

Checking for Understanding

I often hear teachers say to me, "If he (or she) doesn't understand, why doesn't he just say so? I ask him repeatedly if he understands and he always replies, "Yes".

"Then when it comes time to take the test, it's obvious that he didn't understand anything at all. I know he's not stupid. What's happening?"

Actually, it could be several things:

1. The student didn't want to draw attention to herself or appear to be stupid in the eyes of his peers.
2. She didn't have enough academic English to explain why she does not understand the concept.
3. She understood at the moment, but became confused 10 seconds after you asked the question.

Here are some things you can do:

1. Pair the students. Have student #1 tell the concept to student #2. Student #2 then parrots the concept back to student #1, adding any information that was omitted, or correcting any information that was wrong. The pair together writes a response. The teacher randomly selects a team to provide the answer. This keeps the students honest (they never know who is going to be called), and it helps the teacher straighten out any misconceptions.
2. If no one understands, go through the process again, breaking it down into steps that you write on the board. Have the students copy the steps in their journals. If they still don't get it, repeat the process with a new example. Repeat as necessary.
3. If you know that SOME of your students understand the concept, have them explain it to you with the rest of the class listening. Many times students learn better from their peers than they do from their teacher.
4. Ask the students to imagine that you are a new student who has just come in - can they explain how to do the activity?

Why is it important to do this?

1. You need to check that the students have understood because they are unlikely to tell you if they haven't - they will simply bumble through the exercise, doing it wrong, probably *aware* that they are doing it wrong, and losing confidence.
2. You need to ask 'Is that clear?' rather than 'Do you understand?' because the chances of a student saying 'No, I don't understand' are very slim - they will feel

very stupid. Would you admit to not understanding something in front of others in a classroom situation? I wouldn't! The student who doesn't understand will be convinced s/he is the only one who doesn't get it and will not want to admit that in public. Questions like 'Is that clear?' shift the blame to the quality of the instructions instead. Neutral ground - much nicer.