories?
Text-to-world questions. These are questions raised by relating the text to issues in the world.	How does always eating the smaller share of food impact the health of women?

Classroom Principles. Encouraging the habit of raising questions and responding to them will take time. The classroom environment needs to rest on a relationship of trust where

a student doesn't feel judged for her responses by her teachers and peers (see Figure 6). Let's look at some classroom principles that can help establish the use of questioning as a comprehension strategy.

Figure 6. Creating a safe environment for raising questions. **Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh, Nirman, Varanasi.

Create an environment supportive of questioning.

a. *Create a safe, non-judgmental space for raising questions and responding to them.* Often, in environments where questioning is directed from a position of authority, students are crippled by the fear of giving "wrong" answers. *Do not reward students only for right answers or rebuke them for wrong answers; encourage, instead, the habit of thinking about questions.* Create an open and accepting environment in your classroom, where one question can have many "right" answers, and where children are not punished or shamed for giving a seemingly incorrect answer.

b. *Wait-time.* Good questioning skills should also incorporate *proper use of silence.* It is understandable that as teachers we feel anxiety and impatience when we find blank faces to our questions, resulting in a need to break the silence with another simplified question or just providing the answer. Rowe (1972; 1987) coined the term *wait time* to describe the pause between the teacher's question and the student's response, and also the pause between the student's response and the teacher's comments. Waiting for a few seconds longer than you typically do gives students time to mull over our

questions and articulate responses to them; it also permits them to elaborate/re-think their initial responses to our question.

> A student, giving feedback about a teacher, said, "I like how, after asking a question she just remains silent. She is not perturbed by the quietness of students. She waits for as long as it takes for the first student to speak."

Follow GRR to model and guide the use of questioning as a strategy. Every comprehension strategy requires modelling and guidance by the teacher. As with any strategy instruction, the end goal of modelling questioning too is that readers should be able to use it independently by recognising how and when to use it appropriately. This is done through the *GRR* Model as described earlier (Duke & Pearson, 2009).

Model and teach diverse types of questions. While modelling, alert children that there are different types of questions (Raphael, 1986). For example, to ensure that everyone has understood the facts of a story or non-fiction text correctly, a round of closed-ended, factual questions may be warranted; while later rounds of questioning may be more open-ended inferential, or critical, and may put together what the child has learned from *this* text, with what they may have learned from other sources.

Ask questions before, during and after reading a text. Ask questions at every stage of reading—before, during, after—and not just after you finish reading the text (Hoffman, 2011). It is important to emphasise that meaning-making is a continuous process, and requires involvement throughout and even before your start reading.

Classroom Activities

In this section, we make suggestions for activities around questioning which can be used in classrooms.

1. Modelling[4]

    a. *Choose the text for questioning*

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[4] This has been adapted from https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/questioning-text/.

Select an interesting book to model questioning, something that gives you ample opportunities to raise different types of questions throughout. Since during the modelling of the strategy you are inviting children to participate and respond, the content must be relevant and interesting. Both non-fictional and fictional texts would work well for modelling this strategy. In this brief, we take the example of modelling questioning with a fictional text, *Bumboo…the donkey who would not budge* (Author: Sujatha Padmanabhan, Illustrator: Madhuvanti Anantharjan, Eklavya, 2015). This is a story about a beloved donkey who is unable to move at night (see Figure 7). Set in Ladakh, the book invites a number of questions on the location, language, and culture of the story. It is supported by a strong plot, endearing and relatable characters, and a central problem that must be resolved, which could potentially pull the reader into the story.
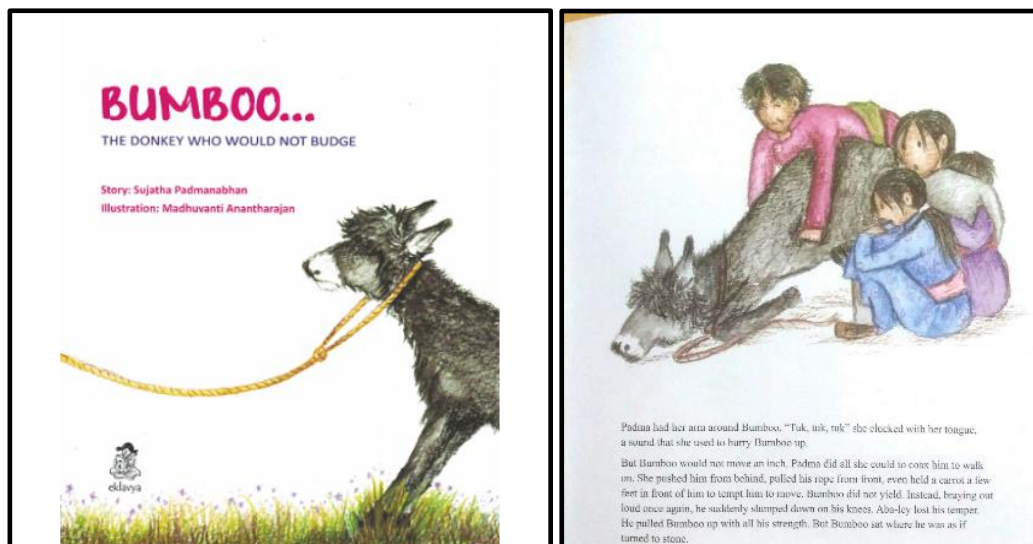

Figure 7. Pictures from *Bumboo…the donkey who would not budge*.

b. *Introduce the strategy*

Explain to the students that you plan to demonstrate the use of questioning as a strategy. Explain clearly that good readers read actively and constantly interact with the text by raising questions. Questions should be raised before and throughout the reading, and not kept only as an after reading activity. Good readers mark the texts with their questions to keep a note of them. There is a constant dialogue between their questions and understanding.

c.   Model thinking aloud

Figure 8. A read aloud session of *Bumboo…***Image Courtesy:** Afsana, librarian; Muskaan, Bhopal.

After choosing your text and introducing the strategy, model the process of raising questions by thinking aloud (see Figure 8). Thinking aloud helps students see your own process clearly, and to understand how you are thinking and engaging with texts. For example, before you start reading *Bumboo...*, you can ask aloud, "Of what uses are donkeys to families?" or "Oh, the story is set in Ladakh, I wonder where that is? Will I be able to find it on a map?" While reading, you can ask, "I wonder if *Bumboo...* is just being lazy and not moving? What do you think?"[5] Let students explicitly see and understand how questions are thought through, raised, articulated, and interacted with, and how these impact comprehension of the text.

d.   Model asking questions before, during and after reading

It is important to model raising questions before, during and after reading. A deep engagement with texts requires interaction with the text throughout the reading, and not only towards the end. Table 2 provides a framework that you can use to model before, during, after reading questions.

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[5] To understand thinking aloud, refer to ELI's Brief: Pydah, A. (2019). *Teaching comprehension strategies. Part II: Conducting a think aloud.* Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Retrieved from http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI_Practitioner_Brief-15_Conducting-A-Think-Aloud.pdf.

Table 2.

Questions During Read Aloud

Before reading	During reading	After reading
The teacher before beginning a read aloud could show children the front and back page, the title, author's name, a few glimpses of illustrations inside and begin a conversation about the book. For example: ➢ What do I see on the cover page? What does this tell me about what this book might be about? ➢ Who is the author? Do I remember any other book by her? Pre-reading questions can also be used for filling gaps in the reader's knowledge about the content and vocabulary. ➢ This book is set in Ladakh. I am very curious about the place. I wonder what their food is like? What is the name of their language, what clothes do they wear?	During reading questions can be of two types. The first type of questions revisits your responses from the pre-reading conversation. For example: ➢ I initially thought this book was about a lazy donkey. Was that right? The second type of question is text-based, either leading or clarificatory in nature, prodding students to think further. ➢ Bumboo seems to be in trouble. Will he be sent away? ➢ I wonder what *Thukpa* is? You can ask questions that relate the text to the reader's life. For example ➢ Has such an incident ever happened in my life?	After reading questions can invite responses again, such as ➢ If there was something in the book that I could have changed, what would that be? They can also be interpretive, critical, justification questions such as ➢ Were Padma and her family really attached to Bumboo? Why or why not? ➢ Was Stanzin's solution a good one? They can be hypothetical or extrapolatory. For example ➢ If Stanzin hadn't helped Padma, what might have happened? ➢ What would I have done if I were in Padma's place?

e. Sort questions into QAR categories

It is important that children understand that they can raise different kinds of questions about a text they're reading. To model this, you could write down all your questions on the board. Some questions that you raised before or during reading may have been predictive in nature. For example, do you think Bumboo will be taken away because he's in trouble? By the end of reading the text, you should have been able to check and see if your predictive questions have been answered satisfactorily. But you can still raise questions about the text *after* you finish reading it, and these questions are easily categorisable using the QAR framework described earlier.

Take a big chart paper and divide it into four columns: *Right There*, *Think and Search*, *Author and You*, and *On my Own.* You could show the children how to classify your questions into these four categories. In Table 3, we categorise some of these questions.

Table 3.

Questions Sorted into QAR categories

Right There	**Think and Search**
• Who is the Author of the Book? • Where is the story set?	• Were Padma and her family really attached to Bumboo? Where in the text does the author give us hints?
Author and You	**On Your Own**
• In your opinion, was Stanzin's solution a good one?	• What would I have done if I were in Padma's place?

2. Guided Practice

After modelling how to raise different kinds of questions for a few lessons, and after ensuring that students understand why it's important to raise different kinds of questions, you could provide guided practice in raising questions.

a. *Three sheet column to record before, during, after questions.*

With children who cannot independently read and write, you could draw three columns on the board and label them *Before Reading*, *During Reading*, and *After Reading*. You could encourage students to raise questions before, during and after reading, and could note their questions down for them. You could discuss how different kinds of questions supported students' comprehension in different ways.

You can modify the activity for students who can read and write independently. Students can be placed into small groups and given a common text to read. Give each group a sheet of paper folded into three columns labelled *Before Reading, During Reading,* and *After Reading*.

- Before reading, ask the students to preview the book, look at the illustrations, title, sub-headings, discuss their questions, and record these questions that they have in the first column.

- The second column consists of questions that students have during the reading.

- Finally, the third column consists of questions that students are left with after reading.

The class can then get into a large-group discussion after the activity. The students can be asked to reflect on how many before- and during-reading questions they could find answers to after they finished reading. Figure 9 provides an example from *Bumboo…*
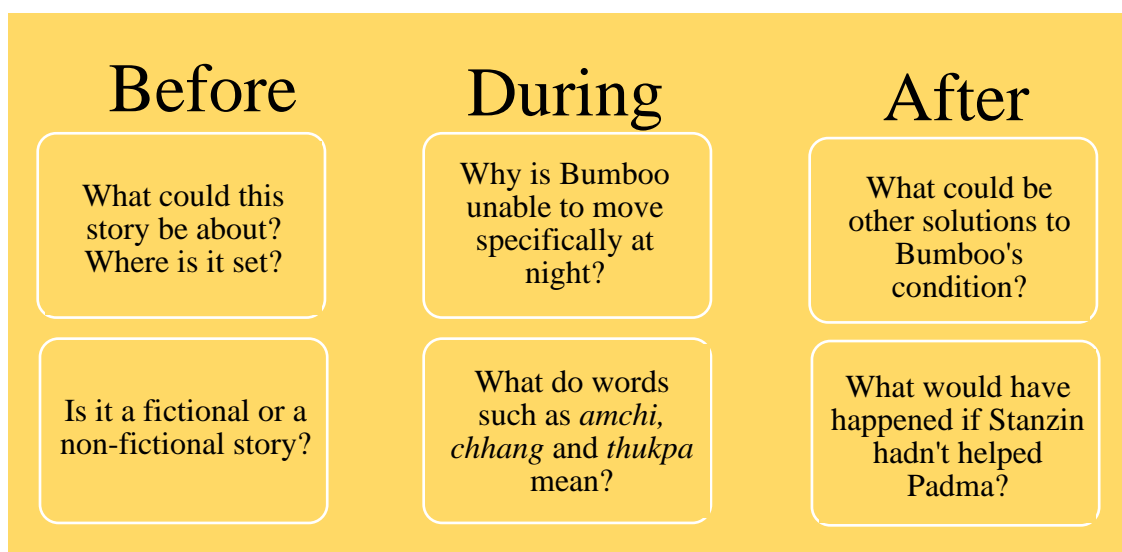

Before

What could this story be about? Where is it set?

Is it a fictional or a non-fictional story?

During

Why is Bumboo unable to move specifically at night?

What do words such as *amchi, chhang* and *thukpa* mean?

After

What could be other solutions to Bumboo's condition?

What would have happened if Stanzin hadn't helped Padma?

Figure 9. Example of before, during and after questions.

     b. *Categorising questions according to QAR*

Once students are familiar with QAR and the teacher has demonstrated multiple times how it can be used with after-reading questions, it become a guided activity. Students can be asked to sort and organise their questions into the four categories of QAR using prompts provided in Table 4. Again, for younger students, this can be done either as a whole-class activity or as a guided small-group activity, during which the teacher is present with the small group. The teacher could encourage students to raise questions as they read a book together. In this format, the teacher could model as well as support readers as they raise questions. With older students, the teacher could give it as a small-group activity that they complete on their own with some support.

Table 4.

Prompts for QAR questions.

Types of Questions	Check	Sample Question Stems
In the text: Right There	Can you find the answer in *one spot* in the text?	• When is/was...? • Who is/was...? • What is/was...? • Where is/was...?
In the text: Think and Search	Do you need to look at *more than one place* in the text to find the answer?	• Contrast... • Explain... • Why were...? • How were…? • Compare... • Summarise
In my head: Author and Me	Do you need the *text and your thinking* to answer these questions?	• Do you agree with…? • How do you feel about…? • What did the author mean by…? • Why did the character act like…?

In my head: On My Own	Do you need to *go beyond* the text to answer this question?	- What do you already know about? - Is this similar to…? - What would you do if…? - Have you ever…?

Variation. Small groups can raise these four kinds of questions, and they can then pass on their questions to the next small group to answer.

    c. *Creating I wonder poems or lists*

Before starting a new topic, get children to make *I wonder* questions or a poem (Tovani, 2000). This introductory pre-reading activity helps draw children towards the content area by connecting it to their questions and prior-knowledge. Figure 10 provides some examples of *I wonder* questions that could be raised before starting a chapter on stars.
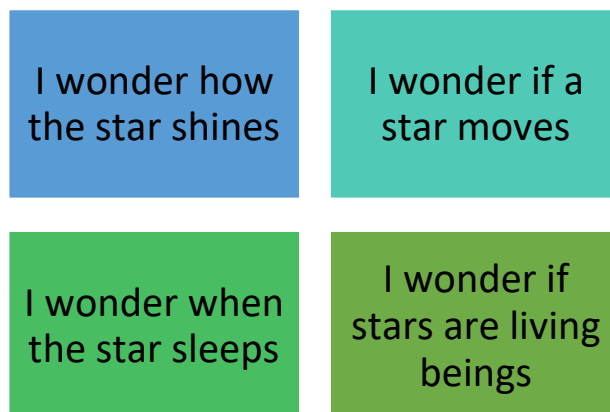
I wonder how the star shines	I wonder if a star moves
I wonder when the star sleeps	I wonder if stars are living beings

Figure 10. Example of *I wonder* questions.

Conclusion

Questioning is a commonly-used tool within classrooms; however, its usage is largely limited (in terms of the types of questions asked) and one-sided (directed from a text or a teacher to the reader). This limits the potential that it has for supporting comprehension. Good readers read actively and raise questions before, during and after reading texts, which supports meaning-making in a variety of ways.

How does Questioning Support Meaning Making?

Questioning helps readers to

    a. Read actively and engage with the text before, during and after reading.

    b. Recall and remember important facts.

    c. Infer, that is understand what is not explicitly stated.

    d. Critically analyse a text.

    e. Extend a text.

    f. Hypothesise and predict.

    g. Interpret and respond.

Therefore, students should be enabled to not just respond to the question that you, the teacher, ask of them, but also to raise questions while reading texts on their own. This brief has provided readers with a theoretically-grounded rationale and explanation of the questioning strategy and a few activities that could be used in the classroom. There are many more activities that could be designed to support the questioning strategy in the classroom; the ones here are just a sampler to get you started. We hope you will explore and design your own activities as you get more comfortable with raising and modelling good questions with your students.

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