

Helping SHY Kids

You cannot help noticing the loud, boisterous children in the class. They always have the answer, they want to call out, they are eager to participate. Obviously they are the clever children, right?

Well, quite often it is the quiet, shy children who are the intelligent ones. They listen carefully, and they notice what is going on, and maybe they spend a lot of time in their own imaginations where life is more interesting for them. (Being imaginative leads to creativity - a good thing.)

So should a busy teacher with a classroom full of other demanding students be taking time out to draw out those quiet kids? (Yes! Every individual child is worthy of attention!) How can they be helped?

Here are some ideas.

But, please, please, please! Don't try an idea just once, and then say 'well that didn't work ...'

- **Firstly**, reflect on what you did (because that's what good teachers do), and decide whether there is something you should change.
- **Secondly**, try again, and again. Change doesn't happen in one go. *(Maybe you took your students by surprise, and they need a moment to catch up with you.)*

We will discuss:

1. Ask open questions

2. Use amplification

3. Deflect the attention

1. Ask OPEN questions

Encourage creative thinking. Let students realise that there is more than one right answer. So instead of the whole class shouting out *the answer*, give opportunities for many students to offer suggestions.

And when a child offers an answer that is not correct, congratulate him/her first of all for giving an answer before *gently* suggesting that it might not be quite what you wanted.

CLOSED QUESTIONS

Closed questions are obviously bad, aren't they? So no one would use them, would they?

Teachers *like* asking closed questions because

- They are easy to compose quickly, not requiring much thought.
- There are only 2 possible answers - the right one and the wrong one.
- The right answer is generally obvious - or guessable from the expression on the teacher's face or the intonation of the question.
- Children quickly call out the right answer, and everyone feels pleased.

So what is a **closed question**? It has only two possible answers, usually 'Yes' or 'No' - and sometimes in the classroom the teacher will offer simply two possibilities. And it's great because the kids just yell the answer.

Here are some examples:

- Is it Tuesday or Thursday?
- Is this correct?
- Do you understand?
- Is this a noun or a verb?
- 'This' or 'that'?

And what is an **open question**? There are *many* possible answers to an open question. Usually the question starts with:

- What ... ?
- Who ... ?
- Where ... ?
- When ... ?
- Why ... ?
- How ... ?

BUT ... the children in my class don't know enough English, don't have enough vocabulary to answer an open question. Right?

Go ahead and ask those open questions - you will be surprised how much the children know. It may take a little bit of prompting, and some patient and gentle encouragement, and even let them check back in their text books, and soon they will be eagerly offering (right and wrong) answers. Make a game out of it. Reward them for *trying*.

Download the worksheet to practise OPEN and CLOSED questions.

2. Use AMPLIFICATION

Over many years of teaching drama and music to primary school children I know the following to be two causes of 'shyness' (lack of confidence) about speaking - or singing - aloud:

1. Many children never hear their own voices really clearly. The sound that they hear when they speak first passes through muscles and bones, and arrives at their ears somewhat muffled.
2. Many children feel powerless. They don't feel that they have anything worthwhile to say, or they don't have the right to speak up. This can be for many reasons - such as their relationship with parents and siblings, or something that has happened to them at school, or simply because they can't hear their own voice properly.

So, firstly, children benefit from an opportunity to hear themselves clearly.

Use a microphone (and loudspeaker)!

- Ask each child to simply introduce themselves on the microphone. (Most children react by laughing or giggling with surprise the first time they hear their own voice.)
- Ask children to practise specific English words, phrases, conversations with the microphone.

Play a Drum

Sometimes very timid children can discover their own 'power' by making a loud noise, such as playing a drum. Usually a timid child will tap only very lightly at first, but as they gain confidence and beat the drum harder you can see a change come over them.

- If you can get hold of a drum / drum-set (from the music room?) allow each child to try playing, just like having a turn on the microphone. Allow them to play a beat while the class sings a well-known song.

3. Deflect ATTENTION

Sometimes it's the sudden awareness that everyone has stopped talking and is looking at and listening to them that makes a child feel incredibly shy.

The first simple way to help students in this situation is to let them use a **puppet**. Now it is the puppet that is speaking, and everyone is looking at the puppet instead of them. This could be:

- **Finger puppets.** These are easy to design and make, the children can make them themselves, and if you do an Internet search you will find lots of ready-made designs free to download.
- **Stick puppets.** Children can stick a picture of their character onto an ice-cream stick, drinking straw, or any other kind of stick.
- **Sock puppets.** Children stick or draw eyes onto an old sock, and put one hand inside the sock to make it 'talk'.
- **Paper 'mouth' puppet.** This is a brilliant little puppet that can quickly and easily be folded out of a single piece of (new or scrap/one-sided) paper. Children can decorate and put their fingers inside the puppet and operate it very similarly to a sock puppet. *Check out the downloadable instructions.*

The second simple way to help shy children to speak in front of their group or class is to get them to do a 'Show and Tell'. This means they are holding and talking about an object which the other children are focussing on instead of the speaker.

- They could hold and talk about an object that is relevant to the subject the class is studying - for example fruit. The teacher could provide realia, such as real food, and ask the children to choose one to talk about. Or they could select a picture, or word on a flash card.
- The children could bring something of their own to show the class and talk about - such as a book, or toy, or photo.
- The children could make something to hold up and talk about. For example their puppet (as above).
- The children could create, draw and/or write in, and hold up to talk about a 'little book'. (Instructions are on the "Little Books" page on the website.)