Strategies for every classroom

Classroom talk

Talk in the classroom is essential. It allows students to formulate their thoughts, communicate their ideas and reflect upon their learning. It also helps teachers to understand and clarify student’s thinking. Consider the following strategies to encourage language for thinking and learning in your classroom:

- Use open ended questions to support student’s learning and be aware of the complexity of the question that you’re asking; a ‘what’ question (for example, ‘what’s happening here?’) is much simpler to answer than a ‘how’ question (for example, ‘how do we know he’s feeling like that?’)

- Try asking students ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ in response to their suggestions or answers; this will help them to develop problem solving skills and extend their thinking using language

- Consider your non-verbal communication; your ‘tone of voice’, facial expression and other non-verbal aspects will impact on your students’ learning and understanding

- Encourage differences in opinions and different viewpoints by asking a number of pupils what they think during whole class discussions

- Comment on pupil responses in order to reflect and check meaning, e.g. ‘It sounds as though…’

- Tentatively offer suggestions where necessary, for example, ‘Have you thought about…?’

- Reframe statements to enable students to consider an alternative perspective

- Validate efforts and focus on key issues that arise from class discussions

- Give students clear roles, expectations and responsibilities during group work, for example one might be the director, one might be the summariser, one might have the responsibility for feeding back to the rest of the class etc

- Allow sufficient time for feedback and debriefing following group work, so that students can process what they have learnt and how. Ensure that feedback and debriefing is structured, using a framework such as:
  - Remembering: Information discussed
  - Summarising: Key points
  - Understanding: Conclusions and answers
  - Evaluating: What was considered and how
  - Creating: Anything made or resulting from group discussion
Increasing the focus on classroom talk means more opportunities for pupils to use discussion and talk to support their learning. Encouraging pupils to work in groups, when supported by teachers, enhances the quality of discussions and ensures all children play an active part.

For group discussion to be effective, make sure that your classroom has explicit rules for discussion time. Discuss and decide on the rules together, but some good rules to start off with might be:

- Ask everyone for their opinion
- Ask for reasons why
- Listen to people
- Be prepared to change your mind
- Think before you speak
- Respect other people’s ideas – don’t just use your own
- Share all the ideas and information you have
- Make sure the group agrees after talking
- Seek contributions from all group members, ensuring that everyone has a chance to speak
- Actively listen and stay involved
- Be positive and open to new ideas
- Question others about their ideas
- Respect and value other people’s opinions and feelings
- Explain your ideas concisely but clearly
- Give clear reasons for your opinions, and expect them from others
- Challenge and discuss points if you disagree
- In case of alternative proposals, decide together which is supported by the best reasons
- Keep to the subject
- Be ready to compromise and reach an agreement if possible, checking that everyone agrees before making a final decision

You can put the rules that you decide on up in your classroom, maybe with some illustrations too, in order to make sure that your pupils get the most out of their group discussion times.