

A Few Remarks on Children's Spontaneous Speech in Class

Abstract:

Pupils' spontaneous questions and statements represent interesting research material from the point of view of the effects they have on the actions taken by the teacher (explanations, assessment, control, etc.) as well as on the kind of knowledge pupils acquire (about the world and about themselves) as a consequence of the teacher's actions. The research into the functioning of children in the course of educational activities described in this article is merely an example of possible attacks on the problems of subjectivity. The research results enrich the present knowledge of the teacher's actions (taken in connection with students' knowledge or lack of it). They also point to the possibility of further research into students' spontaneous speech at various levels of education.

Key words: *children's spontaneous speech; individual and group work; student's subjective actions; active learning*

1. Introductory remarks on children's spontaneous speech.

In education, which from the earliest years prepares the human being for functioning in the world undergoing incessant and ever more rapid change, the following sort of questions are being asked:

- How should we organise our children's education in order to equip them with the ability to make right choices from the earliest years of their lives, e.g. to be able to effectively resist life's dangers?
- What pedagogical concepts are conducive to the development of the subjective attitude, which appears to be so desirable in the era of globalization?

- How should teachers and students act in order to secure their prospective subjectivity, and how will it manifest itself?

Children's spontaneous speech is one of the welcome indicators of their active – subjective learning. This opinion may seem controversial in the view of traditional ways of teaching. In the world of traditional pedagogy it is a time-honoured conviction that in order to “do” anything with pupils, there must be discipline in the classroom, which in practice means silence. However, if we look at it from the perspective of a teacher who wants to gain maximum of information about his or her pupils in order to be able to organise their education in the best possible way, students' spontaneous speech proves to be an invaluable source of information about their interests, needs, talents, knowledge and gaps in their knowledge.

Children open up to talk about themselves or to ask questions when they feel secure, when they know that the teacher will address their doubts or appreciate their opinions. Therefore, children's free spontaneous speech may emerge only in the favourable atmosphere of work, when both the teachers and the students work together on the realisation of certain educational tasks. It is a very broad issue. It touches on the teacher's style, his or her competence, personality as well as a range of students' possible subjective actions, which have an impact on the teacher's work.

Favourable atmosphere of work is a springboard for children's expressing their subjectivity, which according to the literature of the subject, manifests itself through making decisions, taking up tasks, choosing methods of work, taking control and making self-assessment, showing initiative, estimating the chances of success and judging the value of the results expected of an adopted course of action, taking responsibility for risky actions, for personal failure and defeat, acting in line with their own or socially determined motives and values, acting in accord with their will or using their own experience in planning new tasks.

Children's subjective actions depend on their autonomy to make decisions as those who are responsible for their own education. The sense of responsibility for their education can only emerge when children are engaged in the decision-making process about the object of education (e.g. the topic of a day's or a week's activities), ways and means of the activities (individual or group work, with or without the teacher's help, with the textbook or through direct observation in the natural environment), conditions (e.g. today or tomorrow, at school or outside school, at desks set out in rows or around the classroom, etc.).

Throughout the history of pedagogy attempts have been made to organize education according to the above-mentioned principles. An example of such attempts were the ideas of Celestine Freinet, who suggested practical ways of including children in the organisation of their own education (e.g. through weekly

planning of their work on their individual planning cards or proposing lesson topics in the school calendar and assessing them in their self-assessment cards).

The atmosphere of Freinet's classroom can be seen as conducive to children's subjective actions, as they are allowed to choose tasks for realisation, make up their own tasks, assess themselves and others, work individually or with a group according to a work plan, which they have helped to complete – in short – they learn in an active way. Although the work is in a way more 'casual' than in a traditional classroom, which is connected with a great variety of tasks realised at the same time, it is in this very atmosphere that children feel safe and free to speak their minds on a range of topics – mainly connected with their education.

2. Active learning and students' questions and statements

Active learning is connected with pupils' making choices and taking decisions in connection with their own education. It is this kind of learning that W. Kojs refers to in his theory of 'learning by doing'. The author sees learning as subjective activity – informational in nature, in the course of which the subject "(...) emerges and establishes itself in connection with the appearance of the operation of comparing and its results." (Kojs, 1994: 49) Pupils' activity is very often "all about comparing". It comes into play when pupils aim to ensure fluent progress of an activity in its three stages: *preparation, execution and control-assessment*.

At the preparation stage, drawing on his/her own value system as well as a set of conceptual resources, the subject makes decisions as to the course of the actions planned by him/her with reference to their goal, makes decisions about the chances and scope of there appearing various elements of the actions, in other words the subject "determines his or her preferences, weighs out advantages and disadvantages and analyses possible consequences of the presently made choices". At the execution stage, entering the sphere of meta-information and meta-activity, the subject realises the planned tasks while making continual self-assessment at the same time. Thus the subject ensures correct realisation of the basic activity, by making assessment and correction during the course of its realisation. At the control -assessment stage the subject compares the results of his/her actions with his/her preset goals, moving towards the assessment of the actions and possible modification of further similar actions. Eventually, the subject takes further actions being a continuation of those formerly accepted, having reached a satisfying level of self-assessment. (Kojs, 1994: 44, 54–55)

The first stage of an activity seems to deserve special attention when we seek to analyse children's spontaneous speech as a manifestation of children's processing

information. It is at this stage that the question whether pupils' learning will be subjective (active) or objective (re-active) is determined. Pupils can be creators of educational tasks (Kojš, 1994: 115–116), which means that they, rather than the teacher, will determine the goals, means, methods and conditions of the task realisation. They make a number of decisions concerning their learning, which leads to their “switching on” self-control and self-assessment. They can also be users of educational tasks, in which case they choose appropriate tasks for realisation from among those offered by the teacher, textbook author or other students or they choose tasks for other students or the teacher to complete. Therefore, when the teacher allows the pupils to choose their own tasks, the scope of their subjectivity is still sufficient to foster their ability to evaluate the tasks adopted by them, to exercise control and make assessment of the realisation and results – which in turn leads to the development of a subjective attitude.

Pupils are also the ones who complete educational tasks, they are the ‘doers’. Their activity is limited to the realisation of tasks designed by someone else, in which case their interest is lower, they feel less responsible for the task completion, they do not learn to solve problems, to make choices. It is not as common for them to speak spontaneously about their education as when they are creators or users of tasks, they do not ask so many questions, they do not express their opinions. The teacher is to a large extent deprived of the possibility to learn about his or her pupils.

3. Spontaneous questions and statements – research results

Questions naturally rise from a lack of certain knowledge. Already small children ask questions in their first attempts to understand the world around them. Their questions result from their processing information, and they reflect the status of their current knowledge. They gather information about the object, goals, means, methods, conditions and results of their own learning (self-control) and they make appropriate decisions as a result of their assessment (self-assessment). If they do not know, if they are not sure, they ask a question.

Statements expressing pupils' opinions are also a result of their information processing concerning their education (its object, goals, means, methods, conditions, results) and themselves (the subject). Statements also serve as an important source of knowledge for the teacher about the children. They are mostly related to their knowledge about something, or their acknowledgement that they do not know, do not understand...

Questions and statements are specific forms of children's spontaneous speech. Their appearance in class is conditioned on the favourable atmosphere of work. It

is such conditions that I sought to create in the classroom, where I carried out my pedagogical experiment. I carried out the experiment using the technique of parallel groups with two classes of pupils in the 3rd grade of the Primary School No 15 in Žory (13 Sept. – 22 Oct. 1999). In the experimental group I introduced two factors (at stage II and III). One of them was the three-stage format of the educational activities, when the children were acquiring procedural knowledge concerning learning as subjective action, (including self-control and self-assessment). The other factor was acquiring declarative knowledge about learning (including self-control and self-assessment), which was the focus of the classes in the fifth week of the experiment. In the control group work was carried on with in a traditional way, i.e. reactive (objective) learning.

I attempted to put Celestine Freinet's pedagogical techniques into practice. Questions and statements are only two of a number of different kinds of utterances which I noted observing the children at work in the experimental and the control groups. I put them to analysis as there were such a great number of them, increased due to the implementation of the three-stage work format – planning, realisation and control (self-control) / assessment (self-assessment).

Letting the children join in the planning of their activities (through completing weekly work schedules and designing educational tasks) was particularly significant as it is at this stage of learning that they took up appropriate subjective roles of creators and users of educational tasks. Being conscious of their goals, they controlled their own actions, they could comment on their progress on a running basis (statements), reflect on whether they work well or not and how they can possibly correct the activity currently in progress (questions). They did not only wait for the teacher to ask them or instruct them in order to realise the success or the shortcomings of their work. On the contrary, they provoked the teacher to speak (act) asking questions or giving opinions. This kind of utterances did not appear

Table 1: The number of questions and statements in the control and the experimental groups (based on the lesson transcripts)

Form of pupils' spontaneous speech	Total number of pupils' utterances		Number of pupils' utterances at different stages of experiment							
			I		II		III		IV	
	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E
questions	100	624	24	21	45	173	19	106	12	324
statements	300	1147	89	50	117	371	45	190	49	536

Key: C – control group; E – experimental group

in any significant number in the control group, where the lessons were conducted in the traditional way. (cf. Note). In the experimental classroom, where the children were “induced into subjective education” the situation was remarkably different. (cf. Table 1).

The results obtained at the final stage of the experiment are particularly revealing as they represent only one week of work (as opposed to stage II spanning the period of three weeks). The volume of children’s spontaneous speech at the last stage confirms the validity of the three-stage format of work, in the course of which pupils are more likely to be ‘creators’ and ‘users’ of educational tasks rather than merely ‘doers’. Likewise, introducing the topic *learning* (the other research factor) acquires importance in the light of the results.

While acquiring procedural and declarative knowledge about learning the pupils very often operate at the meta-information level. They control the progress of the tasks carried out, they take decisions regarding the tasks’ form, correcting them on a running basis. Naturally, not all of these operations are observable. This is due to the fact that not all children reveal (for a variety of reasons) their ways of thinking when they ask questions or give opinions. However, the fact that there is a remarkable difference in this area between the control and the experimental groups proves that using the concepts of active learning enhances the children’s ability to evaluate their own work.

The analysis of the pupils’ spontaneous speech from the point of view of the various pieces of information which they take in and process in the course of the activities is of equal interest. There are utterances which reveal their knowledge and lack of knowledge regarding various elements of activity (subject, object, goal, task, means, method, conditions, results) – which in their case is learning.

The children in the control group asked more questions concerning the object (39%) than the methods (35%), while in the experimental group they asked more about the methods (38%) than the object (30%). The children also freely commented on the progress of the activities. In the control group most statements concerned the results of their actions (47%), whereas in the experimental group the statements concerned the results (27%), the object (27%) and the subject (21%). We can also see marked differences between the two groups in the number of children’s spontaneous utterances concerning the other elements of the activities. In the experimental group there were remarkably more questions and statements concerning the goal, the task, the means or the methods.

Students ask questions when their self-esteem is high, e.g. when they are ready to go on to another task (“Can I do the next one?”), or when they do not know which task they should do next (“What will we be doing now that we’ve watched...?”) They also ask questions when they know how to put a familiar method to use and

want to use it (“Miss, can I write it out now?”). They ask when they do not know something (questions about the object, e.g. “What will we talk about?”, goal – “Why should we go there?”, task – “Miss, can we do task 2 now?”, means – “Which page?”; conditions – “Will we be doing it today?”, results – “Miss, is this all right?”). It is similar with the statements. The pupils express their opinions concerning various elements of their activity, providing an insight into their knowledge and gaps in knowledge (e.g. about the subject / method – “Miss, in the second task you don’t have to count anything, just look at the numbers and that’s it.”; about the means – “Miss, I will do it with coloured pencils; about the task – “I don’t understand the first one, Miss.”)

This invites further questions as to how pupils’ spontaneous speech at the early age affects the process of their education later on?

(Translated by *Andrzej Pasterny*)

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