Of all English activities in the classroom, the one that relies most heavily on the class textbook is the *comprehension* lesson. It is common teaching practice for most comprehension topics to be taken in a fixed order from whatever English textbook happens to be set for that class. At least this provides the teacher with a set of texts to use and so solves duplicating problems.

But complete reliance on a textbook for comprehension gives rise to other problems. Firstly, a comprehension topic should match the interests and experiences of the particular pupils to whom it is presented. Otherwise factors other than language ability may impinge on the pupils' performance. Naturally a general class textbook cannot cater for individual needs. Secondly, the questions if presented straight from the textbook are too difficult for many of the pupils.

We must note therefore that the teacher should supplement comprehension passages from the textbook with a range of materials from local and topical sources more closely matched with the interests and abilities of the particular pupils. However, because it is there, the textbook provides the majority of passages for the comprehension lesson. The following suggestions describe various ways in which a teacher might present effectively comprehension lessons which are based on passages from a textbook.

One of the most important parts of the comprehension lesson is the *pupil preparation* phase where the teacher must interest the pupils in the topic before the written text is introduced. This can be done by showing the class pictures or objects and discussing them; by telling a story from the teacher's own experience; by asking questions, connected in some way with the topic, which relate back to the pupils' own experiences.
Central to a good comprehension lesson is the manner by which the written text is presented to the pupils. Various methods are used by different teachers. They could be listed thus:

1 Pupils *silent* read the passage or part of the passage.
2 Individual pupils read sentences aloud. (not recommended)
3 The whole class reads aloud. (not recommended)
4 The teacher reads aloud while the class listens and looks at the text.
5 The teacher reads aloud in short meaningful phrases for the class to imitate by chorusing aloud.

Some comments on the suitability of each method follow.

Method 1 (Silent reading) Works best when the pupils are given specific guidelines, namely, a set *time limit* and a definite question to answer, eg. “What crime was committed?”

Method 2 (Individual pupils reading) Very slow in the case of non-fluent readers, while the more able read ahead and then waste time. Inattention and boredom may develop here. Moreover, the pupils are being exposed to poor models of pronunciation and rhythm.

Method 3 (Whole class reading together) Usually becomes just a babble of sound. The teacher is unable to hear whether individual pupils are reading correctly, and in the absence of such correction, the pupils are confirmed in any errors being made. Nor does this method do anything to help the pupils’ understanding of the passage.

Method 4 (Teacher alone reads) Useful when time is short and for providing some variety in presentation. The teacher must make sure the class really is following the text, often by pausing for the class to say the next word.
Method 5 (Chorus reading after the teacher)
Somewhat slow but an active method which involves the whole class imitating an accurate model of correct pronunciation, rhythm and stress. As such it is very useful for improving the oral reading skills of primary school pupils. It is essential that the teacher listens carefully to the pupils’ responses. To do this, the teacher should move around the class as the chorus repetition is going on, asking certain rows or groups, rather than individual pupils, to repeat again if necessary.

The teacher should not necessarily present the text by using only one of the above methods throughout the whole passage. A mixture may be used in presenting the same passage. A comprehension lesson must be kept “alive” and varying the presentation during the lesson helps to maintain interest among the pupils. Variety must be brought into the comprehension lesson. Moreover, comprehension should test the complete range of reading skills.

Therefore, the use of school textbook comprehension passages requires the teacher to:

• Pay careful attention to the pupil preparation phase outlined earlier.
• Assist pupils to arrive at (rather than tell) the meaning of difficult vocabulary.
• Carefully check to see whether all pupils have grasped a basic understanding of the passage before the formal questions are attempted.
• Introduce the formal textbook questions at the appropriate time, not necessarily all together at the end of the passage.
• Re-phrase, if necessary, the questions in the textbook to aid understanding.

To illustrate the above advice, here are some suggested ways of developing the comprehension lesson from a school textbook.
Variation, A

a  Prepare the class for the topic by stimulating pupil interest with pictures, objects, or a story from your own experience.

b  Tell the class to silent read for 3 minutes (or less) to see what the whole passage is about. Ask a more specific question, if possible, but the aim is to get the pupils to skim over the whole passage.

c  If the class needs practice in the mechanics of reading, you the teacher may read in short meaningful phrases for the class to imitate by chorus reading. Move around the class. Stop after one paragraph.

d  Check the pupils' basic understanding of the paragraph just read by asking short pronominal questions (who? what? when? where? why? how?) that require basic information only. Examples: "Where was the farmer going?", "How did he go there?" Direct many of these questions at the weaker members of the class and make the questions as simple as you have to. This should give some success to certain pupils who are normally defeated by the formality of the questions in many standard textbooks.

e  Check any difficult words by asking snap questions. Help the pupils work out the meaning from the context, but do not turn the lesson into a vocabulary exercise. Do not spend much time explaining words. Let the context take care of them and do not let the pace of the lesson drop.

f  Ask any questions given in the textbook that relate just to that paragraph. Re-word any questions if you think it necessary.

g  Let the pupils re-read silently the next paragraph, or for variety read it aloud to the class yourself. Repeat the questioning procedure.

h  After this purely oral run-through, a few questions may be selected for written answers to be done either in the remainder of the lesson period or for homework. But set no more than three, and make sure they have previously been answered orally.
Variation B

a Prepare the class for the topic as explained in (a) of the preceding section.
b Let the class have 3 minutes silent reading to see what the passage is about.
c Without any further class or individual pupil reading, immediately ask simple pronominal questions (who? what? when? where? why? how?) that check basic understanding. This encourages quicker reading and also develops the necessary reading skill of skimming – probably the most used reading skill of all. With slower classes keep the pace of the lesson moving by telling the pupils which paragraph has the answer.
d Now ask the questions given in the textbook, modifying them if necessary. Again the teacher may say which paragraph has the answer.
e As in Variation A, a few questions may be selected for written answers.

Variation C

a Pupils have their textbooks closed. Have written up on the blackboard a paragraph from the textbook comprehension with every fifth word omitted. For weaker classes, every seventh word may be omitted.
b Ask the class to write out the passage filling in the missing words. Alternatively, you can number the gaps and ask the class to write down the number and the missing word only. The textbook must be closed during this activity.
c Tell the class to mark their own work by giving them the relevant page number and paragraph from the textbook.
d Discuss word choices to show how some words fit into the context and meaning of the passage, while certain other choices of the pupils do not.
e The marking should be fairly flexible. Some teachers give marks for exact synonyms and do not count spelling errors since the activity is properly an exercise in context comprehension.

This last Variation may also be used as a supplementary activity to Variations A and B.