

Nomination

Jason Anderson describes how important it is to have a strategy for deciding who answers our questions.

An often overlooked issue in whole class teaching is how we choose which learners answer the questions we ask. Get it wrong, and you can cause boredom, undue stress, or favour the more proficient learners at the expense of those who need your help the most. Given that we do this many times a lesson, dozens of times a week, and potentially thousands of times a year, the wrong strategy multiplied can have a serious negative impact on educational outcomes.

Introduction

In most lessons there are times when we, as teachers, ask questions to the class as a whole. We might be checking understanding of a concept, eliciting answers to a reading comprehension task, or asking questions to check prior knowledge before a listening activity. I'm sure you can think of many more times when you engage the class in what we might call 'whole class questioning'.

Whole class questioning presents a number of challenges to the teacher, some of which have been the focus of much attention recently, such as how we can shift from lower-order to higher-order questioning when appropriate, how we should pose questions to develop critical thinking, and what constitute appropriate instruction check or concept check questions. But in this article I would like to explore a more neglected aspect of whole class questioning, a puzzle that can itself be posed through a question:

When we ask a question to the class, how do we choose who answers the question?

This is of course the issue of 'nomination', also sometimes called 'turn taking' in mainstream educational research.

Four common nomination strategies

The two nomination strategies that I most frequently see when observing lessons are, firstly, what we might call 'free-for-all', when the teacher does not nominate a respondent, but simply allows anyone to shout out the answer, and secondly, the 'hands up' strategy, when learners raise their hands, after which the teacher selects someone to answer. The free-for-all approach is the

norm in many smaller classes, and is particularly common in adult EFL and ESOL, when we don't feel the need to take too much control, and we can always choose to manage responses more carefully if anyone dominates. The hands up approach is more common in larger classes, particularly at primary and secondary levels, when too many students shouting out an answer could become chaotic, or could lead to certain individuals dominating. A third approach is what we might call 'random nomination', when the teacher, irrespective of whether any hands are raised, chooses a student – seemingly at random – to answer the question. Finally, a strategy most often used during feedback involves the teacher simply starting with the first student on the left (or the right) for the first item, then proceeds to the student sitting next to them for the second item, and continues around the class in this more predictable order; let us call this 'ordered nomination'.

Some readers might feel that they don't have a nomination strategy, and that their use of free-for-all is just a natural way of interacting in a conversation with learners. Others may feel that the hands up strategy has always been used in their school, and don't see the need to break with tradition. But in this article I will suggest that both of these may be the wrong approach at certain times in many lessons, and by neglecting to take control of your nomination strategies, you are teaching less effectively than you could if you made conscious, principled use of all four of these strategies at appropriate times in the lesson. But before I give my opinion, let us find out what prior research tells us about different nomination strategies.

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Early research on nomination

Let us first consider an interesting piece of research conducted at the end of the 1970s with reading groups in primary classes in the USA (Anderson *et al*, 1979). Researchers compared the efficacy of a) the random nomination approach, b) the ordered nomination approach and, c) volunteered responses – mainly hands up, but also including free-for-all. Before you read on, which do you think proved to be most effective when considered over the long term across a range of different primary classrooms?

As Lee Shulman (2004) notes, many experienced teachers working in such contexts tend to predict that random nomination will keep all the learners in a class on their toes and paying attention, and will therefore lead to most learning over the long term. But that isn't what the researchers found. They found that ordered nomination led to the highest learning gains in this particular study. Shulman goes on to suggest that the reason why random nomination did not work as well as ordered nomination is because, while 'random' nomination may feel fairly random when we're doing it, the reality is that no teacher is able to randomly nominate students very well. We tend to choose those who we feel (consciously or unconsciously) will give us the answer that we want – usually the right one! And over the long term, this bias leads to us focusing more attention on certain individuals, and neglecting others – to their detriment. In contrast, ordered nomination, being

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more systematic, ensures firstly that we involve all the learners and notice their progress, and secondly, the predictability of ordered nomination in the primary school context may reduce learner stress levels. Everybody knows the system, can focus on the activity itself, and nobody gets anxious about being suddenly nominated, or loses self-esteem if they're overlooked. Thus,

if we take this research in isolation, we might conclude that we are better off using the rather predictable strategy of ordered nomination every time we are questioning the learners.

A low-tech solution to the problem of randomisation

However, the research does not stop there. More recently, a well-known UK researcher, Dylan Wiliam, conducted an interesting experiment at secondary school level involving the issue of nomination. It was documented in a 2010 BBC television series called, appropriately, 'The Classroom Experiment'. His initial hypothesis was that the prevalence of hands up as the default nomination strategy was having a seriously negative impact on learning outcomes for the most disadvantaged students in the UK. Because the higher achieving – or more confident – learners tended to raise their hands first and get selected by the teacher more often, the indiscriminate use of this strategy was leading to an increase in the achievement gap between these learners and their lower achieving – or less confident – classmates. He believed that, if implemented effectively, random nomination would lead to more equity, and introduced into the classroom a simple means for teachers to randomise their selection of learners objectively, through the use of ... (wait for it) ... lollipop sticks!

His idea was simple: write the name of each learner in a class on the end of a slim wooden stick (see Figure 1), put the sticks in a pot so that you can't see the names, and whenever you have a question to ask, stop learners from raising their hands, and select a stick from the pot instead. Ask the question to the student whose name is on the stick, and each time you do, put that learner's stick back into the pot (don't put it aside), so that they know that they might be selected again.

This simple strategy allows the teacher to meet the two requirements that were incompatible in the earlier research: the need to keep the selection unpredictable, so that you keep all learners 'on their toes', aware that

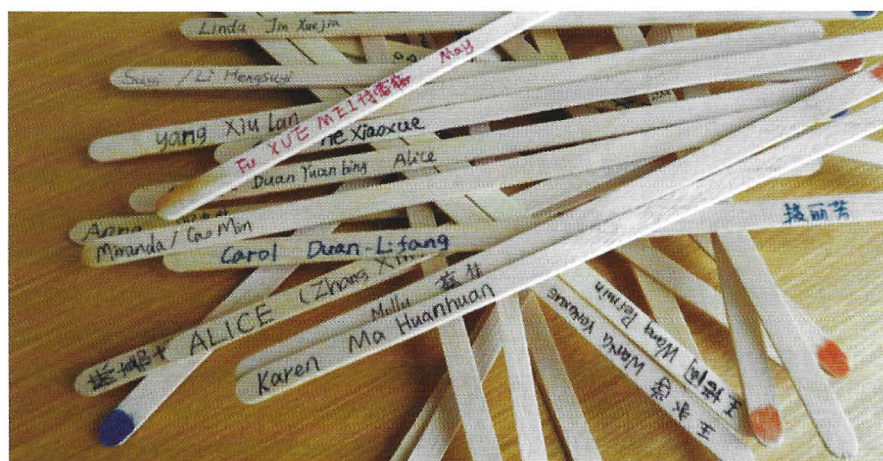


Figure 1: Random nomination 'lollipop' sticks made from coffee stirrers.



they might be nominated next, and the need to remove selection bias that leads to us favouring certain learners. As such, it seems to have advantages over ordered nomination. And the data from *The Classroom Experiment* (2010) supported this. Significant increases in learning were seen across the learners as a whole¹.

'So', I can hear you concluding, 'just give me some lollipop sticks and let me go! I now know the best way to nominate learners.' But I would argue that this still isn't a complete enough understanding of the issue of nomination, and I will have to depart from research to do so. The remainder of this article is opinion only.

Why we need to vary nomination strategies

While research can help us to answer simple questions, teaching is never simple. What holds true in US primary schools doesn't necessarily hold true in UK secondary schools. And in either of these contexts, or yours, or mine, what holds true on one day, or even at one moment, doesn't necessarily hold true the next. All of the research discussed thus far treats questioning as a fairly monolithic phenomenon, implying that each time we

ask questions to the learners, we are doing so for the same reasons, and therefore the same optimum approach might apply. But a little reflection reveals that this cannot be the case. Consider the four following scenarios, and, before you read on, spend a moment reflecting on which nomination strategy you might use for each.

- A. You are asking questions to brainstorm ideas at the start of a lesson.
- B. You are asking questions to check answers after a difficult grammar practice exercise.
- C. You are asking students to share what they learned from their partner after a personalisation speaking task.
- D. You are asking questions to check what has been learned at the end of a lesson.

Your choices will, of course, depend on your context, particularly what level you are teaching at, and the size of your classes. I'm imagining a secondary class of, say, twenty 15-year-olds at A2 level of proficiency. Here are my thoughts:

- A. I would probably use free-for-all here. The focus is to get lots of ideas and keep the pace fast. There's lots of energy at the start of a lesson, and that can be channelled into idea generation. The more ideas

we get, the better – they can inspire everyone. It can also allow the more boisterous and talkative learners to let off some steam – the perfect opportunity for free-for-all!

- B. I'd use ordered nomination here, because once I adopt this approach, each learner knows which item they'll be answering, giving them the chance to double-check and mentally rehearse their contribution. This increases the chance that they succeed (important for self-esteem in front of teenage classmates), and has the added advantage that it'll be a smoother, potentially faster process as a result.
- C. This is quite a challenging task: speaking in front of the whole class with comparatively little preparation. At this point, I would probably invite hands up. This has the combined advantage of providing a nice challenge for the more confident learners in the class, and of ensuring that these more confident learners don't talk about themselves, but share something about their partner – who I can also encourage to contribute if appropriate. While this does favour 'stronger' learners, it has followed a more valuable, more extensive pairwork speaking task that everyone has hopefully benefited from within the less stressful interaction pattern of closed pairs.

¹ Note that the experiment also included other changes in teaching practices and daily schedules.

D. This is the point where I want to find out how much of what I've 'taught' has been learned, and as such, I'm conducting (informal) formative assessment of learning. This is an important time to randomise selection, and, importantly, everybody has had a chance to engage with the content, so should be ready for the questions. It's the perfect time to get those lollipop sticks out for a bit of random nomination!

Why wouldn't the lollipop sticks work for situations A, B or C? Well, if you tried to use them for A, it would take longer, potentially kill the pace (I see a few yawns across the class) and you'd get fewer ideas. If you used them for B, they'd work, but some learners might get overstressed. Instead of the certainty of knowing which item they'll have to answer, and being able to pay attention to the remaining answers as a result, as the Anderson *et al* (1979) research suggested, they might be more worried about their personal performance than what the correct answers are – and this could lead to less (explicit) learning at the end of the lesson.

Once more, I stress, this is just my opinion involving an imaginary class, albeit based on experience. Your ideas might be different, and be better suited to your learners. If you're curious about this, you could try discussing with colleagues who teach the same or similar classes during a CPD workshop. The 'right' answer – if there ever is one – usually depends on the context, constraints and culture of the class, and these are rarely the same for two different classes.

Novel approaches to nomination

If you think your learners would enjoy a little variety in nomination strategies, you could try one of the following: 'Peer nomination' is great fun in a class where learners know each other's names. Instead of you choosing the student to speak, the student who answered the previous question chooses for you. It works well during feedback to activities and exercises. Alternatively, 'ball



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nomination' can wake up a sluggish class. Take a soft, easy-to-catch ball into class and instead of nominating by name, throw the ball to the student you want to choose. When they've finished, they can throw it to the next respondent. It usually works well in smaller classes of teens and younger adults. And finally, there are a number of online random name generators for teachers to use (e.g. wheelofnames.com), which can serve as an alternative to the lollipop sticks. The graphics and sound effects are great if you want to build up suspense. However, note that you have to put the names into the system in advance, and they can be a bit slow, so they tend to work best for games and quiz answers.

To conclude, I hope I have convinced you that the issue of nomination deserves principled consideration. Neglect it, and you could disadvantage the least proficient, cause others to lose interest, or confuse everyone. Like so many issues in the classroom, when it comes to nomination strategies, there's both a right time, and a wrong time, even for the best ideas.

References

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