

Revisiting the Barrett Taxonomy to Upgrade Comprehension Questions

Harry Sewllall

Extraordinary Professor

North-West University

Introduction

During my years as a high school teacher of English and a lecturer at a college of education, between 1977 and 1991, the Barrett Taxonomy of reading comprehension was very much in vogue, almost a gospel for teachers of English. Appropriated from the biological sciences, the term “taxonomy” simply means a classification of questions, from the simple to the complex, to achieve educational objectives. There were two taxonomies that were used by teachers, namely the Bloom and the Barrett.

The Bloom taxonomy was formulated in the 1950s by Benjamin S. Bloom, an American educational psychologist based at the University of Chicago. The Bloom taxonomy was generic in nature and could be applied in the teaching of the languages as well as the humanities (such as History and Geography). This taxonomy categorised questions (for students) and learning objectives (for teachers’ lesson plans) into three domains: the **cognitive**, which catered to the thinking or intellectual dimension; the **affective**, which catered to the emotional dimension; the **psychomotor**, which embraced the practical and physical dimension.

In the late 1960s, Thomas C. Barrett, an American academic in educational research based at University of Wisconsin-Madison, formulated a taxonomy designed specifically to develop reading comprehension skills. He suggested five levels of comprehension skills, namely, **Literal, Re-organisational, Inferential, Evaluative** and **Appreciative**.

These levels also appear in the so-called Bullock Report, a voluminous report on the teaching of English in British schools in the early 1970s. Under the chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock, the report was titled *A Language for Life* and published in 1975 by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office in London. The Index of the Bullock Report, which is chaotic in my view, acknowledges neither Bloom nor Barrett. I mention the Bullock Report because it became the “bible” of school inspectors in South Africa and used to browbeat us poor teachers!

Although I have stated that the Barrett Taxonomy was a “gospel” for teachers of English, especially at the secondary school level, I must also admit the painful truth that some teachers remained ignorant of it. A department of English can only be as strong as the head who leads it. Whereas the taxonomy is intended as a tool for the teacher to design and grade questions, and not necessarily for the student, I saw no harm in acquainting my high school students with the taxonomy so as to prepare them for what to expect in a comprehension exercise, both in classwork and more importantly, the examination.

The Barrett Taxonomy in Summary

The Literal Question (Level 1)

Ideas which are clear and explicitly stated are comprehended. Such questions deal with recognition of details, main ideas and explicitly stated reasons.

The Re-organisational Question (Level 2)

The pupil has to analyse, synthesise and organise the ideas.

The Inferential Question (Level 3)

The pupil has to think and imagine what goes on beyond the printed page.

The Evaluative Question (Level 4)

The pupil has to judge the situation, write his or her opinion and then support his or her judgement with information from the text.

The Appreciative Question (Level 5)

The pupil has to respond to the way language is used, to the technique, style and form in the text.

Application of the Barrett Taxonomy

If the standard language text book used in class is competently written, the teacher's work is almost cut out for him or her. He or she does not have to design questions informed by the Barrett Taxonomy. The teacher merely has to select questions across the spectrum of the Taxonomy so that the questions proceed from the Literal to the Appreciative. As a high school teacher I was fortunate in having the excellent series titled *Comprehensive English Practice* by Rumboll, F.C.H.; Horan, A.C.; and Walker, J.D.

If a class text is inadequate, meaning that the questions set on a comprehension passage focus mainly on the first two levels, and probably the third level, then the teacher should formulate one or two level four and five questions, in other words, at the Evaluative and Appreciative levels. And I must stress one point: If a text is designed for a First Language Class, even at primary school level, it is imperative that it test for levels four and five as per the Barrett Taxonomy. I believe that questions should cater for pupils who can make value judgements (Evaluative Level) and show sensitivity to language usage (Appreciative Level).

The attached text titled "Bruno in Trouble" comes from a book I once used when I was teaching a Standard 2 class (Grade 4). The book is titled *Brighter English for South African Primary Schools: First Language, Std. 2*, by J.J. Redgrave.¹ Later in my professional career, as inspector/subject advisor

¹ For purposes of research, the teacher could consult a copy of this book at the HSRC Library, Pretoria, Open Collection, 372.610968. It is also available at the National Library of South Africa in Pretoria. It was published by Maskew Miller, Cape Town, probably in 1969. I must emphasise that by critiquing the questions in the text, my intention is not to cast aspersions on the author or the publisher but to better serve our pupils. As a school teacher I appreciated the resourcefulness, energy and dedication of the author in producing a basal text series such as this.

for English in the old Transvaal for both primary and secondary schools, I used this particular passage at workshop sessions for primary school teachers.

You will observe that all six questions in the first set (the letter “A” is missing!) are at the Literal Level (who, what, where). If you go down to B, the next set of six questions, you will notice questions on the Re-organisational and Inferential Levels.

Can you identify which ones are Re-organisational and which ones Inferential? That should not be too difficult. Now let us see if the passage lends itself to a question or two on the Evaluative and Appreciative Levels. I must confess that with this text I myself find it difficult to set a question on the Evaluative Level – a question that requires a value judgement or opinion. But let me try! How about “Who do you think was the wiser of the two, Mr or Mrs Bruno? Why do you say so?”

As for the last level, the Appreciative, where I draw attention to the language, there are one or two questions that I can set. One would be: “Which three words tell us that Bruno was excited when he sniffed the smell of honey?” The answer is “quickly, faster, grabbed”.

How about a question focussing on the simile in the last line, without using the word “compares” or “comparison”? Suggestion: “Why does the passage say the bees were droning like a million aeroplanes?”, or “What do the words ‘droning like a million aeroplanes’ tell us about how the bees felt when Bruno stole their honey?”

Conclusion

To be sure, not every pupil in a First Language class would be able to manage an Evaluative or Appreciative question, be it at the primary or secondary school level. As long as there are a few who can, we are duty bound to set such questions.

Lesson 2

BRUNO IN TROUBLE



A Bruno was a huge brown bear. He lived with his wife in a deep dark cave.

"Please, dear," she said to him early one morning, "run down to the river and catch some fish for lunch. But DON'T go near the beehive in the old dead tree-trunk. Remember what happened last time?"

And the bear's wife lit the fire in the stove, put on her apron and took out her pots and pans. Meanwhile Bruno walked down the path to the river like a good bear. Of course, he had not the slightest intention of even looking at the hive! But he sniffed the good smell of honey and it made him walk faster. Presently he reached the tree. Quickly he pushed his paw into the hive and grabbed a hunk of honeycomb. Inside, the bees were making wax and minding their babies. But the minute they saw that big brown paw stealing their precious honey, they swarmed out, darting in all directions and droning like a million aeroplanes!

1. Who was Bruno?
2. Who lived with him?
3. Where did they live?
4. What did Mrs Bruno want?
5. What did she tell him *not* to do?
6. What made Bruno walk faster?



B More questions about the story.

1. Did all this happen at night?
2. What did Mrs Bruno want for lunch?
3. Did she send Bruno to the shop?
4. Name three things she did in the kitchen.
5. Where did the path lead to?
6. Did Bruno mean to steal honey?

