Raising the Quality of Teaching Assistant Practice

The dialogue between teachers and pupils is at the heart of teaching and learning and central to this is the use of questioning. The skilful teacher knows what to ask and how to ask it in ways which support pupils’ learning.

Of all the tasks given to TAs by teachers, verbal interactions with pupils are potentially the most valuable, but this is also the area in which TAs are least adequately prepared – many have received little or no training related to their role and are not necessarily skilled questioners.

Without sufficient guidance, TAs’ interactions tend to focus on task completion, rather than ensuring that learning and understanding take place. When interactions are instructional in nature this can reduce the opportunity for pupils to develop their independent learning skills.

Improving TA interactions with pupils

A range of simple steps can raise the quality of interactions with pupils and can also help TAs to reflect on their own practice:

1. Provide training in the use of effective questioning techniques, including the use of ‘open questions’ where appropriate.
2. Model questioning techniques when working with groups, individuals and the whole class. The TA observes, takes notes and later discusses with the teacher what they learned.
3. After sharing and modelling techniques in these ways, include specific expectations for ‘higher order’ questioning in lesson plans for TAs.
4. Provide sentence stems for TAs to use when interacting with pupils, specifically when asking questions.

Increasing pupil independence

Teachers and TAs can offer pupils strategies that lead to increased independence and engagement in a task:

1. Provide pupils with or display a checklist of self-help techniques in the classroom.
2. Encourage pupils to draw on their own knowledge and understanding to find things out for themselves, using the resources in the classroom.
3. Remind pupils of these alternatives to seeking adult help when difficulties arise.

---