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Typical questions of pupils at primary school level

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Abstract

This work deals with the questions of pupils at the first level of elementary school. The aim of this text is to theoretically analyse some questions of pupils observed during the lessons and to categorise them according to their frequency of occurrence and to assign them to a specific typology defined by the theoretical pedagogy. Some previous research on pupils' questions showed that most students ask merely general questions of organisational character, which is what we aim to explore in this paper. These general questions also play a role during the class but they do not reflect the current scenario of learning activities with pupils. In the last part of this paper, we provide a basis for new proposals that could help intensifying pupils' questions during the courses and to contribute to their better use and work with them in class.

Keywords: Pupil questions, types of pupil questions, frequency of occurrence, relationship of pupils' questions to learning goals and learning tasks.

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1. Introduction

The questions asked by pupils form part of the pedagogical communication. Hitherto, research that deals with the questions of pupils has not given the deserved attention to this area of communication. Although it is a very important part of teaching, it often gets taken for granted and is not sufficiently developed. Specifying pupils' questions is very complicated. Prucha, Walterova and Mares (2003) agree that it is impossible to neatly define what a question is. They believe that this is a general naming or framework for a type of sentence that conceals the need to get to certain missing information.

For teachers, the questions asked by the pupils may be a feedback on how they understand the curriculum which is currently under discussion (Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 138). Molinari and Mameli (2013) state that the degree of pupils participation can be considered as an indicator of the overall quality of learning communication. According to them, teaching is good when it sparks active conversations about the given and learned knowledge. Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran (2003), as well as Webb, Franke, Ing, Wong, Fernandez, Shin & Turrou (2014) showed that the higher the pupils' participation is, the better their results are. Finn and Cox (1992) not only confirmed the link between participation and school results in their research, but also demonstrated that the level of pupils participation in lower-school education is what predicts later success or failure in school. However, this does not mean that any communication between the teacher and the pupils is seen as equally valuable. According to Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur & Prendergast (1997) genuine participation must be based on dialogue, where the dialogue should consist of more than a mere rotation of monologues of different speakers. Scott, Ametller, Mortimer & Emberton (2010) argue that classroom communication is interactive if it takes the form of a teacher–pupil conversation (while uninterrupted teacher's monologue is not interactive). However, it is considered a dialogue-based interaction only when the class's scenario is open to ideas coming from the pupils. The teacher should create a suitable environment to raise pupils' interest and to give them enough space to engage with the learning task and to actively participate in the conversation. It is important to get pupils' attention and the right degree of motivation in teaching.

2. Types of pupil questions

By the type of pupil's question, we can immediately recognise how well the pupils perform within the class, whether they are paying attention or do not understand some concepts. Therefore, it is really important to create room for pupils' questions during the lessons, thus improving teaching and the quality of education. Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova (2012) created one of the possible typologies of pupils' questions at the secondary school level which is based on a sample of selected subjects (i.e., Czech language, history and civics), which we will introduce as an inspiration for our own research further in this paper.

1. 'I Need to Know' or seeking necessary information

These are questions through which the pupils seek to find some information of mostly factual, knowledge-based nature that they feel is absent and which prevents them from learning - they simply ask what they do not know (Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 145). Teachers usually answer the questions unless they decide to challenge the pupils and to delay in giving the answer which can motivate the pupils to maintain their attention. An illustrative example could be the addition of information from other scientific literature, but the pupils may find one part of the text to be unclear for them and it is at this time that the question will arise. However, since diverting from a topic can easily happen, teachers have to be careful about it.

2. 'I do not understand' or seeking for explanation

With these questions, the pupil does not understand the presented content and the question works as an attempt to grasp the given matter. This situation may have two different starting points—either the pupils realise that they do not understand the information or feel they do not understand the

curriculum, but their understanding is, in some way, in contradiction to the teacher's explanation (Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 147). Kendrick's treatises [1987, according to Kendrick and Darling (1990)] define non-understanding pupils as children who do not know what to think about the given content or task, or, vice versa, which one is right. Moreover, Kendrick defines misunderstanding as a state in which pupils understand the information but their understanding does not correspond to the teacher's understanding. We can simplify this concept by explaining that non-understanding represents the need for explanation, because the pupil does not understand the given content; while, on the other hand, mis-understanding represents a conflict of understandings, where the pupil may have different information, which is not necessarily wrong (Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova 2012, p. 147).

3. 'But should that not be rather...' or confrontation of understanding

The pupil understands the content in a certain way but his understanding differs from what the teacher is currently presenting in class. The communication situation can arise when pupils examine whether they correctly understand the contents of the learning (Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 148). In this case, the role of the teacher comes to the front—the teacher should encourage pupils' ideas, support the pupils and consolidate their discussion skills. At lower degrees of primary education, this period is crucial for learning how to communicate with others, to pose questions and to become full-fledged members of society. If there is a debate in the classroom, even those pupils who are usually rather timid often get the chance to have their say and participate in the discussion. The topic explored will encourage much more enthusiasm if more pupils are interested in the discussion. Everyone has different opinions, sees things from a different point of view, and in this way, pupils transmit information to each other.

4. 'It's like this in our country', or comments and questions driven by a tendency towards contextualisation

According to Nystrand et al. (1997), decontextualisation can be described as a relatively standard approach to learning, which we can also confirm based on our own data. The pupil who gives the teacher a satisfactory answer is explicitly praised in front of the class,—the pupil then considers this place as an opportunity for further discussion, reflection and possibly for completing his knowledge by asking a question to the teacher (Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 153). Gathering information in a joint debate and reflecting on the concrete discussed topic lead to the consolidation of knowledge and to a much more effective learning. Based on comments and questions motivated by pupils' attempt to place the new learning object in the context of their experience, we can conclude that pupils talk about themselves and their personal experiences in teaching communication, and therefore classmates and teachers share at least small fragments of their lives. Then, it is the teacher who has to decide whether and which personal experiences of pupils can be beneficial for the process of teaching and learning or when they lead nowhere (Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 154). At the same time, they have to keep an eye on the discussion to ensure the topic is still useful.

5. 'My opinion is this' or comments and questions that make the inner author visible

The essence of this type of pupil questions and comments lays in the pupils' effort to communicate their opinion or attitude towards the discussed topic. The aim of these questions is not intended to enrich the essence of a particular subject. Rather, they help their author to become more visible and to entertain the class at the same time (Svaricek, Sed'ova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 154). The teacher can use this pupil questions as feedback, but they also need to both maintain calm in the class and have a certain sense of humour.

6. 'Watch what I know' or comments and questions demonstrating knowledge

A relatively frequent type of pupil questions and comments related to teaching are those represented by utterances in which pupils seek to demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge. A typical case can arise in a situation where a pupil knows something that has not been said so far (or when he or she knew something before it was said), and therefore quickly enters the learning communication in an attempt to alert the teacher about his or her knowledge by asking questions or

making comments (Svaricek, Sedřova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 156). It is clear from these questions that pupils want the teacher to notice their achievements and expect recognition or confirmation that they are working properly (cf. Gavora, 2005). Teachers, however, generally leave their comments and questions unnoticed, which is quite understandable when considering the number of pupils in the classroom. The outcome of the aforementioned situation (absence of teacher's response) is, therefore, typical (Saricek, Sedřova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 156). We can consider the presence of these types of questions and comments in teaching as very positive, because it means that pupils really care to receive praise from the teacher. We can expect that teachers will respond positively to the pupils' efforts to demonstrate their knowledge, as encouraging the pupils' involvement is one of the objectives mentioned by teachers, for example, in academic studies. In similar situations, however, teachers respond primarily by leaving the question or comment unnoticed or respond in reproof. The reason for this may be found in the strife to achieve synergy across the class—the fastest pupils simply have to wait for the others who are not that fast and should not be in disadvantage for their slower pace (cf. Jackson, 1966).

The summary of the results of pedagogical research on the presence of pupil questions in teaching communication shows some data with which we will be able to compare our own results in the future. Questions can be recorded in a relatively abundant occurrence (around 17 questions per lesson) but only a small portion is directly related to the given class content, where the research sample was mainly conducted in subjects such as Czech language, history and civics. The results of the empirical study have shown that a significant proportion of the questions posed by the pupils in the class are questions of organisational nature, whereas the questions related to the study, the so-called autonomous questions, are rather rare in the classroom (16% of all pupil questions, which corresponds to three questions per one lesson). Teachers respond to different types of questions in different ways. If questions are conditioned by asking for information, explanation or curiosity, then their reactions are positive and they try to give the pupil an accurate account of the topic. However, when pupils only verify questions, whether they understand and speculate on the teacher's interpretation and what they already know, the teachers ignore their questions or react rather negatively. This is probably due to the fact that, in the first instance, the teachers understand the pupils' question as an expression of the pupil's effort to acquire the given content and to convince the pupils of their own knowledge. However, questions motivated by the pupil's attempt to confront are often interpreted by teachers in a completely different way—namely, as a lack of attention of the pupil or as an attempt to question the teacher's interpretation, and this is why they react negatively. (Svaricek, Sedřova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 158).

Pupil comments, nonetheless, also belong to learning communication and play an equally important role. Through comments, pupils seek to get to the forefront and to notify teachers about their knowledge. Afterwards, praise is awaited and pupils are motivated to participate even more in the given activity. These comments can act as a very good feedback for teachers, so they can better deal with them and possibly improve something in the learning strategy for reaching a better understanding of the subject. However, comments or questions need to be handled very carefully because of the disruption as well as the loss of the pupils' attention they may cause in the class.

3. Basis for stepping up pupil questions during the course of teaching

Before each activity, teachers should clearly explain how they will work, on what they will focus and what they will do. This avoids organisational issues on the part of pupils, the entire progress towards the activity itself is accelerated, and then, possibly, it will be followed by questions related to the content of the lesson.

The teacher should create learning conditions which encourage excitement, motivation and further hunger for more knowledge, as well as for exploration of more possible ways to solve the problems given by the task. At the same time, teachers should praise any question related to teaching because the pupils are trying to think, remember certain connections, and the teacher should appreciate it.

If the teacher wants to achieve a scenario where the same pupils ask questions, it is necessary for them to put a good motivational question that would excite pupils and stimulate the need for discussion.

If the pupils have a specific question, it is advisable for the teacher to answer it immediately without assigning the pupils more tasks to find the answer. A separate task could discourage them, yet lessen the effectiveness of information retention. When a pupil wants to know something, they should be given their answers immediately as they are motivated to learn and explore more.

Pupils who enter the class with their experience and personal insights should, in any case, be respected and encouraged in presenting further comments or questions. Thus, pupils can bring their classmates closer together, and, in general, help the others in understanding the curriculum.

The teacher should not be afraid of the pupils' input into the learning communication, even if it should spark a big discussion between the pupils. The teacher should, at least for a while, look at the way in which the process of teaching is taking place and who plays a role in the teaching process. They can better understand relationships among pupils and understand the behaviour of individual pupils, which can also help the teaching style that should respect the structure of social relations in the classroom (Svaricek, Sedřova & Salamounova, 2012, p. 159).

4. Conclusion

The whole text is focused on the pedagogical research of pupils' questions that occur at primary school level. This paper explored all types of pupils' questions that are available at the moment in the professional literature and that have been identified in the results of existing pedagogical research. Pupil questions are the result of social interactions and subsequent participation that have been studied in primary school pupils. Older pupils have been found out to have a higher frequency of questions of the type that tend to contextualise.

On the basis of this information, we have come to the conclusion that the questions that occur during the course are very useful and the teacher should be able to deal with them and work with them. Despite the fact that the vast majority of questions at primary school level are only of organisational nature, the teacher can use these questions and create the basis for questions related to the curriculum. If the pupils have questions about the topic currently being discussed at school, they need to be more encouraged to further develop such questions, teachers have to motivate them sufficiently and make sure that the learning process should look like this. Based on previous research, we advise that if few pupils become interested in the learning activity, they will ask teachers more questions, which will help start a discussion, engaging more pupils. When this is the case, there could be a lot of disruptions in the class, but the teacher should not interfere and direct the pupils immediately after opening the communication between them, because from this situation they can recognise many hidden issues with which they can then continue to work.

According to Sedřova & Sedlacek (2015, p. 53) in all cases of increased pupil participation, the teacher can be identified as a source of their change in behaviour. If teachers reduce their own communication, pupils will have more time for their own speaking (reducing the number of questions, talking with preparation). Paradoxically, the less the teacher asks, the more he hears from the pupils. In addition, working on the definition of roles within the communication structure (teacher play, some forms of search for meaning or opinion conflict) also leads to the strengthening of pupils' participation. Even in this case, however, the underlying mechanism—the retreat of the teacher into the background—is similar. Pupils can move from their usual position in which they only respond to the teacher's questions and start asking questions or making comments themselves.

The last part of the text provided an explanation of how the teacher should work to get pupils engaged, motivated and to support pupils in making questions and becoming more interested in the subject.

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