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# QUESTIONS: HELP OR HINDRANCE? TEACHERS' USE OF QUESTIONS WITH INDIGENOUS CHILDREN WITH CONDUCTIVE HEARING LOSS

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## Abstract

*The development of oral language skills is an important foundation for written literacy for all children. However, where children have conductive hearing loss and consequent language impairment, the development of good oral language skills, especially those that underlie written literacy, becomes even more important. This paper discusses the use of questions during literacy focus lessons by three teachers of Indigenous students, and the way in which their use of questions serves to support or inhibit children's opportunities to participate in classroom interaction. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of the implications of the findings for teacher education.*

## Background and introduction

This paper focuses on the need to encourage student interaction in classrooms where Indigenous students suffer conductive hearing loss. Conductive hearing loss as a consequence of otitis media (middle ear infection) in the preschool years, which is when much language learning takes place, can result in significant impairment to language development. In the preschool years, this, of course, means impairment to oral language, but as oral language skills underlie written literacy, poor oral language skills have an ongoing impact on written literacy development. Children who have good oral language skills are much more likely to have success in acquiring written literacy (Browne, 2001; Clay, 1991; Walker & Wigglesworth, n.d.;

Yonowitz, Yonowitz, Nienhuys, & Boswell, 1995). It is important, therefore, that these skills be developed in the early years, so that there is a strong foundation of oral language models on which children can build when they come to the task of learning to read and write. Therefore, if children come to school with language impairment due to conductive hearing loss, it is important that intervention strategies be applied so that children's development of written literacy is not limited.

In addition to the impact of conductive hearing loss on language development, there are several other factors that may also influence the development of written literacy, one of which is home literacy background. In the case of Indigenous children, many come from a cultural background based on an oral tradition, rather than a written one (Gledhill, 1994), and may not have experienced at home the types of oral language that are privileged at school, those that underlie written literacy. Consequently, these language skills need to be developed in the classroom. The types of oral language skills that need to be developed for success in acquiring written literacy involve both production and reception, and include decontextualised, monologic language; correct sentence structure; precision and specificity in language; and use of the types of language that develop thinking, such as giving reasons or justification for actions or ideas, and predicting outcomes (e.g., see Browne, 2001; Clay 1991; Lowell, Budukulawuy, Gurimangu, Maypliama, & Nyomba, 1995; Thompson & Nicholson, 1999). Furthermore, for many Indigenous children, there is the additional challenge

that the language of school, Standard Australian English [SAE], is not the language of home, so these children have to learn SAE as a second or additional language or dialect, and also develop language and literacy skills in SAE. Related to these two issues of a different home literacy and a different home language for many Indigenous children are the different sociolinguistic conventions associated with home and school language. These factors need to be taken into account when considering teachers' interactions with Indigenous students, especially when the teachers are employing mainstream teaching strategies to stimulate oral language.

There are a number of ways in which teachers assist students to develop literate oral language skills, including modelling target forms of language, and providing opportunities for students to use various types of oral language. Another of the ways that the use of oral language can be stimulated is through questions, questions being a linguistic form that, in Standard English, pragmatically require an answer (Crystal, 1991), and therefore a response from an interlocutor. That is, questions are understood by a listener to require them to give an answer to the speaker. However, although pragmatically questions require an answer, all types of questions are not equally valuable in stimulating interaction. Furthermore, expectations and understandings concerning the role of questions, the types of questions that are asked, and the way questions are responded to vary across cultures (cf, Maybin, 1992).

1. For convenience, in the remainder of this paper, the term 'home language' will be used rather than 'first or home language or dialect,' and recognising that the home language of many Indigenous children is Aboriginal English (a dialect of English), rather than a regional Aboriginal language.
2. It is recognised that questions serve other functions within the classroom apart from stimulating oral language (e.g., control), but consideration of those functions is outside the scope of this paper.

Consequently, using questions in a way that is contrary to the sociolinguistic conventions with which students are familiar has the potential to hinder rather than help interaction. These matters will be considered in turn.

Questions are commonly grouped as one of two types - 'closed' or 'open' (see, e.g., Tough, 1977). Closed questions are ones that have very limited response options, with often only one possible answer, and requiring only one or a few words in reply. The prototypical closed question is the polar, or 'yes/no,' question (e.g., *Did you bring your homework to class?* to which the listener would normally reply either *yes* or *no*, or sometimes with a short clause or phrase, such as *I forgot*, which, in context, means *no*). Open questions, on the other hand, can generally be answered in a variety of ways, and also require much more extensive answers, often a sentence or more. Questions starting with a *wh*-word are sometimes classified as open questions because they generate longer answers, and because their answers more readily generate additional questions than do those to closed questions (e.g., *Why do you think the boy kicked the ball onto the roof?* to which an answer such as *because he wanted an excuse to climb up on the roof to get it back* would be expected, and could then lead on to another question, such as *How did his mum feel about that?*). However, a blanket categorisation of all *wh*-questions as 'open' is somewhat misleading, as many *wh*-questions act in a similar way to polar questions, in that they can be answered with one or a few words. For example, *Where did you go for the holidays?* may simply generate the answer *Esperance*. Or, to consider another example, *When did you read the school newsletter? Yesterday*. Such questions tend to shut down rather than stimulate conversation, because, once the answer has been given, there is little more to say on the topic. Some polar questions would be understood pragmatically by native

3. The *wh* words are *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *which*, *why*, and *how*.

speakers as requiring a more extended answer, not simply *yes* or *no*, but this understanding is not necessarily present in young children, and especially not in young children whose home language is not SAE. So, if one is trying to get someone talking, then the type of questions asked can be significant in terms of achieving that goal. There is, though, another consideration in relation to the use of closed versus open questions as a stimulus for talk, and that is the need of language learners to be supported or scaffolded as they develop competence in their new language. Consequently, the use of closed questions may be very useful in enabling a child to have sufficient confidence to give an answer, even if it is only one or two words, and from there to build to answering more complex questions.

A further issue to be considered when investigating the use of questions in the classroom context is the different role that questions play there from the use of questions in general social interaction. Teachers' questions are frequently direct and focussed, both in terms of the content being sought (the teacher already knows the answer) and the nomination of the student who is expected to provide the answer. The questions are used to monitor student knowledge and evaluate student performance (Malin, 1998; Mercer, 1992). Also, the pace of classroom questioning is frequently very rapid, with teachers expecting answers to questions within a second (Wood, 1992).

The foregoing outline presents the typical situation in mainstream classrooms, that is, classrooms governed by the norms of the dominant culture. And for children who come from a similar cultural background, the classroom experience will be (largely) congruent with their home experience. However, as was signalled earlier, this is not necessarily the reality for children from other cultural backgrounds, such as Indigenous children. Consequently, their interaction may be hindered rather than helped by the use of questions, or at least

by certain types of questions. There are several aspects of the typical mainstream classroom use of questions that may hinder, rather than help, the language development of Indigenous children. While questioning is a useful tool by which teachers can find out what students know (Malin, 1998), often the sociolinguistic conventions surrounding teachers' use of questions is very different from those which form part of the linguistic repertoire of Indigenous children. In Indigenous cultures, parents' questions typically focus on family relationships and spatial knowledge, whereas in non-Indigenous families the focus is 'more on matters associated with language, processes and facts' (Cataldi & Partington, 1998, p. 317). In Indigenous cultures, too, questions may be much more indirect than in non-Indigenous, and the focus is on the group, rather than singling out individuals to answer (Malcolm, 1998; West, 1994). These observations about questions have important implications when looking at classroom interaction in contexts where teachers are trying to help Indigenous children develop oral language skills to support written literacy in SAE.

The use of questions has been a strong focus in work on early literacy development over the past 25 years (e.g., see Clay, 1991; Tough, 1977). In classes where children have impaired language development as a result of conductive hearing loss, due to repeated episodes of otitis media, the issue of how teachers use questions becomes even more important. Children with conductive hearing loss need lots of opportunities to talk so that their oral language skills are developed, and providing answers to questions may assist that process. But questions also need to be used in ways that are culturally appropriate for the children concerned, so that the resultant interaction helps, rather than hinders, the children's language development.

This paper will consider several examples from three classrooms to investigate how the teachers used questions in lessons

whose purpose was to develop literate language skills. The paper will also consider how the use of questions in these contexts might help or hinder the involvement of Indigenous children. The interest in investigating this aspect of language use was stimulated by a small, exploratory case study, undertaken by the author, of one teacher's interaction with her Indigenous students (see Galloway, 2002). The study noted the potential of the teacher's use of *wh-* and polar questions in combination to stimulate student talk, but also the possibility of some types of questions inadvertently restricting opportunities for talk. It is of interest, therefore, to explore further the ways in which question forms are used by teachers and to consider how these may help or hinder the development of oral language skills, especially of Indigenous children.

### Participants

This paper will draw on data from lessons given by three teachers – Melissa (the teacher whose lesson was the focus in Galloway, 2002), Vanessa and Rachel – participating in a cross-sectoral research project investigating literacy teaching strategies used by teachers of Indigenous students with conductive hearing loss. The lessons from which the data come are ones oriented to developing in their students the types of oral language that underlay written literacy.

#### Melissa

Melissa is an early career teacher who teaches Year 2/3 at a school in an urban centre of Western Australia. All her students are Indigenous. Her first professional year was spent at a remote area school, whereas in this, her second professional year, her students are urbanised, and speak Aboriginal English as their first language [L1], with SAE as their second [L2]. The majority of students in her class attend school regularly.

The lesson from which these data are drawn was a whole class session, and part

of a unit of work focussing on self-esteem and positive identity. Melissa's aim was to have the children able to use the form *If I were a bird [an animal], I would like to be a(n)... because ....* Target forms were rehearsed orally first of all, and then the children wrote their sentences. During a post-lesson interview, Melissa commented that she tried to provide all her students with opportunities to talk and to make sure all of them had a turn at talking everyday, so that they did not withdraw into themselves. She described her class as keen to talk. For the section of the lesson sampled here, the children were seated on the floor with Melissa was standing at the front and writing their responses on the whiteboard.

#### Vanessa

Vanessa teaches Year 1 at a school in an urban area of Western Australia, where approximately 20-25% of the students are Indigenous. She has 8-10 years' teaching experience and has lived and worked mainly in regional centres in Western Australia. Her Indigenous students use Aboriginal English at home, with SAE being their L2. Most Indigenous students attend school regularly.

The lesson from which the data come was a small group session. The group comprised two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous students. Vanessa specifically selected these students to be part of the recording session, as they are children who would benefit from extra help with literacy skills. The text used by the group was an information book entitled *Hold on tight*, and, according to Vanessa, not the type of book that students in the group would normally choose to read. However, given the importance of children learning to read a variety of texts, she wanted her class to have experience of information books. Observation of the lesson suggested that the children thoroughly enjoyed reading this text. Vanessa selected the book because it included many animals with which the children were already familiar, so there was an existing knowledge base on which to build, as well as providing an

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4. All names used are pseudonyms.

opportunity to extend their knowledge about some animals new to them.

Vanessa described her focus for this lesson as developing the children's skills in comprehension and listening to questions. She said that she wanted the children to learn how to extract information from a text and to use a variety of clues to assist with predicting what a text will be about. The children in this small group do not come from home backgrounds that emphasise written literacy.

Rachel

Rachel teaches Year 1/2 students at a remote area school in Western Australia where Standard Australian English is an additional language for her students, all of whom are Indigenous. She has taught lower primary classes at the school for about six years. For most of the children their L1 is the Aboriginal language of the area, generally with Kriol or Aboriginal English their L2, and therefore the SAE of the classroom a third language. Students' attendance is irregular, with most averaging between 25 and 30 of a possible 50 days at school per term. Rachel describes the community in which the school is situated as being proud of its school, but education does not have a high priority, and the majority of the children come from homes where written literacy does not form part of their experience.

The lesson from which these data come was, by default, a small group lesson because only six (four Year 1, two Year 2) of the 18 students on the roll were present the day that the recording was made. Rachel's aim in the lesson, which is based on the book *Where the wild things are*, was to develop the use of descriptive words.

### The data

5. Kriol is a language, based on English, that is widely used by Aboriginal people in many parts of the Kimberley and the Northern Territory (Berry & Hudson, 1997).

The presentation of the data will commence with Melissa's class, as that served as the catalyst for looking further at teachers' use of questions to stimulate talk in classes with Indigenous students with conductive hearing loss. The utterances in each example have been numbered to assist discussion. Teacher utterances are labelled T, and student utterances indicated with S for the first student, S2 for the second student and so on, and SS when several students speak at once. Where a specific student is referred to, his/her name is given on first mention and thereafter indicated by the first letter of his/her name. Questions have been bolded for ease of identification.

Melissa's class

#### Example 1

- 1.1 T: Katrina!  
1.2 K: (inaudible)  
1.3 T: I can't hear you  
1.4 K: a 'chitty chitty'  
1.5 T: **a 'chitty chitty'?** [seeking clarification that she has heard correctly]  
1.6 S: that's a willy wagtail  
1.7 T: [writing on board] a willy wagtail  
1.8 **why?**  
1.9 K: (inaudible)  
1.10 T: because  
1.11 K: I (inaudible)  
1.12 T: I can't hear you  
1.13 come here  
[interruption to bring class closer to teacher]  
...  
1.14 T: willy wagtail  
1.15 K: I like 'em  
1.16 T: you like 'em  
1.17 **what?**  
1.18 **do you like 'em how they move their tails?** Shshsh [dancing noises]  
1.19 K: they dance

This exchange between Melissa and Katrina is an example of the type of exchange that is generally considered likely to stimulate student talk. First, Melissa's use of the questions *why?* in utterance 1.8, and *what?* (with the ellipsed [*What*] *do you like about them?*) in utterance 1.17 signals that more

information is required. Second, by commencing with relatively open *wh*-questions, even though she has to go on to prompt using a polar question, Melissa has indicated to Katrina, and incidentally to the rest of the group, the type of answer that is required and given an opportunity for a longer turn at talk.

On the other hand, at another stage in the lesson, as Example 2 illustrates, by using only polar questions (*do you remember...?*) and a *wh*-question that requires only a word, or a few words, in answer (*who remembers...?*), opportunities for interaction are restricted:

Example 2

- 2.1 S I wanna be a duck ...  
 2.2 T **who remembers seeing the duck at C K farm?**  
 2.3 **do you remember?**  
 2.4 S2 me  
 2.5 T **do you remember seeing the duck?**  
 2.6 **do you remember what colour the duck was?**  
 2.7 SS grey  
 2.8 white  
 2.9 green  
 2.10 white and with green feathers  
 2.11 T yeahhh  
 2.12 **do you remember-**  
 ... [break in interaction to deal with matters of classroom management]  
 2.13 S3 and he was shy  
 2.14 T he was very shy  
 2.15 **but do you remember the colour green?**  
 2.16 it was really pretty  
 2.17 **do you remember?**  
 2.18 S4 yep  
 2.19 (inaudible) sparkly  
 2.20 T it was sparkly

The issue here is not only the use of closed questions, as these can be supportive of interaction, as will be discussed later. Rather, the problem is more the way in which Melissa, in Example 2, uses closed questions to pursue her own agenda of getting the children to recall the colour of

the duck, but this test of memory does not appear to be related to the stated aims of the lesson, which included providing opportunities for student talk. Further, opportunities for student interaction have been closed down by the exclusive focus on this issue. The initiation by a student in utterance 2.13 of a related topic could have provided a starting point for an interesting and relevant student-centred discussion in the context of the language focus of the lesson, likewise in utterances 1.5-1.6.

Vanessa's class

Example 3 comes from early in Vanessa's lesson when the children are sitting with her on the mat, each with a copy of the book *Hold on tight* in front of them. She asks the children to tell her what they can see on the cover of the book that they will later be reading together (this questioning is part of the process of developing their skills of prediction). She uses closed *wh*-questions in this context, so the children have only to answer using one or two words. However, in contrast to the situation in Melissa's class, the use of closed questions early in the lesson serves to stimulate interaction as the lesson unfolds, rather than close it down. The Indigenous students in this class are Noreen and Laurie.

Example 3

- 3.1 T: **What can you see Brendon?**  
 3.2 S: Koala.  
 3.3 B: Koala.  
 3.4 T: Brendon can see a bear.  
 3.5 **What can you see Earl?**  
 3.6 E: Koala.  
 3.7 T: **Where's the koala?**  
 [E points to another animal in the picture]  
 3.8 E: It look like a koala.  
 3.9 T: It looks a bit like a koala doesn't it, with fur.  
 3.10 **And what can you see Laurie?**  
 [7 secs]  
 3.11 **What can you see on the book - on the front cover?**  
 [7 secs]  
 3.12 L: Crawling bear.  
 3.13 T: **A ...?**

- 3.14 L: Crawling bear.  
 3.15 T: Crawling bear. You can too.  
 3.16 It could be anything. **What can Noreen see?**  
 3.17 N: Um, [inaudible] the bear.  
 3.18 T: He is, isn't he. Crawling ...  
 3.19 S: [Inaudible]  
 3.20 T: **I wonder why do you think is he going to crawl up that tree?**  
 3.21 S: Miss T [inaudible]  
 3.22 T: **Why do you think Laurie? Why do you think he's trying to crawl up this tree?**  
 3.23 L: I don't know. Cause um [inaudible]  
 3.24 S: What is that called Miss?  
 3.25 T: Ssh, ssh. [inaudible]  
 3.26 L: ... honey and a bees hanging around it.  
 3.27 T: **Do you think some honey's up that tree?**  
 3.28 L: And bees hanging around it.

As the discussion of the book develops, the students become more confident and animated and increasingly initiate interactions and elaborate more when they talk. This is evident early in the lesson, as utterances 3.8, 3.12 and 3.24 suggest, but the confidence to talk and initiate becomes even more noticeable later in the lesson, as can be seen in Example 4, with six of the eight student utterances being self-initiated, rather than being given in response to a teacher question:

Example 4

- 4.1 T: **Can you see them holding on?**  
 [student nods]  
 4.2 S: There's two monkeys.  
 4.3 S: Sharp claws.  
 4.4 S: And I said that koala.  
 4.5 S: There's a monkey.  
 4.6 T: **What's this Noreen?**  
 [no response]  
 4.7 S: There's a monkey.  
 4.8 N: That poor little monkey sitting in a tree.  
 4.9 S: [Inaudible]  
 4.10 T: **Do you know?** [to N – no response] This is a wild sea horse ...  
 4.11 N: Sea horse.

- 4.12 T: ... that lives under the water and it's holding on [inaudible].

One of the aspects of Vanessa's questioning technique that seems to be assisting and supporting this development is the way she mixes closed questions (*what?* – utterances 3.1, 3.5 and 3.10-11; *where?* - utterance 3.7) with more open questions (*why?* - utterance 3.20), and then back to a closed question at utterance 3.27, and later on at utterances 4.1 and 4.6. By starting with closed questions, she provides an opportunity for students to contribute to the extent that they are able to and wish to, and so build confidence in speaking. While the amount of talk they do in answering the question *What can you see...?* is limited, the context in which the question is asked provides the students with some choice as to what they talk about, so they can choose to nominate an item they feel confident about naming, and do not have to 'read the teacher's mind' to be able to give the correct answer. This approach also seems to be a means by which Vanessa builds students' confidence in speaking and so they feel free to contribute further as the lesson proceeds.

Another aspect of Vanessa's questioning that serves to encourage student talk is the way she builds on each student's contribution in asking subsequent questions. This scaffolding is also valuable in supporting oral language development, as it extends students' skills by working from the familiar to the less familiar (utterances 3.12-3.28). A further aspect of scaffolding is seen in her mix of *wh*-questions (3.20 and 3.22) and polar questions (3.27) (cf, Melissa in Example 1, utterances 1.17 and 1.18), so that students have models of ways they can use language.

Rachel's class

Rachel's group also starts their lesson seated on a mat, close to her. She is seated near the storyboard, which has a copy of *Where the wild things are* on it. In the early stages of her lesson, Rachel follows a similar approach to Vanessa in asking the



students what they can see on the cover of the book they are to read together, and using closed questions. In the context of this lesson, the initial use of closed questions does not seem to inhibit interaction, as there is flexibility and scope in terms of response, as with Vanessa's lesson.

#### Example 5

5.1 T: Hand up and tell me **what you can see on the cover of this book?**

George.

5.2 G: [Inaudible].

5.3 T: A big giant, it does look like a giant.

5.4 S: Boat.

5.5 T: A boat, sailing on the water.

5.6 S: [Inaudible].

5.7 T: Ah, you've already read this book, oh. **What can you see** [inaudible]?

5.8 S: [Inaudible].

5.9 T: A little man driving the boat. You must have very good eyes, I can't [inaudible].

5.10 S: [Inaudible].

5.11 T: OK, **Loren, what can you see?**

5.12 L: A foot.

5.13 T: A big foot because the big monster has a big foot. [Inaudible]?

5.14 S: A river.

5.16 T: A river, yes, a river [inaudible] ocean.

Rachel then goes on to read the story, but occasionally pauses to ask a question of her class, and these questions are generally open questions, using *wh-* questions that require the children to make inferences. Example 6 provides several extracts from relevant sections of the lesson:

#### Example 6

6.1 T: *His mother called him wild thing and Max said I'll eat you up so he was sent to bed without eating anything.* **Why did his mum send him to bed**

**with no food?** [Inaudible]?

6.2 S: [Inaudible].

6.3 T: Because he was frightening [inaudible].

...

6.4 T: Hand up if you can tell me, **how did they know that Max is a king?**

Barry.

6.5 B: Because the monsters made him a king.

6.6 T: Because the monsters made him a king [inaudible]. And also he's got a crown [inaudible] his head. [student comments] **This thing here?**

6.7 S: A crown.

6.8 T: A crown – oh like in that gibbon tree book where he makes a crown out of wood. Alright

...

6.9 S: [inaudible]

6.10 T: **This is a girl one?**

6.11 S: No, a boy one [inaudible].

6.12 T: **Why do you think she's a girl, Neville? Why do you think that she's a**

**girl?**

6.13 N: Because he's jumping.

6.14 T: **Because he's jumping?** Maybe. Girls jump a lot. **Do you think it's a girl?**

6.15 S: Because he's got long hair.

6.16 T: Because he's got long hair, maybe. My husband's got long hair though and he's a boy.

As was evident with Vanessa's group also, the use of open questions stimulates longer responses from the children than closed questions do, and so provides opportunity for their responses to be followed up with further questions (e.g., utterances 6.10 and 6.14), thus extending the interaction. Rachel also builds on the children's responses and scaffolds their oral language by the frequent use of repetitions and expansions of the children's responses to questions (e.g., utterances 5.5, 5.13, 5.16, 6.6, 6.8, 6.14, and 6.16).

Later in the lesson, after she has finished reading the story, Rachel prepares the children through oral interaction for a follow-up written activity based on the story. She reverts to asking closed questions, presumably because of the nature of the information that she requires from them, namely descriptive words that can be used when talking about monsters

and wild things. Example 7 is an extract from that section of the lesson, where the children are looking at a picture of a wild thing that Rachel has drawn:

Example 7

7.1 T: **Can you tell me something about my wild thing?**

7.2 S: Good.

7.3 T: Someone said he was good, someone said he looked bad, someone said he had sharp teeth.

**Can you tell me something** [inaudible]?

7.4 S: [Inaudible].

7.5 T: He's got sharp horns. **Can I say pointy horns instead of**

**sharp horns?** [student nods] Pointy horns, good girl.

Pointy horns, horns [writing on board].

**Who else** [inaudible]? A [inaudible]?

7.6 A: Sharp nails.

7.7 T: Sharp nails, sharp nails for tearing [inaudible]. Sharp

nails. **Can anyone tell me about my wild thing's hair? What kind of hair has he got?** Loren.

7.8 L: Curls.

7.9 T: Curly hair, he's got curly hair on his head. Curly hair.

Although Rachel is using closed questions, and thereby potentially limiting talk, these questions in this context do not appear to be shutting down interaction. Rather, the use of closed questions serves to provide a structured opportunity to develop a particular aspect of language – the use of descriptive language, which is not an aspect of SAE with which the children are particularly familiar. Within the given structure, a range of answers may be given, and Rachel continues to use student answers as an opportunity to scaffold their language development as she repeats and expands students' responses (e.g., utterances 7.5, 7.7 and 7.9).

### Discussion

The data from literacy focus lessons given by these three teachers illustrate different ways they used closed and open questions

in contexts where one of the objectives is the development of literate oral language skills. As the data and comments have indicated, although teachers may use the same types of questions, some are more 'successful' than others in stimulating student interaction.

Closed questions have been used in all three classrooms, and in each case the students have responded with one or a few words only. In Vanessa's and Rachel's classrooms the data point to closed questions consistently being used to support language development by developing student confidence about speaking, especially when dealing with new material. Also teachers took up opportunities provided through student answers to build on to information that the students provided in their answers, and to use that information to develop interaction. At other times, Vanessa and Rachel used closed questions to enable students who could not manage to answer an open question to participate in the interaction and thus develop language skills. In Melissa's classroom, however, the pattern was less consistent. While there was evidence of her employing both open and closed questions in her lesson, there was only limited building on and expansion of student responses to closed questions. Further, where a closed question was deemed to require a specific answer (rather than one of a limited range of possibilities being acceptable), this served to further limit opportunities for student interaction and development of language skills. If this pattern of expecting a specific answer to a (closed) question, for no apparent real purpose, were to occur frequently in a classroom, children might well give up trying to participate in the interaction.

The foregoing comments reflect consideration of question use in these three classes from the perspective of the dominant culture. But another factor needs to be taken account of when considering the use of questions in these classrooms - the issue of the sociolinguistic conventions of school that surround the use of questions

probably being different from those of home for the Indigenous students. Despite the teachers' motivation for using questions being to help their students' language development, if teachers use questions in ways different from those with which students are familiar from their home environments, it may actually hinder rather than help interaction, and hence children's language development. This needs further consideration here.

There are a number of commonalities across all three lessons about the way that questions are used, as well as some differences. All three teachers employ 'display' questions (i.e., questions to which they already know the answers) to monitor student knowledge (cf, Malin, 1998). Such questions also serve to reinforce the teacher's control of the interaction, so their use has the potential to alienate students from the school environment generally, and specifically, in terms of the focus here, to hinder language development if the students do not feel comfortable about participating in such interactions because to do so is culturally alien to them. On the other hand, also common in these data are questions that genuinely seek information, that is, questions to which the teacher does *not* know the answer and that require information that only the student can provide. Thus, the control and domination in the interaction shifts from the teacher to the student, giving greater equality between interactants, a situation more akin to that familiar to most Indigenous children (West, 1994). Another feature common to all three lessons is some use of very direct questions and the nomination of particular students to answer questions, albeit sometimes as a result of a student bidding for a turn. Again, because this differs from the sociolinguistic conventions of Indigenous culture, it has the potential to act as a barrier to children's participation in classroom interaction (cf, Malcolm, 1998; West, 1994). However, there are also factors in these lessons that may be serving to mitigate to some extent the effect of the imposition of the classroom discourse style of the dominant culture.

One of the factors that may serve to mitigate the effect of the imposition of the classroom discourse style of the dominant culture is the rapport that the teachers have with their students, evidenced particularly in the non-verbal interaction observed during the lessons (such as students sitting close to the teacher, and pushing closer to be near her), but also through the verbal. There are comments and asides, especially in Melissa's class, suggesting the teachers have spent time getting to know their students and what they like. For example, at one point in her lesson, Melissa says in a very warm, humorous tone, in response to one student's comment that he would like to be a tiger cat, *Bet you do too!* which gives the impression, in context, that she has good knowledge of what the student enjoys, and knows the background to the significance of his choice of animal.

Another possible mitigating factor in these lessons is the way that the teachers speak to their students. Vanessa and Rachel both speak quite quietly, 'gently,' and relatively slowly to their groups. This is similar to the report of Hudspith (1994) about the interaction of Mrs Banks, a teacher of a class of Year 3-7 Indigenous students with learning and behaviour problems, who is loved and respected by students and parents alike. Hudspith quotes the mother of one of Mrs Banks' students who commented on the way Mrs Banks talked with her class by saying that she talked 'nice and kindly and real calmly...[speaking] very gently... not really loud' (p. 99).

A further mitigating factor is the amount of time that teachers wait for a student to give an answer ('wait time'). Both Vanessa and Rachel also allow more wait time for responses than would be the norm in a mainstream classroom. This is especially evident in Vanessa's class (Example 3, above, utterances 3.10 – 3.12) where she waits for approximately seven seconds for Laurie to answer before repeating her question, slightly rephrased, and then another wait of similar length before he

answers. Interestingly, all the other students, not just the other Indigenous students, remain quiet during that time too. The wait times in Rachel's lesson are also somewhat longer than might normally be experienced in mainstream classrooms. Allowing more time for a child to answer is consistent with Indigenous interaction styles, but there is also another function that it may serve in contexts where children whose L1 is not SAE. Children whose L1 is not SAE may need to translate mentally into their first language the message given in SAE, and then, having worked out what information is required, to reverse the process and translate their answer from L1 into SAE, as Hall (1992) reports in a case study of children's interactions with class mates from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Working through such a process takes time, and therefore some children may need longer wait time to prepare their responses to questions. If these students do not receive an appropriate amount of time in which to respond before the teacher answers his/her own question, or redirects the question to another person to answer, Indigenous students can appear not to know the answer when, in fact, they do but need more time to organise it for 'public' presentation. So, allowing more wait time is likely to promote interaction.

Finally, a further accommodation of Indigenous interaction styles is evidenced in the way Vanessa does not at first ask questions of Laurie or Noreen, the two Indigenous students. Rather, she waits until after the two non-Indigenous students have answered some questions, thus allowing the Indigenous students time to observe what happens before getting involved themselves. She also uses some more indirect question forms (e.g., Example 3, utterance 3.20 *I wonder why...*), before reverting to a more direct form (utterance 3.22 *Why do you think...?*) addressed specifically to Laurie. Her use of a *why* question introduces into the interactions a question requiring an inference, which is not the type of question that is generally part of Indigenous

sociolinguistic conventions, but she does allow extra wait time for a response (utterances 3.23 - 3.26), and then goes on to build on his answer.

Melissa, on the other hand, tends to speak somewhat more loudly and more quickly than the other two teachers do. This may partially reflect the fact that Melissa is working with a larger group - the whole class - but also the fact that she is a less experienced teacher. But although she spoke more quickly and the pace of her lesson was generally faster than those of Vanessa or Rachel, it was evident from observing the session, that she was monitoring students' readiness to answer, and gave extra time to students she judged to need it.

The foregoing focus on the way that the teachers in these three case studies used questions with their students also needs to be complemented with further consideration of the students' reactions. The teachers used a mix of the sociolinguistic conventions of the dominant culture of the classroom ('school ways'), and some conventions much more likely to be congruent with Indigenous sociolinguistic conventions ('home ways'). The students in each group seem to deal satisfactorily with the various types of questions used by their teachers and respond appropriately. This suggests that these students have been socialised into school ways by parents, other caregivers and/or teachers making explicit for them the differences between the sociolinguistic conventions of home and school, and that the children have been able to adapt to school ways. On the other hand, the apparent ability of the students to cope with school ways raises the issue of whether the students are really engaging and learning from the question-and-answer process, or whether they have simply learned to comply and 'play the game,' and are not really engaging in the learning that their teachers anticipated would arise from these sessions. Further, although there will be some interaction between teachers and students arising from question and answer

routines, the quality and quantity of the talk generated may not be as great or as useful as might arise from a different interactional context, one more compatible with the sociolinguistic conventions of the students' cultural backgrounds. If that is so, then the use of questions is a hindrance rather than a help, both to the students' language development, and in the longer term, to their attitude to school.

### **Conclusion**

The use of questions can be a very useful tool to stimulate oral language and develop content knowledge, but in classrooms that include children from cultural backgrounds different from that of the dominant culture there is the potential for unintended outcomes when questions are used in ways that differ from those the children are accustomed to in their home culture. This may be even more important in the case of Indigenous children with conductive hearing loss who are already at greater risk of lower achievement because of the consequences of impairment to their early oral language development as a result of their hearing loss.

Despite the attention already given to questioning in teacher education programs, the application of this skill may not be as successful as it might be in many classrooms, where interaction is inadvertently being curtailed rather than encouraged. For Indigenous students with conductive hearing loss the problem is exacerbated if they do not receive adequate opportunities to develop extended oral language skills, and if they feel their contribution is not valued. There is a need for further work on the way that questions are used by teachers so that teacher education programs can be informed by relevant data. It is also important that teachers' awareness of the potential of questions to stimulate or inhibit interaction be increased. And both pre-service and in-service teachers need to be supported in developing the sorts of interaction skills that will open up opportunities for talk, rather than close them down. There are several strategies that could be used to

develop these skills. One may be explicit discussion of data such as that on which this paper is based. Another may be encouraging teachers to tape lessons when they use a lot of questions, and later listen to and reflect on their practice, perhaps with the help of a mentor or other 'critical friend.' Finally, the opportunity to observe experienced, 'successful' practitioners in action is also likely to be helpful and valued by teachers. Whatever means are used, and a multi-faceted approach is probably the most useful, it is vital that teachers be able to use questions in a way that supports, rather than inhibits language development.

### **Notes**

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