Supporting the understanding of abstract language using the Blank Language Model

Introduction
The Blank Language Model (Blank, Rose and Berlin, 1978) has transformed a complex area of language into 4 more simple levels of questioning. This model helps to support and further develop a child’s understanding of abstract language and verbal reasoning. It gives us a tool to be able to develop children’s language development in a structured and developmental way. It allows us to support children’s understanding at the right level or to challenge children at the appropriate level. This model moves from understanding and answering concrete questions to more abstract questions.

Children need to understand and respond to all these levels of questions to function easily within a year one classroom.

These 4 levels are simplified and summarised as follows. As the levels increase the reliance on the teaching materials are less and the demands on language become more advanced:

Level 1 Naming (language demands rely on teaching materials e.g. objects/pictures)
Level 2 Describing (language relates to teaching materials e.g. objects/pictures)
Level 3 Re-telling (language has less emphasis on the teaching materials)
Level 4 Justifying and Problem Solving (language is more advanced than the teaching materials)

A child is operating at a specific level when they can answer at least 80% of questions at that particular level

Level 1 Naming things (2-3 year olds)
The child has to match the language he hears directly to what he sees. The child is given simple instructions about whole objects e.g.

-Point to an object e.g. point to the apple
-Match an object e.g. find another apple like this one
-Name an object e.g. what is this? (with the apple in sight)

Level 2 Describing things and answering who?, what?, where? (3-4 year olds)
The child still has to match language to what he sees but there is a shift towards focusing on specific parts/details of the object rather than simply the whole object. This level involves descriptive language, understanding concepts (e.g. size, colour, shape, number, texture), understanding and describing object functions and understanding and answering some simple “wh” questions e.g.
-Function e.g. Which one do you sleep in? “Find something that can …(cut)”
-Finish the sentence e.g. You eat with a …...
-What goes together e.g. A bucket and a …...
-Categorisation/grouping together e.g. Name another piece of fruit, What else belongs in the bathroom? Which one is a vegetable?
-Concepts e.g. Find a red ball, Show me big teddy, Find 3 pencils, Find something soft
-Show a picture and ask; Who? Where? What? e.g. “What is happening in this picture?” “Where is the…?” (requires a location response e.g. “in the park” not just pointing
-Give information and ask; Who? Where? What? e.g. Sam went to the shops to buy milk. Who is in the story? Where did Sam go? What did Sam buy?

**Level 3 Re-telling/Narrative: talking about stories and events (4-5 year olds)**
The child has to use their own knowledge to make simple predictions, to make deductions, make links or make generalisations. The child will start to use higher level thinking skills and look at things in context. The child will restructure and re-order language. The child will understand how someone else might feel.

You might tell a story, describe an event, use a book or use sequencing pictures and ask the following type of level 3 questions:

-Prediction e.g. What will happen next?
-Give another example with an extra condition e.g. Find something else made of wood, Find something that is not green
-How does a character feel e.g. How do you think he feels?
-What might a character say e.g. What would dad say?
-Re-telling e.g. How do I make a sandwich? Tell me the story
-Define a word e.g. “What is a …?” What does …..mean?

**Level 4 Justifying, problem solving and answering why? (5-6 years)**
The child has to problem solve, make predictions, give solutions and explanations. It relies on the child’s own knowledge, own experience and ability to think about the past and future. The child will have to justify why something has happened and make connections.

-Predicting changes: What will happen if…?
-Solutions: What should we do now? What could mum do? What do you need to bake a cake? (objects not in sight)
-Causes: How did it happen? What made him feel unwell?
-Justifying: Why can’t we go out in the rain?
-Explanations: How can you tell she is happy? Why is it called a fruit basket?
-Inference: How can you tell that is a new football
**Classroom Strategies**

- Ensure the child is listening before asking a question by using their name and waiting for them to look at you
- Allow extra time for the child to process the question
- Use repetition after a pause
- Use Blank levels to assess where the child is functioning and where they need support
- Aim your level of questioning appropriately to support the child’s understanding and build up to the next Blank level gradually
- Re-adjust your use of questions by choosing the Blank level below if the child is not able to answer your question
- Use everyday situations to ask Blank level questions e.g. at lunch, in play, in the class
- Use Blank levels to support learning across different curriculum areas
- Use Blank to ensure realistic expectations of a child’s ability and avoid jumping from level 1 to level 4 questioning in the same activity
- Plan all question levels for all activities and aim different levels at different children, children at a lower level will learn from models at a higher level
- To create a feeling of success for a child ask lower level questions and build up to the level they are working on

**Activities to use with individuals or small groups**

Some examples of using Blank questions during a baking lesson:

**Level 1 Naming**: Talk a lot about what you and the child are doing with all the baking items in sight, especially if you are introducing new vocabulary (e.g. rolling, squashing, cutting). Ask simple questions such as “What’s this?”, “Find me another star”, “What am I doing?” “Point to the dough” “Find me the flour”

**Level 2: Describing**: Add complexity to level 1 questions “What colour is the star?”, “What shape did you make?”, “Find something I can use to roll” “Find me three shapes” “Where will we put the flour?”

**Level 3: Re-telling**: “You rolled the dough out flat, what will we do next?”, “What is a rolling pin?”, “You squashed the ginger-bread man! how do you think he feels?”, “What should we do next?”, “How can you make a snake?” “Tell me how to make the dough?”

**Level 4: Justifying&Problem Solving**: “What would happen if we left it in the oven for too long?”, “Why can’t I roll the dough on the carpet?”, “Why do you think it is called a wooden spoon?”, “I made the table messy. What should I do now?”, “Why do you think the table got so messy?”, “What could I do next time, so I don’t make such a mess?” “What could I use so I don’t burn my hands when I take it out the oven?”
Blank levels of questioning can be used in any activity at school e.g. Circle time, Show and tell, Reading story books, Sequencing, What’s wrong pictures, Odd one out pictures, Baking a cake, Painting, Role play, Lunchtime, Home-time, School trips, School plays.

**Top tip:** Think about using Blank levels when managing behaviour. If a child is functioning at level 3 then avoid asking level 4 type questions e.g. “Why did you do that?” and “What should have done?” The child may get into trouble for not answering when they actually genuinely did not understand the type of questions. In this case you could model the answer and ask a level 3 question instead e.g. “Describe what just happened” and “How do you think that might have made him feel?”

**Possible resources**

- Elklan Language Builders “Advice and activities to encourage children’s communication skills” (Yellow Book)
- Black Sheep Press e.g. Speech Bubbles, Think About It
- Think It, Say It