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# GCSE (9–1)

*Topic Exploration Pack*

J351

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Theme: Spoken Language Skills:  
Listening and Responding to  
Questions

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This Topic Exploration Pack should accompany the OCR resource ‘Spoken Language Skills: Listening and Responding to Questions’ learner activities, which you can download from the OCR website.



The Spoken Language endorsement requires learners to listen and respond appropriately to questions and feedback. The following discussion activities encourage learners to listen carefully to ideas that are presented, to ask questions, and to respond appropriately to those questions. The activities demonstrate how effective questioning can develop and enhance the content of presentations.

These activities provide opportunities for Spoken Language development which can be effectively integrated into the English Language curriculum.

## Introduction

Questions are a vital part of how we interact with others in school and beyond. Asking questions as part of a discussion helps students to manage the discussion and to better understand the ideas being discussed. Asking and answering questions is also a key feature of collaboration.

Many of the contexts in which we ask students to demonstrate their speaking and listening skills require them to use higher academic registers and Standard English. Many students may have little experience of these registers outside of the classroom and so it is important to explicitly teach the vocabulary, structures and behaviours which they will need to be able to give effective presentations and speeches.

A useful teaching sequence for spoken language would include:

- examination of a feature of language that students will need to be familiar with for spoken presentations
- introduction/ reinforcement of key language
- opportunities to use the language purposefully.

## Section 1

### Play the 'Tell me more' game.

*The purpose of this activity is for students to experience being asked questions in a non-judgmental situation and to understand how being prompted can open up the range of material being presented.*

Students work in pairs. Student 1 talks for 20-30 seconds about something of interest to them; it could be about a hobby or sport, about their personal history, about their most recent holiday or family event – it needs to be something that the student knows plenty about and that they are



willing to share. Student 2 then responds ‘Tell me more about...’ selecting something mentioned by the first student. Student 1 then responds and the process is repeated, with Student 2 continuing to prompt with ‘Tell me more about...’

Roles are then reversed and the activity is then repeated.

Ask students to reflect on:

- how it felt to be the speaker being prompted
- what they had to do to be effective in the role of prompter.

*Being prompted demonstrates that the speaker is being listened to carefully and makes the speaker feel valued. The nature of the prompt is open and non-judgemental and this should support the speaker’s confidence. In order to prompt effectively, the prompter must listen carefully to the speaker and consider which aspects are likely to enable the speaker to talk well.*

## Section 2

### Asking questions in discussion

The purpose of this activity is for students to understand that questions (sometimes the same questions) can be used to serve different purposes. It will also help to expand the range of questions in students’ repertoires.

#### a) Why do we ask questions?

Ask students to identify some of the functions of asking questions after spoken presentations or during discussions, providing some examples if they can.

Collect and discuss their responses, eg:

- to invite contributions, eg What do you think about...?
- to manage/direct the discussion, eg Shall we talk about...?
- to prompt elaboration/clarification, eg Could you explain that?
- to challenge contributions of others, eg Is there any evidence for that?
- to soften statements/directions, eg Do you think we should...?



Ask students ‘Why would a speaker choose to use questions instead of statements/instructions? What impact might it have on the discussion?’

Eg:

- to invite contributions, eg Tell me what you think
- to manage/direct the discussion, eg Next we’re going to discuss...
- to prompt elaboration/clarification, eg You need to explain that
- to challenge contributions of others, eg There’s no evidence for that.

*Asking questions is more open and less directive – it helps to develop a sense of collaboration and interaction. The statements in the examples above could be perceived as challenging or threatening.*

Remind the students that discussions can have very different purposes eg:

- to explore an idea
- to debate an issue
- to express opinions.

*In order for them to be successful, the participants must collaborate, even if they are arguing for very different views.*

## b) Question card sort

Reinforce that questions can be used in a variety of ways. Use Question card sheet on [page 9](#).

Ask students in pairs or small groups to sort the question cards in to categories [category headings are in bold]. Spare cards are provided so that students can add any category headings they think are missing, or add more question stems of their own.

Were there any questions which were difficult to categorise?

*Some questions will perform different functions depending on how they are asked or on the point at which they are asked.*



### c) Structured discussion: questioning

*The purpose of this activity is to give students the opportunity to practise using questions in an exercise.*

*Although any topics can be used, it is often best to choose something trivial/ridiculous. See [Topics for discussion](#) on page 12 for some ideas. If students are discussing something that is important to them it is easy for them to forget that the purpose of the exercise is to use particular language/structures rather than on the content of the discussion.*

Arrange students in groups of four and give them a discussion topic. Place the question cards face up on the table. Students discuss the topic, asking each other questions at relevant points (making sure that the questions are answered). Each time they ask a question they remove a card from the central pool and add it to their own pile. Once all the cards have been used the discussion is over and the 'winner' is the student with the most cards.

Ask students to reflect on which were the most/least useful cards in their discussion. Which would they like to have had more of? Why?

Variations:

- Add more/duplicate cards to the pack
- Deal out the cards between the group. Each student has to use the questions in his/her pile. The 'winner' is the first to use all of his/her cards effectively.
- Lay the cards out face down on the table. When a group member thinks he/she has an opportunity to ask a question, he/she turns over one of the cards and immediately uses it as a stem. The student then keeps the card. Keep going until all cards are used. The 'winner' is the one with the most cards.
- Introduce an adjudicator – his/her role is to decide whether a contribution makes sense and/or contributes to the discussion.



## Section 3

### Socratic discussion

*The purpose of this activity is to reflect on the impact of using questions in a discussion and to apply the questioning skills developed in a more naturalistic discussion. A [Socratic discussion worksheet](#) for students to use is on page 11.*

*For this discussion, select a topic that is relevant to the work being done in class. It might be:*

- *an exploration of a literary text, or part of a text that the class is studying*
- *an argument on a topic the class have been studying as part of their work with non-fiction texts*
- *a discussion of an issue in the news*
- *a discussion of a local issue.*

*If this is the first time the class has attempted a Socratic activity, it is best to select students who are confident speakers for the inner circle. You do not need to choose the most able as the focus is on the manner of the discussion, rather than the content. In some classes it may be wise to 'plant' a student with particular instructions, eg, not to volunteer any contributions unless asked.*

*During the inner circle discussion, there will be quiet 'thinking moments' so allow for this; only intervene if the discussion flags completely and the students look to you for support.*

- a) Select between four and six students to be the 'inner circle'. These students will conduct a discussion amongst themselves on the topic provided while the rest of the group observes them. Give the inner circle the topic and allow them some thinking time while you explain the task to the rest of the group. If possible, arrange these students in the centre of the room with the rest of the class arranged around them.

The rest of the group now becomes the 'outer circle'. Their role is to observe the discussion closely and make notes on the way questions are used and the effect they have on the discussion. Introduce the Socratic observation sheet. There is space to record examples of the different types of question asked and their effect and also to note down some of the key points raised.

The 'inner circle' now discuss their topic with the outer circle observing and making notes.



Following the discussion, ask the 'inner circle' for their response to the task. How did they feel during the discussion? What did they notice about the way they were working in the group? What did they notice about how the group was working as a whole?

Take feedback on what the 'outer circle' observed. What questions were asked? For what purpose? What effect did they have?

- b) Arrange the 'outer circle' into groups of three or four. Allocate one member of the 'inner circle' to each new group. The new groups now continue the discussion of the topic, discussing the ideas that were previously raised by the 'inner circle' as well as their own views. The 'inner circle' member takes on the role of observer, using the same Socratic Observation Sheet to record how the new group uses questioning.

Take feedback from the observers ('inner circle' members) on how each group used questioning.

Ask students in pairs to answer the questions:

- what was I reminded of?
- what was new to me?
- what was the most useful bit of learning?



# Appendix

## Question cards

To invite contributions	To manage/ direct the discussion	To prompt elaboration/ clarification	To challenge contributions of others
<b>To soften statements/ directions</b>	Would anyone like to suggest...?	Couldn't it be argued that ...?	Might some people not think that ...?
Does anyone have any ideas about...?	Right, who would like to...?	What evidence do you have to support that opinion...?	What would happen if...?
What will be the consequences of...?	What will happen if...?	Should we...?	Would it be a good idea if...?
Yes, but don't you think that ...?	Do you see what I mean?	Surely one of our main points was...?	Isn't it the case that...?



Question cards cont...

To invite contributions	To manage/ direct the discussion	To prompt elaboration/ clarification	To challenge contributions of others
Could you tell me more about your idea?	Do you think you could get that done by...?	Isn't it true that ...?	How can you tell...?
Don't you think that...?	Please could you explain what you mean?	What if...?	But don't you think we need to...?



## Socratic observation sheet

Socratic observation sheet	
What were questions used for?	Examples/comments
To invite contributions	
To manage/ direct the discussion	
To prompt elaboration/ clarification	
To challenge contributions of others	
To soften statements/directions	
Ideas from the discussion	



## Topics for discussion

### Examples of topics for discussion:

- All dogs should wear nappies in public places
- Lace up shoes should be banned
- Car horns should be replaced with bell chimes
- Tea is better than coffee
- Anyone found guilty of a crime should be obliged to wear a pink ribbon in their hair
- The best place in the world to live would be...
- The worst place to live in the world would be...
- The best thing never invented
- Man's greatest achievement.



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