

3.6.3 Secret instruction

Brief description, and rules of the implementation of the learning activity

This is a variable-length flexibility-building classroom activity for students aged nine and older. At the beginning of the lesson or session, each student (or some of the students, depending on their age and the time available) receives a small piece of paper with a two-sentence instruction written just for them, which does not fit into the normal routine of the lesson. One sentence contains a condition, the other an instruction. Students must carry out their normal classroom activities, pay attention to the teacher, answer questions, etc. They must stay alert and execute their unique task the exact moment their condition is met.

Skill focus

- **Primary Skill Focus**
 - Flexibility
- **Complementary/Secondary Skill Focus**
 - Emotional awareness (emotional regulation and communication)
 - Curiosity, sense of wonder and openness
 - Resilience

Age group	Student number	Duration
9 + years old	class size	variable (throughout a lesson)

Proposed step by step implementation of the learning activity

1. The appropriate number of instructions should be prepared in advance – each student receives one.
2. It is advisable to plan the instructions in a logical sequence so that one action triggers the next.
3. It is useful to record the planned sequence, but this should not be shared with the students.
4. Each selected student receives a separate, unnumbered instruction that begins with "if ..." and ends with "then ...," which only they know.
5. The activity starts upon a predetermined signal or event.
6. The signal triggers a chain reaction: students respond to each other's actions.
7. The process should be monitored to detect any interruptions.
8. A group discussion at the end helps to process the experience and deepen learning.

Indoor/Outdoor Classroom layout notes

Indoor activity does not require room rearrangement.

How does this learning activity develop this particular skill?

The Secret Instruction is an activity that develops children's cognitive flexibility and improves the brain's ability to be flexible by requiring the children to perform seemingly unrelated tasks and activities that do not fit into the normal daily classroom/lesson routine. Adapting to this apparent "chaos" (created by Secret Instruction) helps the children adapt to changing rules, which is an important requirement for flexible behaviour.

Routines are very important for children of this age, and teachers pay special attention to this. However, over-dependence on routines makes it difficult to deal with unexpected changes. Instead of always following the same sequence, it is necessary to change a few things from time to time. So, the teachers need to create opportunities for flexible thinking, reward it with praise and positive feedback. It is important that teachers introduce regular collaborative thinking about alternative solutions to develop cognitive flexibility, and that they incorporate fun activities into their lessons to practice flexible thinking.

This activity develops students' flexibility by:

- They must adapt to unexpected situations while primarily carrying out their own classroom tasks,
- having to time and carry out their own task,
- fostering cognitive and emotional adaptability, since they do not know exactly when and how their turn will come,
- needing to stay open, react quickly, and manage uncertainty,
- learning to adjust their behaviour flexibly according to external circumstances, which forms the basis for adapting to unexpected situations.

What do we want to achieve regarding primary skill development (student understanding and/or behaviour)?

As a result of completing this task, students will:

- become capable of quickly adapting to unexpected or changing situations.
- be able more attentive to their peers and better adapt to group/class dynamics.
- be more confident in handling unknown or unexpected situations grows.

Suggested use, and practical subject-related examples

The Secret Instruction is great for use in the classroom in any lesson, developing students' cognitive flexibility and brain flexibility in a playful way. The teacher's creative planning is required to design actions that fit the lesson content, subject, and classroom environment. This approach also encourages students to think flexibly.

An example for a class of 24 students:

1.	When the teacher claps three times and says 'start', take a white sheet of paper and, while standing, tear it into 4 pieces!
2.	If someone stands up and tears a white sheet of paper, go to the black magnetic board and move the sun magnet to the white magnetic board!
3.	If someone moves the sun magnet from the board, turn off the light!
4.	If someone turns off the light, say loudly: 'Wow, it's so dark!'.
5.	If someone says 'Wow, it's so dark!', draw a sun on the digital board!
6.	If someone draws a sun on the digital board, wait 2 minutes and then draw a cloud next to it!
7.	If someone draws a cloud, say loudly: 'Could it be a sheep cloud?!
8.	If someone mentions a sheep cloud, start singing: 'Where have you been, little lamb...!'
9.	If someone starts singing about the little lamb, take the recorder from the shelf by the door and hand it to the teacher!
10.	If the teacher plays the recorder, take the thickest storybook from the shelf and sit on the small bench by the board!
11.	If a student sits on the small bench by the board, sit next to them and say, 'I'm here too!'
12.	If someone says, 'I'm here too!', sit down next to them and say loudly, 'I am the third!'.
13.	If someone says, 'I am the third!', stand up and say, 'Three is the Hungarian truth!'
14.	If someone loudly says, 'Three is the Hungarian truth!', respond with: 'No-no-no! And one is the extra!'
15.	If someone says, "No-no-no! And one is the extra!", they should start loudly counting: "101, 102, 103." (Do not continue counting!)
16.	If someone says "103," ask the teacher, "Is it math class now?"
17.	If someone loudly asks the teacher, "Is it math class?", then go to the board and write: "Class 4.c."
18.	If someone writes "Class 4.c" on the board, then take a chair next to the big trash bin!
19.	If someone takes a chair next to the trash bin, then take the robot down from the top of the cupboard!

20.	If someone takes the robot down from the top of the cupboard, then go there, ask for it, and put it on the green round table!
21.	If someone puts the robot on the green round table, then loudly ask, 'Did the sevens bring back the breakfast box?'.
22.	If someone asks whether the sevens took the breakfast box, then stand up on your chair and raise your red pencil high!
23.	When someone stands up on their chair and raises a red pencil, go to the window, open it, and say, 'Is it raining?'.
24.	If someone says, 'Is it raining?', then find an umbrella in the room and open it!

Materials and tools needed for implementation

Paper, pencil – possibly a computer (printer) for writing the pre-planned, chain-reaction style instructions. These are the tools that appear in the instructions.

Guiding questions

The key to the success of the whole class is that everyone carries out their individual tasks. Basically, you don't need to help the process because the task is simple. Cases where teacher support may be needed can be found in the Tips and Tricks section.

Tips and Tricks for dealing with challenges

- Challenge:** The process gets stuck because someone does not react or forgets what is on their paper.
Tip: The teacher should know the activity order of the students so that they know who needs to "disrupt" the traditional classroom routine and when. The teacher can gently help non-verbally or restart the chain with their own actions.
- Challenge:** The students remain in "flow" and are unable to return to the lesson activity.
Tip: The teacher should monitor the students' activities and, if this is noticed, interrupt the "flow" process, for example with another learning activity technique: "Pause for Reflection" - This is a simple technique, asking the students to stop a bit, listen to the teacher and then (after waiting a bit!) ask students to review their notes and ask questions on what they've written so far.
- Challenge:** Someone gets confused or blocked.
Tip: It is important to avoid negative feedback. In this case, say that it's okay and give your paper to your peer.
- Challenge:** The children don't want to stop the Secret Instructions task.
Tip: Start a short discussion of the reflection questions.

Difficulty level tailoring

Teachers can tailor this learning activity to three difficulty levels to meet students' needs.

- **Beginners (6-7 years old):** – Learners with low cognitive flexibility: Aim of the activity: to practise divided attention, acceptance of unexpected situations, and simple behaviour changes. The instructions should be short and clear (e.g. “If the teacher puts down the chalk, clap twice.”). The chain should be short, involving 4–6 students, so that it remains easy for the children to follow. Events should occur at a slower pace, giving students enough time to observe and respond. The signals should be obvious and easy to notice (e.g. a loud word or a clearly visible movement). The teacher may gently support the process, for example by discussing the instruction with the child in advance or by guiding attention from the background (“Something just happened, watch what comes next!”). After completing the task, students should always receive positive, specific feedback (e.g. “You paid great attention and reacted very well to the signal!”).
- **Advanced learners (8-9 years old):** – Learners with normal cognitive flexibility: Aim of the activity: to develop attention shifting, tracking parallel processes, and quick reactions. The instructions may be more complex and include multiple steps (e.g. “If someone laughs, stand up and say: That was funny!”). The chain can be longer, involving approximately 8–12 students. The signals are not always very noticeable, so students need to pay attention not only to the main classroom task but also to unexpected events. The pace can be gradually increased to support the development of divided attention and flexible responding. The teacher provides limited support and mainly guides reflection after the activity with questions such as “What helped you notice when it was your turn?” or “What was the most unexpected moment?”
- **Experts (9–10 years old):** – Learners with advanced cognitive flexibility: Aim of the activity: to develop self-regulation, rapid situation assessment, and adaptive behaviour in complex and unpredictable situations. The instructions may include absurd or multi-step elements (e.g. “If someone who is not your desk partner touches your desk, look to the side, say ‘Wow!’, and spin around once.”). The chain can be long (involving the whole class) and may run on multiple threads, for example with two parallel chains or optional continuation paths. The signals can be more subtle or delayed, requiring students to respond flexibly. Feedback loops can be introduced (e.g. the process returns to a previous participant at some point), increasing the level of concentration. Instructions requiring cooperation may also be included (e.g. “If someone starts singing, clap three times and then ask your desk partner to continue.”). The teacher acts mainly as an observer; students manage the chain reaction independently and then reflect together, for example: “What helped you stay calm when something unexpected happened?”

Debriefing and Reflection questions

- What happened when someone first stood up and "disturbed your concentration"?
- How were you able to pay attention to both tasks?
- How were you able to help yourself adapt to the new situation?
- Was it difficult to divide your attention between the lesson and the secret instructions?
- Did you wait for your turn?
- How did you deal with the uncertainty of not knowing what was going to happen?
- How were you able to return to your task?
- How did you feel during the lesson?