

Using Questions to Develop Young Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This study investigated whether training in pre-, while- and post-reading questioning enhances the English reading comprehension ability of high- and low-proficiency Prathomsuksa 6 students and whether it affects their responding abilities to literal and reinterpretation questions. This paper reports on part of a full-scale study, which had experimental and control groups, and focuses only on the experimental group. The results show that, after being trained with pre-, while- and post-reading questioning, reading comprehension and responding ability to literal and reinterpretation questions of both groups improved in general, with particular improvement in the lower group's responses to literal questions. This suggests that training in such questioning is beneficial, especially for low-proficiency students responding to literal questions.

Background

In Thailand, the Ministry of Education has been aware that English is important for all Thai people and has made it obligatory in all educational levels. In the 2001 curriculum, which is currently in use, English is the only compulsory foreign language and reading is one of the skills required in all core English courses. In the upper elementary curriculum and syllabus, students are required to read two text types, fables and short stories or narratives, not only to understand the information that is directly presented in the passages but also to interpret the meaning implied in the passages as well as to think logically and critically. In short, students are required to achieve two levels of reading comprehension: literal and reinterpretation. However, to achieve this, elementary students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) need to be trained with explicit instruction so that they can develop their reading ability in general and at the required reading level.

Questioning has been chosen as an explicit instruction in this study because the results of previous studies have shown the effectiveness of both self-generated and teacher-generated questioning. For example, Davey & McBride (1986) found that self-generated questioning works well with native English speakers while Wong (1985) found that it is effective with graduate students. Kramut (2001), on the other hand, found that teacher-generated questioning works well at the secondary level in Thailand, an EFL context.

In the case of Thai elementary students, who possess more limited language skills than the secondary ones in Kramut's study, teacher-generated questioning seems to be a better choice than self-generated questioning. Moreover, elementary classes are generally heterogeneous, with more than 40 students in each class. Therefore, for these young learners, teacher-generated questions may be better as a tool to develop reading comprehension ability as well as responding abilities to different types of questions. Arguably, this is because questioning may not only promote students' involvement and interaction with texts but also encourage them to think logically and critically.

In terms of teaching, questioning can be integrated in normal phases of reading procedures, which can be classified into pre-, while- and post-reading (Williams, 1994). The use of pre-, while- and post-reading questioning can encourage students to achieve the purposes of each reading phase and guide them to read interactively, the way which is widely viewed as effective in reading (Eskey, 1988; Samuels & Kamil, 1988; Silberstein, 1994). In other words, questioning requires students to employ both top-down and bottom-up processes when reading, that is, relating their knowledge of the world to make predictions about the text and decoding the meaning from the words, phrases or sentences to better understand information in detail (Eskey & Grabe, 1988).

In each reading phase, pre-, while- and post-reading questioning can be employed for different purposes. In the pre-reading phase, questions can be used to prepare students to read purposefully and also make reading activities more meaningful (Grant, 1987; Srivardhana, 2002). This is because pre-reading questions are general questions employed to activate students to think and to relate their relevant background knowledge to the text, to preview important points, and to set the purposes for reading (Shin, 1992; Williams, 1994). In this phase, students are required to use top-down processes because they need to relate their knowledge to make predictions about the text. This seems to activate their schemata, which helps them interpret the meaning of what they read (Samuels & Kamil, 1988; Wallace, 1992).

In the while-reading phase, literal questions can be used to check students' understanding of textual details of content and the process of reading, which can enhance their comprehension (Williams, 1994). Students need to use bottom-up processes to analyze words, phrases and sentences in texts to verify their anticipation from the pre-reading phase and to understand the details of the text (Carrell, 1988; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988; Brown, 1994; Chia, 2001). It can be seen that while-reading questions may enable students to understand the details of what they read thoroughly.

Then, after reading, reinterpretation questions that enable students not only to review or conclude what they have read from the text but also to integrate the textual information into their own experiences can be used. In this phase, top-down processing is needed. This means that students are guided to think beyond the text and relate their knowledge of the world to what they read, to discuss, to react, and to express their opinions. Because of this, students will have to think logically and critically (Williams, 1994; Anthony & Raphael, 1996).

It can be seen that the use of pre-, while- and post-reading questioning not only involves students in interacting with the text but also guides them to read the texts purposefully and meaningfully in each phase of reading.

Based on the idea that questioning seems to be an effective way of teaching reading comprehension in EFL contexts, it is interesting to verify their effectiveness with a heterogeneous class consisting of both high- and low-proficiency students. Therefore, this research sets out to find answers to the following questions.

- Does pre-, while- and post-reading questioning affect high- and low-proficiency students' English reading comprehension ability?
- Does such questioning affect high- and low-proficiency students' responding abilities to literal and reinterpretation questions?

Methodology

Subjects

Forty-three Prathomsuksa 6 students who were studying English in the first semester of the 2005 academic year at Pattani Municipality School 4 were divided into high-, mid- and low-proficiency groups based on their pre-test scores. Using the twenty-seven percent technique (Hughes, 1989), the top 27% (12 students) were considered the high-proficiency group and the bottom 27% (12 students) were considered the low-proficiency group. The mid-proficiency group (19 students) was not used in this study; thus, there were 24 subjects.

Instrument

Pre-/Post-test: The pre-test, which was also used as a post-test (see Appendix 1), comprised 20 multiple-choice items on three passages of two text types: one fable and two narratives. It was designed to tap two levels of reading comprehension specified by the upper elementary curriculum and syllabus (literal and reinterpretation). As literal comprehension is the basis for students' global comprehension, and the subjects were only in Prathomsuksa 6, which means that they have limited reading ability, more concentration was put on the literal level of questions. Hence, twelve items were literal comprehension questions and eight items were reinterpretation comprehension questions (see Table 1, below). The test was piloted and the reliability was found to be .86.

Table 1: Literal & reinterpretation questions for each reading passage

Passages (text types)	Types of questions		Number of items	
	Literal	Reinterpretation		
A Greedy Monkey (fable)	3	3	6	20
Camping is Fun (narrative)	4	3	7	
A Grandma's Exciting Story (narrative)	5	2	7	

Note Although the passages appear without their titles in the pre-/post-test (see Appendix 1), in fact they occur in the test in the same sequence as shown in this table.

Reading texts

Ten passages from *Say Hello 6* (Apidet et al., 2003), consisting of two text types, fables (4) and narratives (6), were used as material for the training.

Lesson plans

Ten lesson plans applying the use of pre-, while- and post-reading questioning were written to be used during the training (see Appendix 2).

Procedures

Pre-test: This was administered to a class of Prathomsuksa 6 students to divide them into high- and low-proficiency groups based on their scores using the 27% technique (Hughes, 1989).

Training: Conducted over 10 periods, the training was designed to tap the objectives of the three reading phases, as follows.

In the pre-reading stage, through the pre-reading questions, the subjects predicted important points from the pictures and the titles of the texts they were going to read and also related their background knowledge to the texts to get the general concepts,

activating their schemata which may have helped them interpret the meaning of the text they read.

In while-reading phase, the subjects were asked to read the texts silently by themselves in order to confirm or refute their predictions set beforehand and then read each paragraph of the texts again part by part and to try to find the information relevant to the (mainly literal) while-reading questions, which were gradually presented on a transparency.

In the post-reading phase, the subjects were divided into groups of five or six and randomly assigned to answer one of the post-reading questions to discuss the key concepts, review and summarize what they had read and integrate the textual information with their knowledge of the world by putting themselves in the situation of the texts to give comments and express their ideas about what they had read. After that, the representative of each group was asked to speak out to the whole class. By doing this, the subjects were encouraged to think more, and to learn more by listening to the others' opinions; in other words, the post-reading questions were likely to enrich students' thinking process in various aspects as well as improve their ability to discuss different aspects of what they had read.

Post-test: This was administered to the subjects to see the differences between the high- and the low-proficiency groups' reading English comprehension abilities and their levels of comprehension.

Data analysis

The mean scores of the pre- and post-test of the high and low groups were compared using the paired samples t-test to see any changes in both groups' English reading comprehension ability after the experiment.

Results

As seen in Table 2, the pre-test mean scores of the high and low groups were significantly different at $p < 0.01$ level. This means that, before being trained with the pre-, while- and post-reading questioning, the high-proficiency subjects had significantly better English reading comprehension ability than the low-proficiency subjects.

Table 2: High & low groups' pre-/post-test results on reading comprehension

Tests	Proficiency groups	Mean	SD	t-values	Two-tailed test
Pre-test	High	11.000	2.522	6.601	**.000
	Low	4.083	1.164		N=12
Post-test	High	14.833	4.063	1.892	.085
	Low	11.833	2.790		N=12

** significant at $p < 0.01$ level

However, after the training, though the reading ability of both groups improved, there was no significant difference between their achievements, which means the low-proficiency subjects increased their level of English reading comprehension ability to a level close to that of the high-proficiency students'. Figure 1, below, shows these changes.

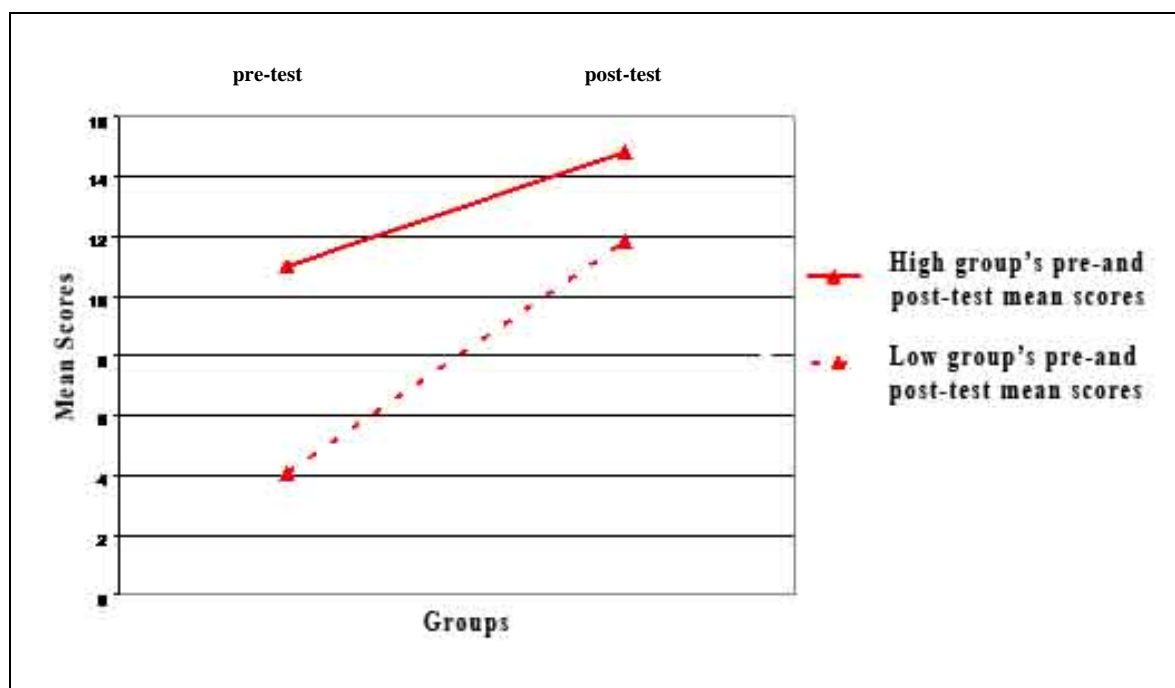


Figure 1: High & low groups' mean reading comprehension scores

Besides, the mean scores of the pre- and post-tests of both groups in responding to each kind of reading questions were compared using the paired samples t-test, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: High & low groups' pre-/post- test results on comprehension questions

Tests	Comprehension question types (numbers of items)	Groups	Mean	SD	t-values	Two-tailed Tests
Pre-	Literal (12)	High	6.333	2.229	5.242	** .000
		Low	1.75	1.138		N=12
	Reinterpretation (8)	High	4.666	.887	6.567	** .000
		Low	2.333	.984		N=12
Post-	Literal (12)	High	9.083	2.353	1.308	.218
		Low	7.667	2.015		N=12
	Reinterpretation (8)	High	5.75	2.137	2.258	* .045
		Low	4.166	1.193		N=12

** significant at $p < 0.01$ level

* significant at $p < 0.05$ level

The data presented in Table 3 show that the pre-test mean scores on responding to both literal and reinterpretation questions of each group were significantly different at $p < 0.01$ level. However, the post-test mean scores of the responding ability in the literal questions, though improved in both groups, showed no significant difference (0.218). This indicates that the two proficiency groups had similar responding abilities to the

literal questions. It appears that the questions guided the low-proficiency subjects to understand the texts thoroughly, so their scores apparently improved; that could be why there is no significant difference between the two groups.

In terms of the reinterpretation questions, the post-test mean scores of the two proficiency groups' responding ability were significantly different at $p < 0.05$. The level of significance changed from $p < 0.01$ to $p < 0.05$. This indicates that, after the training, the low-proficiency subjects had better development than the high- proficiency subjects; in other words, the responding ability to the reinterpretation questions of the low-proficiency subjects increased at a higher rate than that of the high-proficiency students. This may have been because, in the while-reading stage, the lower proficiency group were able to understand the details of the text thoroughly, which may have improved their responding ability to the reinterpretation questions.

Figure 2 illustrates the two groups' comprehension levels of improvement in responding ability to the literal and reinterpretation questions.

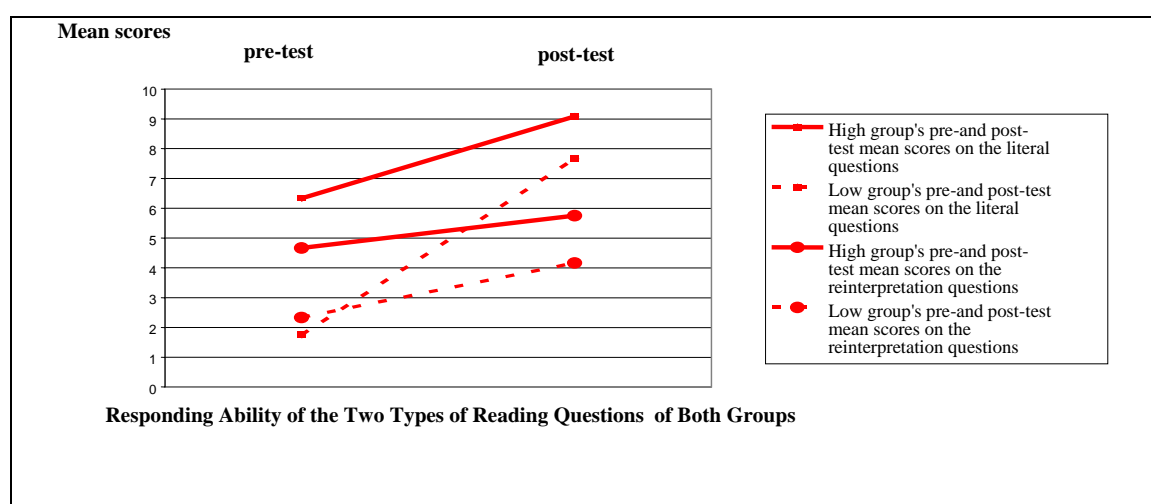


Figure 2: Groups' mean scores on literal & reinterpretation questions

Discussion and implications

There are five major implications that can be drawn from the findings of the study. First, because it was found that the use of teacher-generated pre-, while- and post-reading questioning seemed to enhance both high- and low-proficiency subjects' English reading comprehension ability, it would probably be useful to employ them as a method of teaching reading, at least with those in the upper elementary level. Second, according to the findings, it seems that the low-proficiency group gained more benefits from the use of the pre-, while- and post-reading questioning than the higher group; hence, questioning may be very helpful for low-proficiency students.

Third, to succeed in employing pre-, while- and post-reading questioning, it is advisable that teachers set appropriate purposes in questioning at each reading stage. In other words, pre-reading questions should be used to activate students' background knowledge that is relevant to important points of the text, to preview its key concepts and to set purposes for reading. While-reading questions should be used gradually to check students' comprehension of the text. And the purposes of using post-reading questions should be to review and conclude what has been read from the text and to integrate the textual information with students' knowledge.

Fourth, it was found that the pre-, while- and post-reading questioning enabled the subjects not only to read interactively but also to become more efficient readers. They seemed to be able to make use of the reading process effectively and also think logically and critically, as required by the English curriculum. Fifth, since this study was conducted with upper elementary students, the levels of reading comprehension questions have been limited to only literal and reinterpretation questions. There are still higher levels of reading comprehension, such as critical or evaluative and appreciative levels, which would be interesting to investigate.

A possible limitation to this study should be noted. Since the pre-test and post-test were identical, some of the improvement in the subjects' scores may have been due to a practice effect; thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Conclusion

The results of this study appear to answer the two research questions positively. The use of pre-, while- and post-reading questioning seemed to help both the high- and the low-proficiency subjects enhance their English reading comprehension ability and their responding abilities to questions at different comprehension levels. However, as significant differences between the two groups' comprehension ability and responding ability to literal questions were no longer found, it may be assumed that the lower group improved at a faster rate than the higher group. As for the ability to respond to reinterpretation questions, the level of significance decreased from 0.01 to 0.05, signifying also the greater improvement of the low-proficiency group.

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Appendix 1: Pre-/Post-Test

Level: P.6 Primary school students
Number of items: 20 items

Time: 40 minutes
Total score: 20 marks

Directions Read the following passages and then choose the best answer to each question by marking (X) on your answer sheet.

Once, there was a greedy monkey which went around stealing food from houses, shops, and school canteens.

One day, the monkey saw a jar in the backyard¹ of a house which was at the top of the hill.

5 “The old woman must have put something out to dry in the sun.” the monkey thought. Then it entered the backyard and crept² to the jar. There was something³ in it and the monkey quickly put one of its hands inside.

10 “Help! Help!” it shouted, pulling out its hand quickly. There were thousands of red ants in the jar and they had bitten its hand. The monkey ran down the hill shouting and crying. From that day onwards, the greedy monkey never stole food any more!

1. backyard (n.)= สวนหลังบ้าน 3. something (pro.) = อะไรสักอย่าง
2. crept (v.2) creep (v.1) = คืบ

1. What is this story about? (reinterpretation)

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| a. an old woman | c. a jar in the backyard |
| b. a greedy monkey | d. thousands of red ants |

2. Which is not a place where the monkey steals food? (literal)
 - a. the shops
 - b. the houses
 - c. the canteens
 - d. the hospital
3. What did the monkey think the jar held? (reinterpretation)
 - a. some food
 - b. some money
 - c. some ants
 - d. some snakes
4. Why did the monkey shout and cry? Because..... (literal)
 - a. it was afraid.
 - b. the old woman hit it.
 - c. the ants bit its hand
 - d. it could not pull out its hand from the jar
5. The word 'it' (line 7) refers to..... (reinterpretation)
 - a. the jar.
 - b. the backyard.
 - c. the house.
 - d. the monkey's hands.
6. According to this story, the monkey was (literal)
 - a. clever.
 - b. greedy.
 - c. friendly.
 - d. naughty.

- Last summer holiday, the boys went camping. The air was fresh and the sun was shining. The boys were busy setting up their tent. Somsuk and Yut were busy hammering some pegs¹ into the ground. Note was cutting branches and gathering firewood. Pith was

5 cleaning the ground with some branches. Manop was taking some water from a nearby river.

Lert was preparing² lunch. He lit a fire and opened a can of sardines. He then served sardine sandwiches with cups of hot coffee. The hard work had made the boys hungry. As a result,

10 they all had a good meal. After that, they were so tired that they fell asleep.

1. peg (n) หมุด 2. prepare (v) จัดเตรียม

7. Which would be the best title for this passage? (reinterpretation)
 - a. Camping is Fun!
 - b. Lost in the Forest!
 - c. A Fine Weather Day!
 - d. A Great Adventure Day!
8. Which sentence tells you about the weather? (literal)
 - a. The boys were busy.
 - b. They all had a good meal.
 - c. The air was fresh and the sun was shining.
 - d. Note was cutting branches and gathering firewood.
9. Who was setting up the tent? (literal)
 - a. Somsuk and Yut
 - b. Manop and Somsuk
 - c. Pith and Lert
 - d. Lert and Manop
10. Who was cleaning the place? (literal)
 - a. Note
 - b. Pith
 - c. Lert
 - d. Manop
11. What did they have for lunch? (literal)
 - a. fish
 - b. hotdogs
 - c. hamburgers
 - d. sandwiches
12. The word 'He' (line 7) refers to..... (reinterpretation)
 - a. Yut
 - b. Pith
 - c. Lert
 - d. Note
13. How many boys were there altogether? (reinterpretation)
 - a. 4
 - b. 5
 - c. 6
 - d. 7

Kitty Currie is everyone's favorite grandma. She is sixty-eight years old. She has snow white hair and always wears a pink cardigan¹ and carries a big handbag. She likes knitting and looking after her five lovely grandsons. But she's not looking after them at

5 the moment. Kitty Currie has gone to prison!

Two months ago, Kitty, who lives in the village of Bovdon in Devon, robbed a bank! She took her grandson's toy gun, put a stocking over her face, and walked into Barclays Bank. She pointed the gun at the cashier and asked for some money. The cashier gave her \$20. Kitty smiled, said "Thank you very
10 much", and left. The cashier called the police and they caught Kitty in the next street. The money, the gun, and the stocking were all in her bag.

Kitty says, "I got married when I was sixteen. All my life
15 I've looked after my home and my children. I've got a lovely husband and I've had a happy life but I've never even done anything really exciting. I've never been abroad². I've never even had a job. Now I'm famous. I've been on TV and the newspapers³! But I'm not going to rob another bank!"

1. cardigan (n.) เสื้อถักไหมพรม 2. abroad (adv.) ในต่างประเทศ 3. newspapers (n.) หนังสือพิมพ์

14. What would be the title of this story? (reinterpretation)
 - a. A Lovely Grandma!
 - b. A Beautiful Grandma!
 - c. A Grandma's Happy Life!
 - d. A Grandma's Exciting Story!
15. What is Kitty's favorite hobby? (literal)
 - a. cooking
 - b. watching T.V
 - c. reading books
 - d. knitting and looking after her grandsons
16. How old was Kitty when she robbed the bank? (literal)
 - a. 65
 - b. 68
 - c. 75
 - d. 78
17. What did Kitty prepare for robbing the bank? (literal)
 - a. a gun and a stocking
 - b. a toy gun and a stocking
 - c. a toy gun and sunglasses
 - d. a pair of sunglasses and a stocking
18. The word 'they' (line 11) refers to (reinterpretation)
 - a. police
 - b. cashiers
 - c. news reporters
 - d. Kitty's grandsons
19. Why did Kitty want to rob the bank? (literal)
 - a. She wanted to have a job.
 - b. She wanted to be on TV.
 - c. She wanted to earn some money.
 - d. She wanted to do something exciting.
20. Where is Kitty now? She is..... (literal)
 - a. at her home.
 - b. at the bank.
 - c. in prison.
 - d. in hospital.

Appendix 2: Part of lesson plan showing pre-, while- and post-reading questions

Pre-reading activities (whole class)

1. The objectives of the lesson are told to the students.
2. The students discuss the following questions:
 - Do you know what the word 'fables' means?
 - Have you ever read or listened to fables?
3. Teacher explains the word 'fable'. Fable means a short story that teaches a lesson (a moral) or truth, especially a story in which animals or objects speak.

4. The students discuss fables. Teacher asks “Can you give me some examples of fables?”
5. Students open their books on page 36 and look at the picture.
6. Students guess the title of this story from the picture.
7. Teacher writes the title of the story on the chalkboard.
8. Students discuss the story from the picture. Teacher asks students to discuss the following questions:
 - What do you think this story is about?
 - Where was the crow?
 - Where was the fox?
 - What was the crow holding?
 - What did the fox want to do?
 - Can you guess what happened in the end?
9. Students scan the text and check their answers. Then they preview the story and tell the teacher the words they do not know.
10. Teacher presents the meaning of these words by using the context in which the words are found.
 - Teacher writes the words that have been selected on the chalkboard in sentences in the order in which they first appear in the story.
 - Teacher reads each sentence aloud and then asks students to guess the meaning of the vocabulary.
 - Teacher quickly writes the students’ ideas on the chalkboard and records other ideas expressed in the discussion.
 - After discussing, teacher concludes the definition of the words.

While-reading activities and questions

1. Teacher tells students to read one paragraph at a time silently.
2. Teacher reads a question of each paragraph presented on the transparency aloud and, if necessary, clarifies it.
3. Then students orally answer the questions.

The Fox and the Crow

A crow was in the forest. One day it found a piece of meat under a tree. It took the meat in its mouth and flew up into the tree.

1. Where did the crow find a piece of meat?

A fox was hungry. It looked for food. It saw the meat in the crow’s mouth. The fox wanted the meat, but it could not climb the tree.

2. Why did the fox want the meat?

The fox wanted the crow to open its mouth so it said, “Good morning, Mrs. Crow. You are beautiful. Can you sing?”

3. What did the fox do when it wanted the crow to open its mouth?

“Oh yes,” the crow said. When the crow opened its mouth, the meat fell on the ground.

4. What happened when the crow opened its mouth?

“Listen. I am going to sing now,” the crow said. The crow began to sing, but the fox didn’t listen to the song. It took the meat and ran away.

5. What did the fox do when the crow began to sing?

Post-reading activities (group work)

1. Teacher presents the following post-reading questions to the whole class. Then teacher reads them aloud and, if necessary, helps students to clarify any questions.
 - Who is the cleverer of the two animals in this story? Why do you think so?
 - If you were the crow, what would you do when the fox took a piece of meat and ran away?
2. Students are divided into nine groups. Each group consists of five students. A question is randomly given to each group. Teacher goes round and monitors.
3. A representative of every group is asked to read the answers. Then students summarize the main points of this story.

Extended activity: Students do exercises 16-17 on page 37 (*Say Hello* 6).

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