

Action Research Project

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RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent can ‘informed’ class debate increase a student’s confidence in preparation for a transactional writing task?

BACKGROUND

The English Language 9-1 GCSE is an exam-based course with highly differentiated assessment criteria. Although it is ‘Language’ rather than ‘Literature’ it requires students to analyse fiction and non-fiction literary texts according to their narrative qualities, devices and potential effects. The texts are far from being vehicles for literacy skills. Spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax are examined in question 5, the question with the highest mark weighting on each paper, but only alongside creative and persuasive ideas and techniques. Spoken Language skills, previously a core element of assessment, are now relegated to a mandatory five-minute talk with no mark weighting at all.

I teach students re-sitting this exam after failing it for the first time at school/college, or students who have only previously completed Level 1 Functional Skills English. Most of the students I teach struggle with basic literacy, do not read outside the classroom and struggle still more with the demands of literary critical analysis and its concomitant terminology.

Recent commentators have called for the scrapping of obligatory English (and Maths) re-sits and have recommended they be replaced by tests of literacy. This includes the ‘Passport in English’ as suggested by the ASCL in its recently released report on the ‘Forgotten Third’ of students that leave school without achieving a pass at GCSE English.

The Passport should be criterion referenced, comprising online assessment, a portfolio of a student’s writing and a significant oracy component. (ASCL, 2019, p7)

I was struck when reading the report by the focus on the importance of ‘oracy’. This has been an area that I have been keen to investigate for some time.

Because of FE re-sit students’ lack of confidence and motivation in relation to their written skills, I have often used class discussion as a means of garnering engagement and ‘buy-in’ from those students. Other than increasing engagement, I saw class discussion as a way of improving teacher-student and student-student relationships and hence class cohesion. On reflection, this was also an extension of my PhD work on peer learning and the interest I had developed in the power of conversation (both semi-structured and informal) to develop knowledge, motivation and a sense of practice identity. (Wakefield, 2013)

I realised increasingly that within the FE context, it might be helpful to impose some clear boundaries on discussion. Low-level disruption was frequent and the same students often lacked the confidence to participate, or they dominated group talks. Perhaps, given clear parameters, students would be feel permitted to contribute? I felt I needed to give individuals a role in order to hear their voices. I

experimented with the 'Socratic Talk' method with one class as a means to explore critical evaluation skills in relation to a fiction text (Hanson, L, 2016). In one exercise, the teacher-blogger 'Mr. Hanson' had given some of his students clear statements to respond to and nominated others to be note-taking observers. However, when I tried this, some of my students did not understand my statements and the 'observers' did not take notes.

Nevertheless, I was emboldened by the experiment and decided to try a more traditional debate structure for teaching related to Paper 2, Question 5, the transactional writing question. This question requires students to write a letter, speech, article, leaflet text or essay in response to statement designed to provoke. The weighting of the question is worth 50% of the entire paper and it is the students' opportunity to showcase their persuasive language skills and to structure a cogent argument on a specific theme.

AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

An action research approach is ideal for such an investigation for a number of reasons:

BENEFICIAL

At the heart of my investigation was this problem: the lack of confidence I had perceived in students in their ability to formulate and structure a piece of persuasive transactional writing in preparation for their GCSE exam. The secondary problem was mine: how could I best help students' confidence to grow so they could achieve their aims? My research process itself, quite apart from its conclusions, could benefit both participants and researcher alike.

INTEGRATED

Action Research is characteristically conducted "as part of a teacher's normal daily practice" (PLLDD, 2010, p2). This research could be integrated into my weekly teaching routine and rather than disrupt my students' curriculum, would contribute to it.

FOCUSSED

Action research would enable me to clarify my focus for a short period in a specific area, rather than thinking of all of the complex demands of teaching, learning and assessment. Ulvik et al (2018) link this focus to the development of prioritisation skills in the student teacher:

(...) action research gives student teachers an opportunity to move from working on everything at the same time to concentrating on one aspect of the practice that they can influence. Student teachers learn to choose challenges and solve them in their own way. They learn to make decisions and to prioritise (Kosnik and Beck 2000). (Ulvik, M et al., 2018, p. 276-277)

ACTIVE AND FLEXIBLE

As I know from lesson planning, in education, a plan is merely a helpful skeleton on which to hang a lesson structure. Within this, it is necessary to adapt approaches, differentiate resources and change pace according to the diverse student cohorts I work with every week. Similarly, action research would allow for internal flexibility and continuous adaptation during a research period leading to open-ended 'conclusions' that could be potential springboards for more research, sometime called the 'Action Research Cycle'.

CRITICAL

Finally, I chose to focus my research on an area of learning that, I believed, was not currently sufficiently valued by education policy-makers. By constructing spaces for debate in the classroom I was engaging with a ‘critical action research’ approach, of which, “the aims are emancipation and generating change.” (Ulvik, M et al., 2018, p. 275). The status of oracy on the classroom, as well as the lack of articulacy about climate change of many marginalised young people, were issues I also hoped to highlight in microcosm.

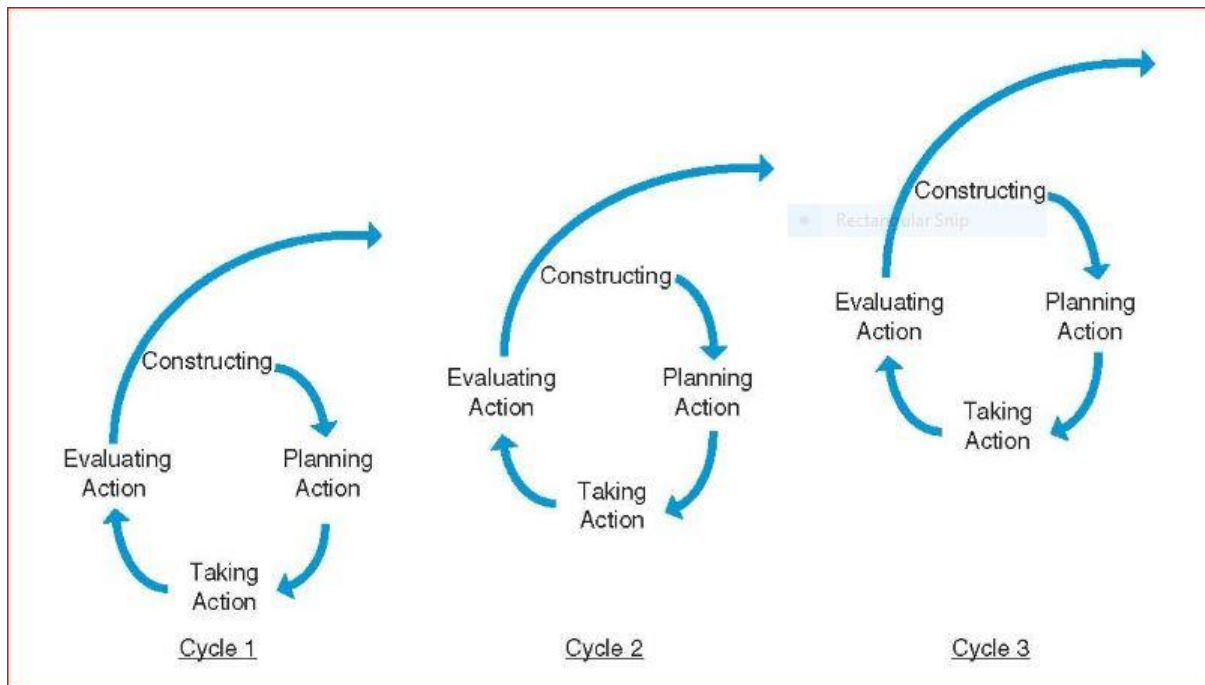


Fig: Spiral of Action Research Cycles (Coghlan, D & Brannick, T, 2019)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oracy can be defined as the development of children’s capacity to use speech to express their thoughts and communicate with others in education and in life, and talk through which teaching and learning is mediated. (Millard, W and Menzies, L, 2016, p72)

The literature on oracy in English teaching is extensive and I have chosen here to focus on the recent moment in contemporary education policy where classroom talk is increasingly in the limelight. This attention seems to have arisen from a perceived lack, within the current National Curriculum, to give oracy its due. In its 2016 research, the organisation, *Voice 21*, which promotes oracy in education, found that:

In general schools do little to support and extend opportunities for oracy, with a minority doing more than asking pupils to present occasionally in assemblies. Few schools evaluate the quality of pupils’ verbal contributions in lessons or communicate with parents about their children’s oracy. (Millard, W and Menzies, L, 2016, p72)

Back in 2012, Robin Alexander told the DfE seminar on oracy that, “talk can be an effective means of re-engaging the disengaged and closing the overlapping gaps of equity and attainment.”(Alexander, 2012, p3) His wide-ranging paper emphasised the need for teacher ability and confidence to develop oracy skills in a structured highly intentional way. He traced how the Bullock Report in the 1970s

and the Cox and Kingman reports in the '80s all argued for a greater development of the teacher's own 'knowledge about language' so that they can articulate this clearly to students, thus modelling good oral skills. (Alexander, 2012). He referenced a 2006 report by Jim Rose that linked early reading with the verbal teaching of phonics and argued that talk is not only the basis of literacy, but of all pedagogy.

Around the same time in Australia, Nikki Arnott was highlighting how older children and teenagers often become more self-conscious and reluctant to speak in class than their younger counterparts:

One of the main problems I encounter in my senior English classes is the reticence of students. Many are either not confident enough in themselves to contribute to class discussion, or simply do not feel they have the vocabulary to communicate their ideas clearly. (Arnott, N, 2013, p14)

She outlined a series of strategies she had used to increase oracy in the classroom, including open-ended questions, focussed thematic discussion sessions, making verbal inferences from a text thereby modelling how prior knowledge can connect to new information and peer teaching. She is a keen advocate of intentional dialogic activities within lessons to build critical thinking skills.

The abstract for Debbie Newman's recent book, *The Noisy Classroom: Developing Debate and Critical Oracy in Schools* (2019), makes this link between oracy and critical thinking, but also, significantly, links back to social justice.

Critical oracy is talk which involves engaging with people, ideas and the outside world, as opposed to performance oracy which might be delivering a pre-written speech, taking a scripted role in a play or reciting poetry. The profile of oracy in schools is increasing and more evidence is being gathered about its importance both in relation to academic attainment and also as a driver of social mobility. At the same time, studies are showing that teachers feel unsupported in using oracy in the classroom. (Newman, D, 2019)

Newman's volume fulfils an important niche, as the new Ofsted inspection framework (EIF) makes an attempt to address gaps in social mobility by way of the curriculum. Many low-income students may not have the confidence or verbal dexterity to perform as well in university and job interviews as their more advantaged peers. Newman offers practical advice for bringing in intentional dialogic encounters to every subject.

Overall, I have found no research that examines the use of debate within the 'reformed' 9-1 English Language GCSE, specifically for re-sit students. The GCSE has a Spoken Language component, comprising a formal presentation, but these skills in terms of mandatory assessment objectives are not otherwise formally integrated with the day to day delivery of the curriculum.

PLAN AND METHODOLOGY

I used a mixed-methods approach. The primary methods were:

- The setting up of five debates, across five classes (46 participants). Each debate was preceded by approximately 45 minutes context-specific teaching involving multi-modal methods. I was both participant and observer in the research process.
- The collection of self-reported quantitative and qualitative¹ data from a questionnaire, completed in two sessions during the research period.

¹ Very few participants made comments in the sections for qualitative data, so I have chosen to discount this element of the research.

- My own field notes based on observations of the process noted down in two sessions during the week, outside of the main research period.

My role as Participant-Observer: As a participant-observer I accepted that I would both take part in the research and affect the results. It would be difficult, for example, to prove that students were not gauging their confidence on the questionnaire in a way that would please me as their teacher. For this reason, I emphasised the anonymity of the results.

Debate Topic: Climate Change

I decided to carry out all of my fieldwork within one week. I chose five classes to work with, each of which had two lessons per week with me. I needed a topic for debate that would engage the students, but also one that was relevant to their lives. I decided on Climate Change for a number of reasons. Firstly, I am keen environmentalist myself and had been sometimes saddened by the ignorance of many of my students about the climate crisis. Although I was aware that many young people were taking part in the School Strikes for Climate movement, nothing comparable had seemed to galvanise students in FE. I wondered to what extent this lack of engagement was related to the fact that many are from low-income backgrounds and were less likely to discuss politics in domestic, social or academic spheres. Given this starting point, I was also aware that to ask students to debate from such a sparse starting point was unproductive and that some topic grounding and student research could be incorporated into the process.

Secondly, the research was carried out in Autumn 2019, a particular moment during which climate change appeared increasingly on the national and international news agenda and was beginning to be regarded as a phenomenon that would, at some point, affect everybody. March and May 2019 saw global student climate strikes. Protest group, Extinction Rebellion had been a visible presence in London throughout the Summer. Deforestation picked up pace in the Amazon, while bushfires took hold in Australia. Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg attended the UN Global Climate Action summit in September, crossing the Atlantic on a racing yacht. In November, all the main political parties (bar the Conservatives) were represented at pre-election Channel 4 Climate Debate and the leadup to COP25 in Madrid in December was underway. I was hopeful that students would be aware of at least some of these developments.

Research Process, Informed Consent and Confidentiality

I split the topic and research over two lessons for each class, carrying out each debate in the second lesson. I had gained permission to proceed from my manager a few weeks earlier and spoken to students about my intention the previous week. In the first of the two lessons this week I informed them once more about my planned research and my interest in debate as a learning tool. I let them know that they were free to participate or not, as they saw fit and that all participants would remain anonymous. All students chose to participate.

Climate Change: Context-setting

In lesson 1, I presented the overall theme through images, so that students had a chance to articulate any prior knowledge and learn from one another. I introduced them to factual information and ideas in the form of a short animation and a speech from Greta Thunberg (Davos, 2018). A persuasive language bingo game required them to spot language techniques used by Thunberg in her speech. In this way, I tried to establish the meanings behind some relevant terminology, such as 'carbon footprint' or 'carbon budget'. Students learned new vocabulary like 'glacier'. They learned what IPCC stood for and what climate modellers had predicted for a 2 or 3 degree rise in global mean temperature.

Climate Change: Student-led research

It is more appropriate to call these sessions an ‘informed debates’, than debates per se. In my decision not to set up student debates ‘cold’, but to prepare students with a range of materials, I was very much influenced by Daniel Willingham’s writing and research. This pairing of resources, self-directed research and debate presented problems at the stage of data analysis, as will be seen. However, I shared Willingham’s belief that critical thinking is predicated on a need for factual knowledge and that without factual knowledge, participation and engagement from students would be minimal.

You can teach students maxims about how they ought to think, but without background knowledge and practice, they probably will not be able to implement the advice they memorize. Just as it makes no sense to try to teach factual content without giving students opportunities to practice using it, it also makes no sense to try to teach critical thinking devoid of factual content. (Willingham, D, 2007, p8)

The Questionnaire (SEE APPENDIX – after Bibliography)

Towards the end of lesson 1, I asked students to consider a sample exam-style question on climate change. They completed the first part of a form, marking on a confidence gauge a number between 1 and 10 that reflected their confidence in answering this question at that moment:

I then allocated all students a clear position on the statement, either FOR or AGAINST. For the remaining half hour of the lesson we went to the ‘Open Access’ computer suite where I asked students to research facts, opinions and statistics to support their position.

In lesson 2, after a brief re-cap, students returned to the computer suite for half an hour to complete their research.

Climate Change: Class debate

The debate lasted 20-25 minutes. I introduced the statement: “There is absolutely no point in doing anything about climate change”.

I then asked individuals from the ‘for’ camp to respond. Following this I asked the ‘against’ camp to respond. The ‘for’ camp was given a further chance at rebuttal, followed once more by the ‘against’ camp. I summed up the debate.

Finally, students were asked to complete the form they had started the previous lesson. They self-reported their level of confidence in answering the exam-style question after the debate and research session. They also completed questions asking about how helpful they rated the debate itself, and resources from the previous lesson such as the video clips, text of the Thunberg speech, their own research/prior knowledge. I asked students to comment on what else might helped them and what they may still find difficult.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

	Self-reported confidence BEFORE debate and research	Self-reported confidence AFTER debate and research	Difference	How helpful was DEBATE?	How helpful were VIDEO CLIPS?	How helpful was TEXT EXTRACT?	How helpful was STUDENT-LED RESEARCH/PRIOR KNOWLEDGE?
Mean	4.8	7.0	2.2	6.8	4.0	5.4	7.1
Standard deviation	2.1	2.2	2.6	2.1	3.5	3.1	2.6
Min score	0	2	-4	2	0	0	0
Max score	9	10	9	10	10	10	10

Fig: Table showing average confidence increase before and after student-led research and debate to answer exam-style persuasive language question. Table also shows self-reported assessment of helpfulness of various resources used. The mean score of 46 pupils before was 4.8 and after was 7.0. The mean difference was 2.2 ± 2.6 , which was highly significant (paired-t test $T = 1.68$, $p < 0.001$).

Data Analysis

After collating all 46 results, I found that the mean score of confidence in answering the exam-style question of 46 pupils before the research and debate was 4.8. Immediately after the research and debate the mean score was 7.0. The mean difference between scores was 2.2 ± 2.6 . I received help from Dr Ewan Wakefield to carry out a 'paired sample T-test' on these results. The result was significant (paired-t test $T = 1.68$, $p < 0.001$). As this number is so low, it means that this difference between the two sets of samples can be regarded as significant. There was a significant rise in student confidence after the research and debate.

Examining a breakdown of the self-reported perceived usefulness of resources, I found the following: The mean score for the usefulness of the student-led research in the IT suite (approx. 1 hour) was 7.1 The usefulness of the debate itself was rated 6.8. As both debate and research elements were lumped together it is impossible to know if any self-reported rise in confidence before or after the research/debate was due to one or the other. This is a flaw in the research and opens up the potential for a study that looks at the effect of each in isolation. Moreover, as there were some gaps in the results for *all* data pertaining to the usefulness of different elements (debate, self-directed research, text extract, film clips) I did not complete a paired T-test for these and they must be regarded as purely anecdotal. Very few students completed the sections for comments on what else they had found useful/what they might find difficult, so I also discounted these results.

Field Notes/Reflections

Context-Setting:

It soon became clear to me that very few students had much existing knowledge of details of the carbon cycle and what the term 'climate emergency' might mean. Many had heard of the fires in the Amazon and Australia and some made links with deforestation and climate change. Other students did not understand the connections between 'fast fashion', landfill waste or recycling with climate change. Much of these lessons were spent very productively discussing potential cause and effect scenarios and learning new vocabulary, such as 'methane', the difference between the Arctic and Antarctic peninsulas and what different degrees of global warming above pre-industrial levels might look like. Many students were interested in the Greta Thunberg speech and the fact that she is autistic. However, I was surprised how few of the students were able to name her. Students were quite highly engaged in general.

Self-directed student research:

I had begun the week by allocating students a range of positions on the climate change debate, e.g. "There is absolutely no point in doing anything about climate change because technology will save us" or "We must act now or there will be devastating consequences for our children". As the prompts were quite prescriptive the students, often lacking in basic research skills, seemed to find them confusing and it stalled their research. I therefore condensed these prompts to simply: 'No point' and 'Act now'.

Students engaged very well with the independent research, but it was clear that many lacked basic research skills, omitting to take notes or being unable to find appropriate sources of information that supported their position. I therefore adapted my teaching slightly to provide students with a few website addresses that showcased either position and strongly advised them to write or type notes as they read.

The Questionnaire:

Students all engaged well with the questionnaire. I felt that it helped that they merely had to circle a number on a gauge, and it was clearly laid out. However, many had to be reminded to turn the form over to complete. After I realised this, I adapted the timings so that they had longer to complete the form and formalised the process of completion a little more. I noticed that I felt so grateful that students were engaging that it was sometimes difficult to see the research process clearly through to its conclusion, in the fear that students would feel I was placing unnecessary demands on them. I had to remind myself to 'round off' each lesson cleanly.

The Debates:

The first debate developed a life of its own after I had facilitated both sides speaking in turn once. Similarly, in the second debate, students tended to read out their points in the first call for evidence and some stronger students were able to paraphrase points. These were not always the stronger students in terms of writing skills, however, and the debate format seemed to give them an opportunity to exhibit strengths in oracy where they have struggled to engage in other areas. When, at the end of the second debate, I asked if either side had anything to add, some students were able to ad lib or expand upon points.

After the first debate I decided that I needed to find a neater way of rounding up. I had originally intended to allocate some students the role of audience, but as both classes were small (many students were on vocational placement that week), I abandoned this idea. It was therefore up to me to react, conclude and round up. I became interested in the process of the debating itself and, after the initial debates, I quickly learnt to note down points as students were speaking so I could sum up. I kept hold of these notes to use in the following week's lessons when students would come to write a response to the exam-style question. It struck me how useful the articulation of points was for planning for a written response, both for myself and the students. I did not do this for the first group and was interested to see to what extent they would be able to recall their own points and positions the following week, without prompts from myself.

Halfway through the week I had a very successful debating session. One student started by saying that he did not want to take part verbally, but would just listen. However, the debate format seemed to enable him to respond to points with which he did not agree and he made several relevant verbal interjections, despite himself. Discussion in the group genuinely took on a life of its own and certain students who were normally very reluctant to speak became animated and able to defend a position. One, very able student, who habitually answered with very brief answers in class, gave far longer, cogent responses in the debate. With this class in particular, I had identified two social 'factions' that seemed to be based on friendship groups. There had previously been some palpable discomfort between the two and I had adjusted seating previous plans accordingly. However, in this debate I felt that all students were communicating in a more confident and fluid manner with one another.

The high level of engagement with the debates and research periods continued throughout the week. I noticed that only a few students did not speak at all. One of these suffers from severe anxiety and had told me separately that he preferred to simply listen. Another couple said that they had not managed to think of or find anything relevant to say. Instead one of them chose to ask me questions to clarify the topic. All students appeared to listen to one another.

I felt that the debates were very effective for classroom cohesion and student engagement, particularly of those students who normally struggled to engage. The data showed that there was a significant increase in confidence in actually answering the exam-style question after the research and debate. I felt that this confidence came from students' articulation of their ideas, the opportunity they had to listen to counter-arguments framed as such, and the ideas and arguments of their peers.

In having to take a position, they were mirroring the potential structure of a written response. However, for most students I felt that the gathering of factual knowledge through the lessons, primarily through self-directed research and the debate itself, was key to their growth in confidence. I believe that informed debates are an effective method of negotiating topics such as climate change for students whose social and educational contexts may disadvantage them in relation to their more privileged peers.

APPRAISAL

In terms of the spiralling Action Research Cycle, I felt that the minor, but various adaptations I made during my week of research reflected this process quite well. It also led to a series of questions. I felt that the results, while not perhaps 'emancipatory' in a major sense, did show that informed debate was helpful for building students' confidence towards a written exam-style response. It was of benefit to them and to me as a developing teacher. Inspired by practitioners like Arnott (2014) and Newman (2019) and by the confidence I have gained in structuring this study, I would like to develop many more intentional classroom activities in which dialogue is a key component.

I can also envisage simplified research projects where I can separate out the effects of student-led research from debate or textual analysis from debate etc. I would approach the design of any future questionnaire with a lighter touch, making it simpler and more concise. I would also like to investigate how best to nurture the confidence of students with mental health problems, who are very likely to struggle with dialogic encounters in the classroom.

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APPENDIX: Questionnaire

BEFORE

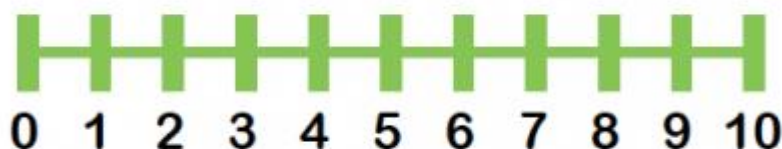
Here is a sample Question 5 for Paper 2:

A student said: “There is absolutely no point in doing anything about climate change”. Write a speech aimed at your peers in which you argue your point of view on this statement.

At this moment, how confident do you feel about answering this question?

Mark on the scale below.

0=not at all confident, 10=extremely confident

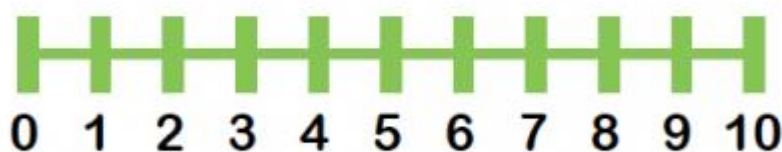


AFTER

How confident do you feel about answering this question now?

Mark on the scale below.

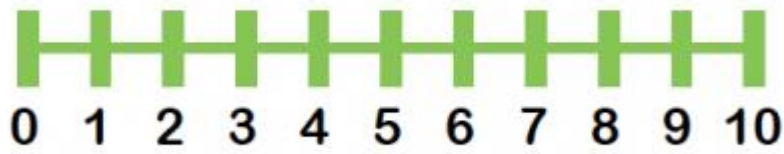
0=not at all confident, 10=extremely confident



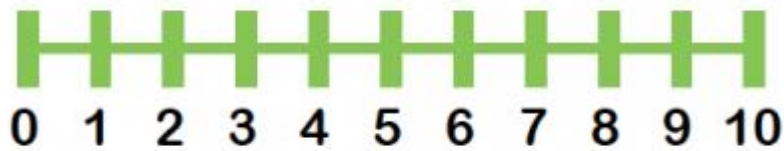
What do you think will help you to answer it?

0=no help, 10=the most help

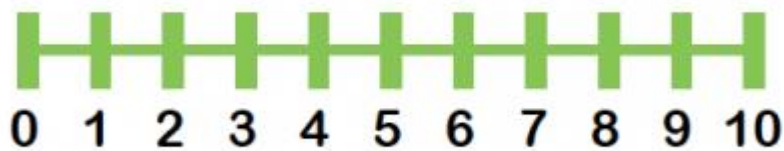
The class discussion



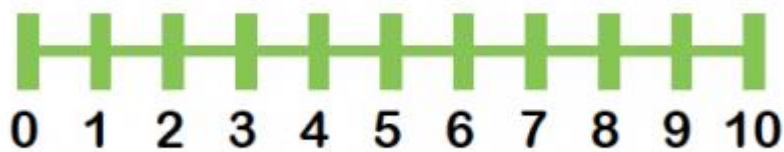
The video clip



The reading material



My own research/prior knowledge



Something else?

What might you still find difficult?