



HARRY FLETCHER-WOOD

QUESTIONING FOR RETRIEVAL FIVE MISTAKES TO AVOID

THE EXPERIMENT

We invited trainees to ask five Year 4 pupils revision questions about sound. We offered guidance encouraging them to cold call, wait three seconds before asking a student to respond, correct wrong answers, and offer a hint if students couldn't respond.

Many trainees pursued these retrieval strategies effectively. But I rapidly noticed a handful of common mistakes. The job of a teacher is to push students beyond what they think they can do. This one-pager summarises the five most prevalent ways not to ask questions for retrieval – and what to do instead.



MISTAKE 1

Asking for hands up

Most trainees invited and relied on hands up: “Who can remember...?” or “Hands up if...?” Relying on hands up means we rely on the most confident or interested students responding. We create a two-tier classroom: those who are participating and those who aren't.

A BETTER OPTION...

is to nominate a student to respond: “I'm going to call on someone to tell me...” or “I'll be cold calling...” This gets every student thinking when a question is asked, and involves all students in answering and so participating in the lesson.



MISTAKE 2

Mostly asking the boys

“What do you think Will?” There is decades of evidence that boys, white students and high attainers talk more in the classroom (Howe and Abedin, 2013). If we're not actively working against that to make classroom participation fairer, we're accepting it instead.

A BETTER OPTION...

is to select who participates. We could: preselect students to ask questions; use some kind of random selection tool to encourage fair participation; use a register to track who has talked as the lesson has gone on, and use this to target questions.



MISTAKE 3

Bouncing the question to another student (too early)

Once teachers had picked someone to call on, if a student got an answer wrong, or said they didn't know, most trainees immediately asked another student to answer: “Can anybody help Carlos?”

A BETTER OPTION...

would be to encourage students, push them, offer a hint or get a substantive answer: “What could it be Carlos? Or “The part of the ear that vibrates shares its name with a musical instrument.” Or “What do you remember about...?”



MISTAKE 4

Don't round up a wrong answer to a right one

When students gave a wrong answer, we often heard: “That's nearly right, we just need to also mention...” We can make students feel good about themselves far better if we do so based on their genuine achievement.

A BETTER OPTION...

is to protect the ego, while being clear about the gaps. And/or to offer praise after students have got the right answer: “Thanks Mina, that's helpful, can you add to that, mentioning...” or “That's not quite right, I'm sure you can do it, have another think...?”



MISTAKE 5

Talking too much

We discovered that teachers did not pause for three seconds of silent wait time between the question and nominating a student to answer. If the goal is to promote retrieval, to promote individual, effortful thinking, we need to let students do that thinking.

A BETTER OPTION...

is to say the question clearly and slowly the first time. Pause for three seconds. Then repeat the question if it's needed. Then nominate a student to respond. If the student doesn't understand, you can always say the question again.