TYPOLGY OF PUPILS' QUESTIONS ON THE FIRST LEVEL OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

This work discusses the types of pupils’ questions that can be heard at the first level of primary school. The goal of this text is to theoretically analyse pupils’ questions during observation of tuition and to thoroughly classify them into the types that are most often used and have been previously described in expert pedagogic theory. This work will also focus on identification of pupils’ questions that focus on the content of tuition. Previous research of pupils’ questions demonstrates that most of these are of a general nature. In our approach we will endeavour to find out why this is. These questions also play a role during tuition, but do not provide a current picture of the pupil’s learning activities with schoolwork. We tried to register the important differences between pupils’ questions directed towards the teacher and questions directed towards peers and to specify their basic purpose during tuition. We also found it interesting to observe which of the aforementioned questions has a more satisfactory function for the pupil himself.

Keywords: pupils' questions, types of pupils’ questions, characteristics of the types of pupils’ questions, relationship between pupils’ questions and the organisational form of tuition.

1 INTRODUCTION

The willingness to communicate is a condition for formation of pupils’ questions. This could be defined as the individual’s inclination to establish communication with others or as pupil participation (student class participation, which is perceived in the sense of the pupils’ actions leading to expression of an opinion or asking questions. Pupils’ questions are part of pedagogic communication. Teachers may perceive pupils’ questions as feedback regarding how pupils understand the schoolwork currently being taken (Šedová, Svaříček & Šalamounová, 2012, 138) and what their subjective perception of the schoolwork is (Lukášová, 2010, p. 160). Many teachers apply the principle of pupil rights in their classes, which includes:

- “only speak when the teacher allows them (adhered to at a level of 89.7 % in the examined sample of classes)
- only speak to the specified person (adhered to at a level of 99.2 %)
- only speak about what was specified (adhered to at a level of 99.9 %)
- only speak for the specified time (adhered to at a level of 99.8 %)
- only speak in the specified place (was not established but very probably is close to 100 %)
- only speak from the specified position (not established)”.

This principle means that pupils evidently often don’t receive sufficient opportunity for their questions. However, the opinions of the pupils themselves are linked to pupils’ questions. The pupil doesn’t know something, is not certain about something, but is afraid to ask. One of the obstacles is naturally speaking in public, when the question must be clearly, briefly and precisely formulated. The pupil is not often actually capable of doing this. The teacher then often rebukes him in regard to the formal faults of the question (What are you blathering about? Say something sensible instead). Teachers may even respond to inaccurate content with irony. Publically asked questions are usually also judged very critically by classmates and their deficiencies become the subject of ridicule. Another possible obstacle is the function of the question. By asking the question the pupil demonstrates his ignorance and flaws to the teacher, and also his interest in learning and his efforts to find out more to his classmates (Mareš & Křivohlavý 1995, 93). When pupils ask questions it is often expected that this question will be

appropriate, comprehensible and brief, clear and precise. However, if pupils are not led to ask questions themselves, then this requirement is very inappropriate and does not comply with the configured system.

However, if there is a lack of pupils’ questions during the classes, this is to the detriment of not only the pupil, but also the teacher. The teacher loses the opportunity to get to know the interests, opinions and particularities of the pupils’ thought processes. Pupils’ questions can also be a source of much information and will find it easier to work with pupils or individuals and also understand them better on the basis of this knowledge. At the same time, when pupils ask questions, this may not always mean they are ignorant, but simply that they require assurance that they understand the relationships and context properly. In this case the questions are also very beneficial for the rest of the class, because schoolwork explained by a pupil is often easier to understand for the rest of the pupils.

Questions directed towards classmates and questions directed at the teacher differ considerably. It also depends what organisational form of teaching was applied. On the basis of observation of tuition I registered that in group tuition, questions are directed towards pupils informally, but to the point and pupils complement each other, enhance each other and frequently create additional impulses for forming questions. Questions towards the teacher are not completely formal, they understand the teacher as a person who can help them during variously assigned tasks and these questions apply to the schoolwork. In mass tuition questions towards the teacher are more of an organisational nature (which side is this? When will we go outside? Do I have to hand it in?). Questions regarding the content of tuition and specific schoolwork only appeared occasionally, this particularly concerns questions requesting assurance. Questions directed towards classmates appeared very infrequently and contained functions of an organisational nature.

In group tuition pupils have a common goal and common activity, which is difficult to imagine without questions and answers addressed to classmates. The language the pupils use during group work differs to the language they use during communication with the teacher. It contains more abbreviations, is more relaxed and contains slang elements, but retains a high functionality.

In mass tuition some teachers welcome questions from the pupils, because they are the best source of information about their interests, the level of understanding of the schoolwork, and the method of thinking for the teacher. Others are more reserved in regard to pupils' questions, because they have negative previous experience (they ask when the class will end, what games they will play during P.E.). This refusal by some teachers to create opportunity for pupils' questions arises from their inner doubt, we can also encounter teachers who simply do not permit pupils' questions. The reason for this is that the content of pupils' questions cannot be estimated in advance. Pupils' questions bring an element of uncertainty into the prepared class, it is impossible to forecast what exactly the query will develop into or even whether the teacher will be able to answer it at all. Another reason is that the question is thought to contest their pedagogic activities (the teacher believes that he prepared a truly excellent presentation with plenty of examples, but some pupils still don’t understand and so the teacher considers questions regarding the schoolwork unnecessary, see Mareš & Křivohlavý 1995, 92).

By means of observation during tuition we were able to see the difference in the number of questions asked been group and mass forms of tuition. In the group form the number of pupils’ questions rose rapidly, pupils asked factual questions regarding content and communicated more amongst themselves, because they had sufficient opportunity. While in the mass form of tuition pupils asked more about information of an organisational nature and practically did not speak amongst themselves at all because they were not permitted to.

The reasons why pupils ask questions vary. This can be an effort to show off their knowledge to others – show how good the pupil is, or the comfort of acquiring the necessary knowledge (the teacher assigns the pupils the task to find the necessary information at home, but they start to ask the teacher now). Pupils could also ask questions because they want to provoke the teacher, distract him from examining the pupils and to reduce examination time with questions or delay repetition by asking a question on the teacher’s favourite topic (Mareš & Křivohlavý 1995, 92).

2 TYPES OF PUPILS’ QUESTIONS

Depending on the type of questions asked, the teacher immediately knows how much the pupil thinks in the class and what potential he has, whether he is paying attention or whether he requires additional explanation of the schoolwork. This is consequently important information for the teacher, who should be able to work with it, and particularly create sufficient opportunity for questions during classes and therefore improve tuition and the quality of education. The authors Šeďová, Švaříček & Šalamounová
(2012) created one of many possible typologies of pupils’ questions for the second level of primary school on a sample of selected subjects (Czech, history, civics), which we will give below as inspiration for our own research. They created a typology with most usually six types of question, which are directed towards the teacher. We registered the questions that appeared during the class and classified them into the following types on the basis of our own observations at primary schools.

1 Questions establishing essential information
This concerns questions that pupils use to establish specific information, mainly of a knowledge-based character, the absence of which they perceive and which forms an obstacle to the learning process – they basically ask what they don’t know about. “How old was Euclid? Was it 100? Hey boys, what’s the result of 56:8? Adam, what is a product? What is a two-digit number? What is the result of 3*5?”

2 Questions asked shortly after tasks have been assigned
This concerns questions that pupils ask to assure themselves that they have understood the assignment correctly and may work in this manner or ask because they didn’t listen when the assignment was announced and did not concentrate enough, or did pay attention but do not understand this assignment specifically and need their goal repeated one more time. “How should I work with the hundreds table? Should I say the examples from the card for plus and minus together now? How many members should the group have? What does the word “define” mean? How much time do we have? Will this be graded? Can we help each other? What does the question “what is the subject of geometry?” mean? What do we need the letters to the individual answers for? (answer: you will receive the answer to the following questions.) Are there multiple choices? Each group should think up an example for addition? (answer: No, each personal individually in the group.)”

3 Inquisitive questions
This concerns questions that are asked by only some pupils and are connected to specific schoolwork. The information already acquired is not enough for the pupil, he wishes to learn more, seeks the connection between phenomena and endeavours to understand the situation in context. The teacher’s standpoint is important during these questions. One option is to try to give the pupil a satisfactory answer, this means that the entire class will be delayed and the planned schoolwork will not be managed. Or the teacher can brush the pupil off, which will not encourage the pupil’s inquisitiveness and the pupil will not be motivated to repeat the entire situation next time. “What is Pythagoras’ theorem? When will we learn about it? (answer: It is used in regard to triangles, we should learn about it in the fifth year, now can we continue please.)”

4 Questions for assurance
These questions serve to reinforce/refute the pupil’s thoughts. The pupil has an idea but is not certain whether it is correct, and so asks the teacher whether it is correct. In this case pupils often prefer questions directed towards classmates in front of the teacher, because this usually concerns previous schoolwork and so they do not want to be scolded by the teacher that they do not know what they should. “This is the letter G? Is it true that when I calculate the product of three and five the result will be 20? 7+4=10, is that right? So I should cut the string into 3 parts? Should I fold the string without cutting it first of all and check that it is correct?”

5 Derivation questions
These questions come from pupils who are thinking about the assigned task, endeavour to resolve it and want to manage it even though they are unable to resolve part of it yet (foreign words in the assignment, which they do not understand or a task that is assigned differently, where they have to first of all realise the basis and are then capable of continuing the task). “In the question “where do the beginnings of geometry date to?” - those beginnings, does this mean when it began? Please, in the question “how would we define geometry?” - define means describe?”

6 Questions of the type “what should I do when…”
This concerns questions when the pupil understands the assignment, i.e. knows what is required of him, but there are several reasons why he has reached this stage. The first possibility is that the pupil was not sufficiently motivated by the assigned task and when he encounters the first difficulties he gives up and refuses to continue seeking a solution. The other possibility is that the assigned task is too difficult for the pupil and he needs advice on which way to go and will then
continue himself. "Does the table give the right answer? ...I’ve done everything right and I can’t see it anywhere. How should I continue when I have 6 and the result is 2?"

3 CONCLUSION

The entire typology we created focuses on pupils’ questions and their possible classification. The results of observation also demonstrate that the more opportunity and stimulating tasks the teachers offer pupils, the greater the number of pupils’ questions. However, pupils’ questions can often detract attention from the schoolwork and so it is necessary for the teacher to be capable of responding/improvising at the specific time. On the basis of the obtained information we came to the conclusion that the questions asked during tuition are very useful and the teacher should be capable of dealing with them and working with them further. The teacher could use the questions and create a materials to them for origin of questions related to the schoolwork being taken. If students have questions regarding the currently discussed topic at school, they should be encouraged to create more such questions, be sufficiently motivated and assured that this is how the teaching process should proceed.

According to (Šeďová & Sedláček 2015, 53) in all cases of increased pupil participation, the source of the change in behaviour is the teacher. If the teacher reduces his own communication activity, the pupils are given more time for their own discourse (reduction of the number of questions, speech with preparation). It could paradoxically be said that the less the teacher asks questions, the more he finds out from the pupils. Work with defined roles within the communication structure (playing at teacher, some forms of seeking out meanings or conflict of opinion) lead to reinforcement of pupil participation, however, in such situations the base mechanism – the teacher’s withdrawal into the background – is also similar. Pupils must liberate themselves from their usual position, in which they simply answer the teacher’s questions, and start asking question themselves or commenting on the speech of others.

During future research we will be interested in the frequency of the types of pupils’ questions and also their relationship to various learning tasks and their operational demands.

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REFERENCES