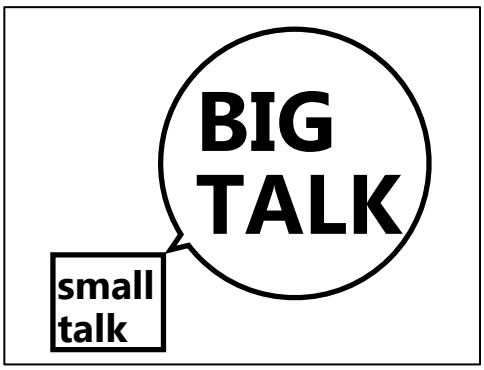
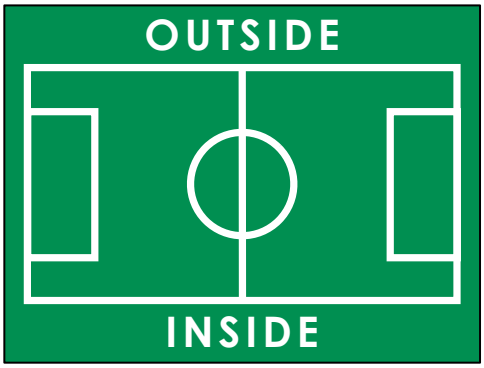
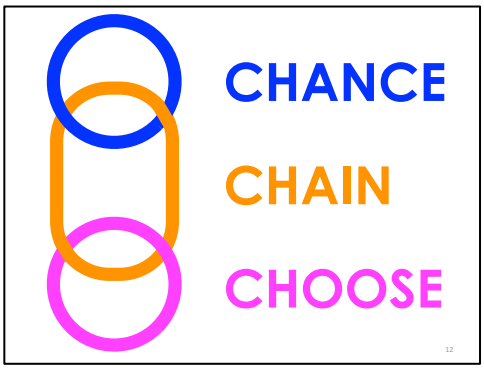


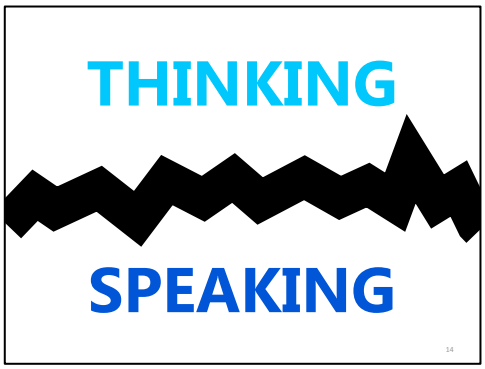
Help Me Find My Voice

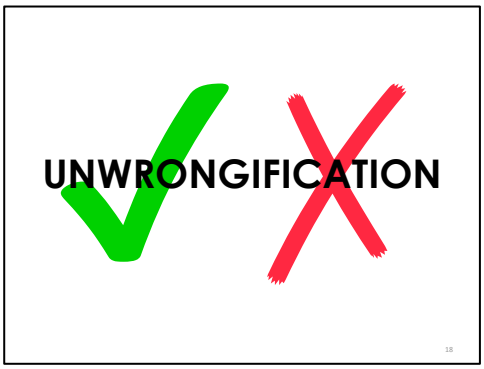
Seven Strategies To Get More Children Speaking More

Jason Buckley









Every class has “wallflower children”. Those who rarely get involved in a discussion, and so miss out on the learning and growth that speaking in front of others can bring.

Different wallflower children face different obstacles.

Some are fearful that other won’t listen.

Some want to speak, but not in front of 30 people.

Some don’t like having their opinions on display.

Some want to speak but are put off by classrooms or teachers.

Some want to speak but don’t want to be seen to want to.

Some are afraid of getting the wrong answer.

And some discover that playing the “I dunno” card gets you out of speaking.

The seven principles described in this e-book look at ways you can help deal with these obstacles. Sometimes, that’s by breaking the obstacle down. Sometimes it’s by throwing the child over the top and creating a soft landing on the other side!

The principles are illustrated by a variety of activities. But I emphasise the underlying principles because there’s no point in doing stuff but forgetting why you’re doing it. Please share other things you’re already doing that fit with these principles, and the new ideas they inspire.

Some children, such as stammerers, need specialist help (google “The Starfish Project”) that is beyond the scope of this guide. But for most children, these strategies should help you bring more voices into your classroom more often, and make talk more fun for everyone – including you.

Best wishes,

Jason

聽 Chinese Listening

The Chinese character for “listen” has five elements.

ear

you

eyes

undivided attention

heart

It’s worth eliciting from a class what they think makes for good listening, and mapping it onto these elements. A common complaint from schools where self-esteem is high is "Our children are very good at speaking. They have opinions about everything. But they're terrible at listening to each other."

To be a good listener, you have to become a follower. You have to stop moving in your own direction for a while and follow the thoughts of the person speaking as close as you can. And like any skill, a good way to practice listening/following is to play a game.

How to play The Following Game

It's best if the players are in a circle, but any format where they can see each other is OK. I start as "leader", making slow gestures which the "followers" copy.

I start with symmetrical gestures, spreading and raising my hands, and bringing them together. Then I move one up and the other down, and back again. The effect you're after is slow-mo martial arts/Tai Chi, with all your followers able to keep up.

Name a new leader

I explain as I move that I'm about to say someone's name, and that when I do, we swap and he becomes the leader. He carries on moving smoothly and everyone watches and follows what he does. After a few movements, he names somebody else as the new leader and joins in following him... and so on.

Followers have to be patient

In this game, everyone has to spend far longer following rather than leading, just as in a discussion everyone spends far longer listening than speaking.

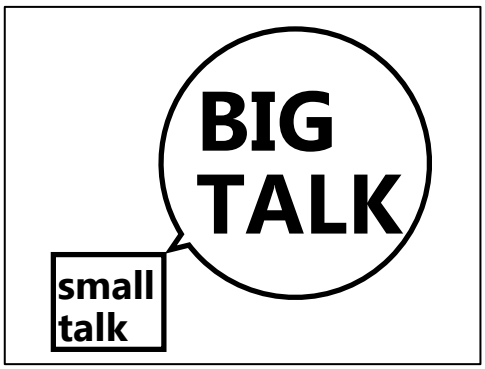
Listeners make a discussion, just as the followers make the game. Making following others fun and a team activity helps children to see listening as an active "doing" of its own. Work the Karate-style theme and finish with a bow, you'll double the benefits!

If you want to encourage good listening and also reinforce your control of a group, another excellent activity, from the outdoor tradition this time, is..

Fingertrap

Players stand in a circle around the facilitator. Each player holds his left arm out to the side, palm open and facing up. Then he places the middle finger of his right hand touching the palm of the player to his right, pointing straight down. When all the players are connected in a chain like this, you are ready to begin.

When the facilitator clicks his fingers (and not before) players simultaneously try to trap the finger of the player to their left by closing their hand, and avoid getting their finger trapped by the person to their right by pulling it away. Each player keeps his own score. Make a point of the absolute silence before you click your fingers.



When did you last have a meeting where the very first thing you spoke about was the subject of the meeting? Unless you are getting fired or firing someone, it almost never happens. If you launch into a meeting without some sort of preliminary small talk, you seem brusque and lacking the human touch.

Yet when we get children to work in groups, we don't usually leave any space for that small talk to take place. We assume that they are primed and ready to talk about what we want them to talk about.

But often, the small talk either intrudes anyway, or doesn't happen and therefore inhibits the purposeful "Big Talk" about the substantive subject that we want to follow.

Small Questions Before Big Questions

A good rule to follow when you want effective dialogue in the classroom is to get the children talking about an unimportant question before you get them talking about the main topic. Have them talk about nothing before talking about something.

It relaxes them, makes sure everyone is engaged, defines groups, makes sure they can hear each other, and breaks the ice for the serious talk that follows.

For example, use a game like Pointing at Stuff or a Philosopher's Cocktail Party with low-stake questions. Or have a brief warm-up question for your discussion, such as "Which is better, North Pole or South Pole?".

Small Talk Before Big Talk

To establish specific groups ask a trivial question which requires everyone in the group to speak in order to arrive at an answer.

How many legs do your pets have in total?
How many brothers and sisters have you got in total?
Whose birthdays are closest together?
Who has the youngest relative you know of?
Who dislikes Brussels sprouts the most?
Would you vote for two Sundays or two Saturdays?
Would you vote for no TV or no internet?

Small Groups Before Big Groups

For some children, the larger a group the more intimidating it is to speak. Sustaining the same activity in groups that merge together, building towards a whole class discussion, is very effective. It raises the stakes gradually, so that there is no "panic point" at which a shy child suddenly becomes self-conscious.

For example, use Ping-Pong Proverbs in pairs, then fours, then eights, then a whole class.

Whatever you use to start small, keep it crisp and short, and then tackle your main subject with greater energy, purpose and group identity.

Why it's not enough to get children thinking for themselves

In philosophy for children, we take pride in getting children thinking for themselves, celebrating their diverse opinions. The first response we usually invite to any question is, "What do you think about that?"

But perhaps that question should come later

One of the characteristics of good analytical thinking is a willingness to suspend judgement until all the evidence has been considered. Yet we often rush children into expressing an opinion about questions they may never have considered before. Not having an opinion can come across as reluctance to participate or a lack of engagement. But it can also be a perfectly reasonable position. Until you've heard a spread of opinions and the reasons for them, you may well not know what you think.

So try starting with "who" instead of "you"

Get half the class to argue for someone who thinks "blah", and the other half to argue that "rhubarb". To use the same example I use in training, take the question "Which is the more important ingredient in being a good person? Following the rules, or trying to make people happy?"

If you ask, "What do you think?" to that question, you tend to get a substantial majority on the side of "make people happy". The importance of rules doesn't get a fair hearing, and it's likely that many participants will just be following the crowd.

Instead, split the class in two, ask the question, and then get one side to "think of the reasons somebody would have **who** thinks making people happy was the most important ingredient" and the other side to do likewise for someone "who thinks following the rule is more important". Split the class, ask the question, and assign roles in that order, or it gets confusing.

Then hear reasons from both sides, with the children staying in role as someone **who** thinks blah or rhubarb. Of course, it helps if you are playing a physical Thinkers' Game such as the Dividing Line so that the two sides are squared up against each other.

Only now, ask "what do you think?"

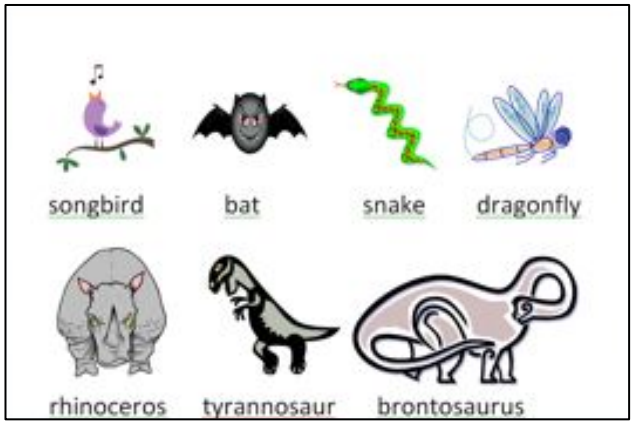
They now have more evidence and reasoning to go on. So when you switch from "who" to "you", you get more considered opinions. And there are other benefits to getting them thinking for other people before they think for themselves.

It adds importance to listening. Children are more likely to quote one another's "who" utterances as reasons for their "you" positions.

It draws on the imagination. Children can go into character.

It encourages empathy. By looking for the best reasons someone might have for a point of view that isn't necessarily your own, you come to understand other better.

It provides a "distancing technique". Particularly helpful to allow people to voice opinions about sensitive or controversial topics, and to help risk-averse children feel they are not putting their own opinions up for criticism.



Or go from "you" to "who" with a brainstand

Get people to show what they think first, by standing on one side or the other, or any of the other ways of committing physically shown in Thinkers' Games. Facilitate a discussion, and then get everyone to do a "Brainstand", swapping sides and arguing the opposite.

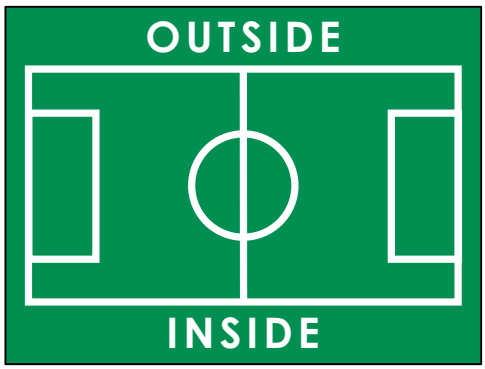
Would You Rather/Ark Factor

A good example to use if you are passing this on to colleagues, or as a confidence-builder with classes of any age, is to run the Cocktail Party activity, "Would You Rather Be a Bee or a Chicken?" Click the picture right to access it. It's a set of several sheets of pictures of various animals. Chop them up so that each person has an animal.

First, run it as suggested in those instructions. People pair up and say which creature they would rather be and why, then swapping cards and swapping partners. Then, change the activity to the following scenario.

Noah's Ark is about to depart. There is only enough room left for one more pair of animals. Pair up and take it in turns to make the case for why you and Mrs Tiger, or whoever you are, should have last places.

Afterwards, you can ask how the second activity felt different. The "pretending" aspect usually makes people rather freer, and they give longer responses.



Michael is holding court in a small group discussion. You can see that he's the dominant figure in the group, because the others have arranged themselves around him. The talk bounces back and forth between Michael and the others. He's enjoying being the centre of attention and has plenty to say.

So why doesn't he say anything inside your classroom?

Out on the playground, his natural habitat, he's a storyteller, joker, organiser of games. Inside the classroom, he speaks only when he has to, and then makes sure he says as little as possible, quietly and with a shrug that says "I don't know, why are you asking me?"

Let's peer out through the classroom window to do some surveillance on Michael and his friends.

Observation 1: They're standing up

Most of children's social talk takes place standing up, on the move. Even in secondary schools, it's only in the sixth form common room that pupils begin to socialise while leaning back in comfortable chairs. At lunchtime, the moment kids have finished eating, they're back to the playground which is where the social scene happens, standing up and moving about.

The activities in Thinkers' Games are the fullest extension of this. But even in a cramped classroom, just getting everyone to stand up and having the first and third rows turn round to speak to the person behind them will bring a bit of playground energy into the classroom.

Or have a "doubles match" discussion bringing four people together across a table. The voices are louder, the turn taking goes faster and there is more commitment and energy just from standing up.

Looking back at my language lessons at school, I don't recall ever standing up to hold a conversation, wherever the conversation was set. It was as though French could only be spoken sitting down.

Observation 2: They're in small groups

The only time thirty children stand in a ring outside the classroom is when there's a fight in the middle of it. Children in the playground cluster in groups of 3 to 8 most of the time. Larger groups tend to split into subgroups.

Children are more confident in a small group. The stakes are lower and more children are empowered to speak. There are also far more opportunities to speak. Using smaller groups when possible increases the amount of time each child can be talking. "Stage time", even in a small group, moves children's fluency and confidence on faster than anything else.

Yet we tend to see small groups as a preliminary for the main event of whole class discussion, and often squander that in tedious "reporting back" of what has already been said. That has the unintended effect of devaluing the talk that goes on in the group, in the same way that "best work" devalues the process and provisionality of creativity in favour of a finished, presented artefact.

And of course, in a small group, as on the playground…

Observation 3: You're not there

Some children engage more when an adult is present because they are hungry for praise. But for others, the presence of a teacher raises the stakes too high and they shut down. They feel that what they say is going to be evaluated, marked as right or wrong. Rather than risk getting it wrong and being seen as stupid, or getting it right and being seen as a swot, they prefer not to act as if they didn't get it at all and be seen as not being bothered.

You can't remove yourself from your own classroom. But you can take steps to withdraw a little when a whole class discussion is in progress. Using a Philosophy Circle or Parliament Format already make your physical position less dominant.

Whether you can move the furniture to make for a more democratic space or not, a key move is to redirect the gaze of the pupils from you to one another, by getting each speaker to choose the next. This is enhanced further by using a conch, which acts as a physical focus that isn't you.

Standing outside the circle, moving your chair back, sitting down while they stand are other ways that help get you out of the picture and contribute to something else you see in playground talk...

Observation 4: They're relaxed

There's a lot of smiling and laughter. They're uninhibited and honest with each other. They can disagree with each other forcefully while (usually) being good humoured about it.

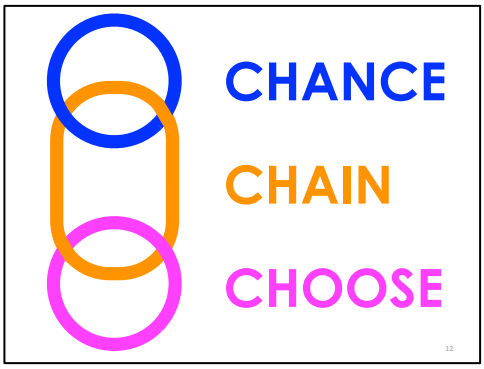
You can't create the conditions of only being with their chosen friends, and only ever talking about the subjects they already know about. But you can relax them in other ways. You can use Small Talk Before Big Talk, using low-stakes, trivial but fun questions to get them warmed up. You can plan in very short activities that tend to create smiles or laughter or just add to the energy.

Activities are better than jokes because: 1) even if your joke is funny, children are strictly bound by a code of honour not to admit it and 2) you can use the same activity more than once. Pointing at Stuff has endless variations. Using familiar games so that you don't need to repeat instructions also makes it the children's game rather than yours.

After bringing the outside in, take the inside out

After you've put into action some of these strategies, and playground Michael is starting to make appearances indoors, it's time to take the classroom into his natural habitat. Take the class outside for discussion activities, piggybacking on as many features of playground life as you can – teams, chalk circles on the floor for "bases", somebody counting down to when they have to be ready.

When you've done that a few times, take advantage of a rainy day to bring those very same routines back indoors. With your skill and patience, playground Michael will come too.



"To him that hath, more shall be given; and from him that hath not, the little he hath shall be taken away"

Shelley's version of this biblical quote often appears in discussions of rising inequality. It seems an unfair way to distribute something that is in short supply.

Yet the main way classroom discussions operate follows exactly that principle. Confident speakers are made, not born, and there is no substitute for airtime in the development of speaking skill. Whole class airtime is scarce – probably 5-10 minutes per child per week.

Those who choose to speak, by putting their hands up, are the main participants in a discussion. That means that those who have already had enough airtime to become confident speakers get more and more practice at speaking in front of a whole class. Those who aren't already pushing themselves forward are happy to cede the airtime they desperately need, and fall further and further behind in their oracy skills.

Of course, that's not what teachers want to happen. And most of us will call on some conscripts who don't have their hands up to add to the volunteers, getting a wider range of children to contribute.

But that creates resentment and fatigue

Why are you asking me when Lucy has her hand up? Why are you asking Fred, who doesn't want to speak, when I do? Why endure a series of "I dunnos" and "I'm not sures" when there are half a dozen children keen to answer?

It's quite difficult to sustain a mixture of choose and chosen because those who haven't volunteered to speak tend to feel they have not just been picked but picked on. And there are also children who would like to contribute more, but don't have social permission from their friends to be seen to be keen.

So they are obliged to hang back and sound aggrieved when called upon to speak. The expectation of the class is that you'll get fed up with the poor quality of the answers you get, and will go back to "hands up". So to convince them you mean business, you need a major and permanent shift that turns the usual order of things on its head.

Chance, Chain, Choose

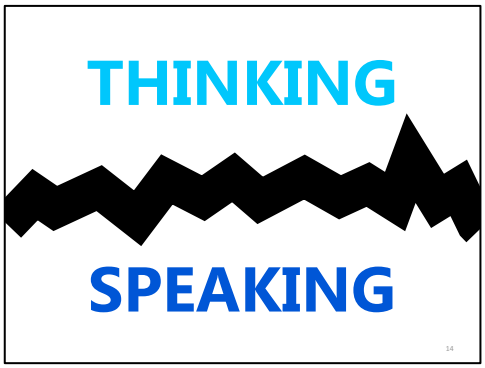
Make the first person to speak in a whole class discussion the outcome of chance. Lolly sticks with names, playing cards, randomisers – anything that provides the indisputable fairness of pure CHANCE.

The first speaker chooses the next, who chooses the next and so on in a CHAIN. They can use names, pass a conch, point. Crucially, no hands up at this stage, and priority given to those who haven't spoken yet in the lesson. This allows the obvious points to be made by some of the more reluctant speakers.

Only then switch briefly to hands-up to allow a few of those who CHOOSE to speak to do so. That allows the most able students or those with an unusual angle on the question to enrich the discussion.

Multiple chains

I like to use Russian dolls (robots or ninjas, usually), and after I've established the chain principle with a whole group, have several small groups pass the smaller dolls back and forth. It gives more children the chance to speak.



We've reached the trickiest cases one the edges of who you can help without specialist intervention. Those children who at some point in their careers, have discovered a pair of magic words that stop teachers pestering them.

"Idunno"

There is something quite unchallengeable about "I dunno". It takes its strength from the bald truth that each of us has a mind of his own. You might know (and care about it) but I don't. And you can't make me know something.

Of course, sometimes children don't know, and the previous strategy is about encouraging people to share their thinking even when it hasn't reached a definite outcome. But if a child resolutely maintains that he has nothing to say, even about his thinking in progress, you have one further trick up your sleeve to bring his voice into the discussion.

That's to separate having something to say from saying it.

A simple technique to use is "spokespeople". Ask who has a contribution to make, then get them to tell it to someone who hasn't. Their listener then becomes a "spokesperson" and shares their thought with the group.

Hot potato

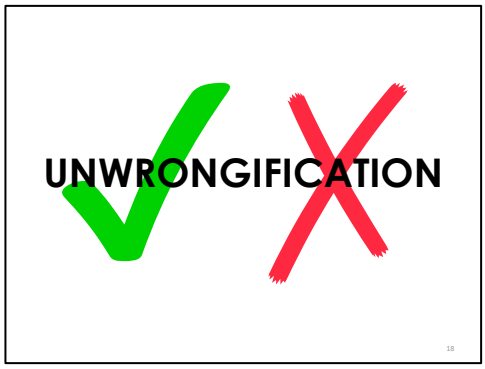
Get groups of four to stack up their fists after talking, and then hear back from "the top potatoes" or "second potato up", or give them the task of sharing their thinking with another group.

Or you can shift who is making the effort and appoint your reluctant speakers as a…

Roving Reporter

giving them the job of gathering the opinions of a group, and the reporting it back.

Either way, you've forced those words "I dunno" to lose their magic



Many children are held back from speaking by a fear of getting the answer wrong and looking stupid. There can be a perverse hierarchy, which from top to bottom runs:

not speaking at all (cool)

speaking without effort and getting it wrong (rebel)

speaking without effort but getting it right (winner)

speaking with effort and getting it right (swot)

speaking with effort but getting it wrong (loser)

There are several strategies you can adopt to "unwrongify" the answer, so that nobody gets marked out as a loser.

Start with the ridiculous

If you begin with things that it is really impossible to get wrong, and that are silly, you create a bold, playful atmosphere where people are more willing to take risks. Have everyone point at things and saying what they are not, or walk round saying out loud sums that don't add up "1+13 is 1032. 6x4 is a fish. 173/my aunt is 3 apples" etc.

Quarrelsome questions

Much as I rail against the blanket assumption that "in philosophy there are no right or wrong answers", there's no denying that this idea is a big selling point for both teachers and pupils. Questions where children don't feel they will get caught out and shown to be wrong have a powerful appeal, whether it's low-stake "would you rather" questions or more open enquiries such as, "What does it mean to be a good person?"

They are very liberating for children who have not been successful at playing "snap" with the answer teacher already has in her head. We'll look at question creating in more detail in The Questionarium. Suffice it to note here that in many subjects, you need to ask questions that aren't in the least bit quarrelsome, in maths for example. There's one correct answer, and that's that.

So how do you get children over the fear of being wrong when there's no doubt they can be? Fortunately, whatever the question, there's a way of reframing it so that it's difficult for anyone to get the answer wrong. After you've asked your question, direct it to a particular individual with the words:

"What's your thinking?"

Then you are asking them, not about the subject matter, on which they might be right or wrong, but about the contents of their own mind, on which they are the expert.

They are reporting, rather than justifying. And that invites people to share more provisional thinking, so that speaking is not just the presentation of "best thoughts" but a window into thinking in progress.

The ultimate goal in shifting the emphasis from the outcome to the process of thinking is a transformation in people's attitude towards mistakes. In a classroom where the object of speaking is to give the correct answer, mistakes are for losers. In a classroom where speaking is about sharing thinking and making it better, mistakes are valuable and to be appreciated.

Celebrate Mistakiness

Set up tasks where the group's eventual success depends on people going through a series of mistakes and correcting them. Riddles and puzzles are ideal, because all the wrong guesses eliminate possibilities. Every mistake has a share in the victory when the riddle is finally solved.

First, none at all.
Big and short when you are
small. Long and small as you
grow tall. Big and long as old age
falls.
Last, none at all.

Fingers Crossed

The best single idea for this principle comes from someone else – Anna Jordan of Derby High School for Girls.

She wanted to encourage her girls to take more risks with their answers and be more willing to contribute to a discussion even when they weren't sure of the answer.

So she devised the signal of hands-up with crossed fingers to indicate "I'm taking a responsible risk" – I'm not sure, but I'm going to have a go.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the point of answering a question in class was not to show what you knew, but to learn something new?