

## 6 Patterns of classroom language

For at least 50 years, research in many countries has shown similar patterns of whole-class communications:

- teachers talk for most of the time (often more than all pupils put together)
- teachers determine the structure
- teachers ask the questions, pupils answer
- teachers' questions are overwhelmingly closed, prompting very short answers
- teachers mostly ask 'phoney' questions (i.e. they already know the answers)
- pupils rarely ask questions (apart from how to carry out a task, or permission to go to the toilet).

It can be argued that this structure serves important purposes, but it also has limitations. For instance, it can lead to pupils becoming overdependent, restrict learning to the acquisition of simple factual knowledge, and fail to develop pupils' abilities to communicate in more complex ways.

However, these communication patterns are deeply engrained habits and very difficult to alter, even when teachers agree that there are good alternatives.

### Categories of questions

Some questions are in reality not questions at all but oblique instructions, e.g.

Would you fix the clamp onto the test tube?

Would you mind getting on with your work?

Most questions linked to learning require the recall of facts, and few questions require a thoughtful answer.

Many questions are test questions, or even 'guess what I'm thinking' questions (i.e. requiring a particular answer where several are correct).

It is useful to distinguish between closed and open questions, but not all open questions are 'higher order' thinking questions. For example:

*Can you tell me the name of a current Celtic player?*

is open, whereas

*Were there still dinosaurs when Edinburgh's volcanoes became extinct?*

is closed but intellectually far more challenging.

### **More challenging questions**

Because we are less used to them, it is worth thinking about the nature of some more challenging questioning. Here are a few examples of higher-order questions, relating to the French Revolution (16-18 year olds):

*What were the big slogans used, and what do you think they were meant to achieve?* (recalling what is already known, and then building on it by seeking interpretation)

*What was the difference between the French and Russian revolutions?* (relating different knowledge)

*Are there common features of revolutions?* (attempting to link knowledge to form a coherent theory)

However it is important to include more challenging questions even at more elementary levels, if children are to develop their powers of thought. For example, in response to the story of the Three Pigs, we could ask basic factual questions such as:

How many little pigs are there?

What happened to the first two little pigs' houses?

Who blew them down?

We could also ask higher-order questions such as:

What would you have done?

Can you think of a different ending?

What would you have built your home from?

How would you defend the wolf's action?

The latter not only require more complex thinking, but they invite children to see events from different perspectives, to connect literacy with their own lives, and to consider alternative possibilities. They are likely to generate longer contributions from children, more debate between them, a sustained conversation, and a wider range of linguistic constructions.

In observing other teachers, or in action research on your own teaching, it may be helpful to develop a simple categorization. One useful starting point is Bloom's 'taxonomy' of cognitive levels:

- *Knowledge* – of terminology, specific facts, procedures (i.e. ‘knowledge’ in the sense of remembering previously learned information)
- *Comprehension* – grasping the meaning, e.g. classify, describe, explain, paraphrase
- *Application* – to new situations
- *Analysis* – break down into components, identify motives, find evidence, think critically
- *Synthesis* – connect knowledge together to make a new whole (e.g. design, predict, solve problems)
- *Evaluation* – judge, based on personal values or opinions.

Bloom originally thought in terms of a stepped progression through these stages, but the categories can be used as a general guide, contrasting the early ones with the later, in order to check whether factual recall predominates.

## **IRE**

A very common structure in whole-class communications has been described as IRE (also known as IRF).

Initiation (the teacher starts the exchange with a question)

Response (one pupil answers)

Evaluation / Feedback (teacher comments)

Then the whole process starts again.

Consider this sequence:

T      What makes a road slippery?

P      You might have rain or snow on it.

T      Yes, snow, ice. Anything else make a road slippery?

P      Erm, oil.

T      Oil makes it slippery when it’s mixed with water, doesn’t it.

Here we have IRE twice (the second one begins ‘Anything’).

Some writers argue that this ‘triadic dialogue’ is justified as a way of monitoring knowledge and understanding, guiding learning, and signifying to pupils what is significant. The E (or F) step provides a ‘built-in repair structure’ to correct errors.

A major concern is that it is overused and too controlling. It tends to restrict pupils to brief responses. It is rare that the teacher, by asking the same pupil some follow-up questions, or bringing in others with different views, comes in to develop or clarify the argument or asks pupils *why* they think what they have said.

It is useful to consider alternatives to the F / E move. For example:

- asking the pupil a further question, e.g. a request to justify or explain further or think if there might be exceptions or if there might be another view
- making a statement in relation to what has been said
- giving a simple signal of hearing what's been said
- maintaining an attentive silence and looking round in anticipation of other pupils coming in
- commenting on differences between what two students are saying.

### **Other alternatives to a series of questions**

- Ask just a single question, for extended discussion.
- Raise only questions that genuinely perplex you.
- Put no questions at all to students. Instead, state your thought honestly and invite response.
- Say what particularly interests you about a subject.
- Ask pupils to consider possible contradictions in an argument.
- Invite pupils to pose interesting questions about a topic.

### **Encouraging more and longer pupil contributions**

A distinction needs to be made between quick-fire questions to test rapid recall of facts, and questioning designed to encourage thoughtful contributions.

Pausing is more conducive to thoughtful response, and pupils learn to use the pause to organize a more complete answer. This doesn't happen at once, but may need prompts such as 'Please think over your answer'. Teachers often find pausing uncomfortable, and may need to count to themselves to leave a 5-10 second gap.

Allowing some opportunity for rehearsal is another important approach. Pupils can be given 2-3 minutes to discuss with their neighbour(s) before the teacher calls on someone to answer.

Sustaining an exchange with a pupil, for example by asking for reasons or possible reservations, also encourages more extended and thoughtful contributions. Other pupils benefit by listening to such an extended exchange or articulation of a viewpoint. Alternatively, other pupils can be asked to build on one pupil's response, without the teacher intervening with a comment.

Questions can be asked in such a way that a yes or no answer is impossible. Thus, instead of ‘Were the Crusades a success or failure’, you could ask ‘What reasons could you give for saying either that the Crusades were a success or a failure?’

### **Inviting personal engagement**

Questions can also be used as an invitation for pupils to connect their own knowledge and experience to the lesson content. Here is an example from a lesson about World War 2:

*T: Where do you live?*

*P: South Street.*

*T: In the First World War, you'd be safe in South Street. There weren't many bombers, just balloons. What about the Second World War?*

The teacher continued by telling how his mother made a dress out of a damaged parachute, then asked:

*How many of you would make your own clothes? I bet you'd be trying to find a sports shop and a designer label!*

### **Group work**

One key means of avoiding learning being dominated by the teacher's questions is to have pupils working in groups, so that the teacher is not directly involved.

One piece of research found that the following frequently occurred when pupils were talking together about a topic.

*Hypothetical*

How about... What about... sort of thing...

*Experiential*

I remember once... It reminds me of when... Once I ...

*Argumentational*

Yeah well... Yeah but...

*Operational*

Push it down... Hang on a minute!

*Expositional*

Gail, why do roads block up? ... There's too many cars on the road...

The first two are vital to learning – but are actually very *rare* in whole class talk.

**Some suggestions for discussion and observation**

- A) Note down frequencies and other characteristics of utterances in an observed lesson, then comment on the extent to which you agree with the opening section above.
- B) In a group, formulate several closed factual questions, several open and challenging questions, and some which are open but unchallenging.
- C) Carry out further observations, to investigate the frequency of different types of questions.
- D) Make a recording and transcript of part of a lesson in which you asked a lot of questions. Do the pupils' responses confirm the doubts expressed in the above sections? Consider how you might have used alternatives to questions? (Better still, do this in pairs)