🔲6 Withholding validation of student answers

> *When a student gives a correct answer, my first reaction is usually relief. Phew! Someone actually understood my teaching! But after I've said, 'Well done', I'm left wondering whether that student was the only one who got it?*

Aim

To involve more students in answering questions, not only the fastest ones.

Introduction

When you get the chance to observe other teachers teaching, it's often noticeable how some race along at the speed of their best students, oblivious to the fact that the weaker learners are getting more and more left behind, more and more lost. The techniques in this unit can change that.

Technique: Not rubberstamping

I am sometimes asked what I think is the single most useful and important practical technique for a teacher to use. My reply is, 'not rubberstamping'. A surprisingly small number of teachers seem to use it, but when you do see it being used, the impact is astonishing. It is the one technique that makes all the difference between a class taught for the benefit of a few and one which involves and engages everyone.

So, of all the ideas in this book, I urge you to try this one. If it doesn't work for you first time, don't give up on it. Try it again. It can transform your classroom management, your teaching and your students.

When you ask a question and a student replies, it's tempting to respond immediately to what they say, perhaps validating their answer with a 'yes' or 'correct' or by indicating that they haven't yet got the right answer.

In doing this, you let the student know where they stand, but you also close down many possible ways that the discussion could expand to involve more of the class. The interaction is between two people, you and that first student, while the rest of the class may ignore you or drift off (especially if the interaction is quiet and hard to hear).

Look at this exchange in which the teacher is asking about a recording the class has just listened to.

    Teacher: So who do you think stole the purse?
Student A: I think it was Petra.
    Teacher: Yes. Good. That's the right answer.

In answering like this, the teacher has confirmed that 'Petra' is the correct answer, and, in doing so, has completely closed the conversation. There is no point in now turning to another student and saying:

Teacher: Do you agree, Kamal?

It would be a bold or foolish student who chose to disagree or offer an alternative answer once the teacher has already put her 'rubberstamp' of approval on an answer. It's like putting a great big inky red 'CORRECT' stamp on a certificate. It leaves nowhere else to go.

Rubberstamping kills interaction. It ensures that you work at the speed of the first and fastest students to call out.

Train yourself to withhold the rubberstamp. When you ask a question, try these three steps:

1 Acknowledge, but don't validate
When a student answers, thank them or nod to acknowledge their answer or say something non-committal such as 'interesting', but don't give any response as to whether it is good or correct.

2 Get other students to comment
Look around the room, and ask another student, 'Do you agree?' or a similar question. Listen carefully, acknowledge, but, again, don't respond.

When the second student has finished (whether they agreed or not, whether they are right or not), move on to a third student and ask them, 'What about you? Do you agree with him or her, or neither?'

If you think it helps, you could objectively summarise answers given so far (e.g., 'So Nanami thinks that Petra stole the purse. Zainab also thinks it's Petra. Kamal thinks that it was the stranger'), but, again, make sure you give no indication as to which is correct.

You could obviously go on in this way, collecting different student answers and opinions, as long as you wish, but even if you stop after just two or three students have spoken, you will already have a much better idea of what the class as a whole thinks than by just asking the first student. In addition, you have encouraged them all to listen to each other and process what they are saying (rather than only listening to you).

3 Confirm and validate
At the appropriate point, after a number of answers, you need to confirm which are correct. Give credit to those who said the right answers, but avoid pointing out or picking on those who didn't.

If there have been a lot of incorrect answers (for example, in the listening example, if most people got it wrong), this is an indication that the students need more chances to get the right answer. In this case, avoid confirming which answer is correct; simply telling them (e.g. 'The right answer is Petra') wouldn't really help. They need to find it out for themselves (i.e. by listening again).

By using these three steps, you start to get answers and interaction *bouncing* around the class rather than getting caught in a permanent teacher–student loop.

Bear in mind that if your students are familiar with the 'first person wins' approach, they may be puzzled by your change of mode. You could explain what you are doing, or perhaps ask them what they think might be the value of this way of working.

Technique: Blank face

When using the technique above, watch out for indications you may unintentionally give as to whether an answer is correct or not – nodding your head, for example. Sometimes teachers are so relieved to hear a right answer that they cannot help *leaking* the fact that it is right as soon as it is given.

Try to practise keeping a *blank face* that does not give away the fact that an answer is correct.

Questions for reflection

• Think back over your own teaching. Do you think that you have a tendency to rubberstamp or not? If you believe that you don't, how can you be sure that what you think you don't do is what you actually don't do? (With this technique, there is often a significant gulf between what teachers imagine of themselves and what the reality is. It's worth checking out what the reality is for you. This would be a useful observation focus for a colleague to come in and comment on.)