

PUTTING QUESTIONS TO THE CLASS

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There are various occasions when you need to get oral feedback from a class, e.g.

- when checking the students' comprehension of a reading passage or taped material;
- when eliciting examples from them; and
- when checking their answers to a written exercise.

When we put an oral question to a class of any size, it would be helpful to find out *how many* know the answer. But this cannot be done efficiently if students give oral answers. If you simply stand in front of the class and ask a question, it will be interpreted as an invitation to all. The students will normally either shout out their answers or put up their hands; or both may happen. This can be noisy and can become unruly; and in any case, you will not be able to tell how many did not answer, or did not answer correctly.

For this reason many teachers use the 'Hands up!' system when questioning the class. This system is so widely used, in fact, that both students and teachers follow it without thinking whether it is necessary. Think about it. Suppose you are facing a class of forty. You ask a question. Twenty hands go up. Quite pleased at the response, you pick one. You get a correct answer. You say 'Good!' and continue the lesson. What have you found out? Simply that one of the forty students knew the correct answer. No-one ever knows the true state of knowledge in a class, of course. But the situation in your class at that time *could*, for example, have been like this:

STUDENTS WHO WOULD, IF YOU HAD ASKED THEM, . . .	WAS HAND UP?		TOTALS
	YES	NO	
have given the right answer	10	10 (i)	20
have given a wrong answer (thinking that it was right)	5	5	10
have given no answer (because they didn't know)	5 (ii)	5	10
TOTALS	20	20	40

Note:

(i) This situation is not very usual. Students may have reasons for *not* putting a hand up, including:

- not wanting to appear to be a ‘goody-goody’ or swot;
- being rather uninterested or bored;
- finding the question so easy that they go on to the next one; and so on.

(ii) This too is quite common. I can remember putting my hand up in order not to stand out as one of the few who didn’t know the answer. There is, of course, a very good chance that you will not be asked. Also my teachers quite often asked those who *didn’t* have their hands up: this was an added incentive for me to raise mine.

The number of raised hands, then, does not indicate the number who know; it indicates the number who *think* they know, plus the number who wish to *appear* to know. Likewise, those whose hands are not raised are not necessarily ignorant of the answer. Thus, you should consider how it benefits you or your students when you say ‘Put your hands up!’ My own practice is to train my students *not* to raise their hands or call out answers, but to wait until I nominate an answerer. This does have one advantage, as you will see in (b) below:

- (a) I ask a question.
- (b) There is a short pause as I begin strolling among students. No-one knows who I’m going to nominate, so *everybody tries to frame an answer*.
- (c) I nominate an answerer.

One final point about the questions you ask. Please encourage your students to give answers (and not statements) in reply. The so-called ‘long answer’ or ‘full answer’ was invented by language teachers and does not exist outside the language classroom. When you are checking the understanding of a passage, for instance, an answer is all that is needed:

- T : What did Boxer try to do? Soon Kee?
Soon Kee : Escape.
T : Yes. And did he escape, Sarimah?
Sarimah : No.
T : Right. Why not? Raja?
Raja : Because he was weak.
T : Good etc.

If Raja says, ‘Boxer did not escape, because he was weak’, commend him for the accuracy of the information, but get him to give you *just* the answer.

When you are doing oral practice and you want your students to produce statements, don’t ask questions. Just point to the picture, or give the number, or give a cue-word. There are many ways of getting statements – not answers – produced orally. Asking questions is not the best way.