

Novice Teachers and some need-to-know Classroom Management Questions

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Abstract

*"Classroom management refers to the ways in which student behavior, movement and interaction during a lesson are organized and controlled by the teacher."*¹ While one has completed a graduation and learned all that s/he could about classroom management while student teaching, by reading textbooks, or observing experienced teachers, he's still left with many questions unanswered. Many 'inexperienced' teachers stand in front of the classroom, instruct students, give explanations, assign homework and are convinced that they have done the best possible job. However the question still remains if the students "got it"?! It's worth taking a moment here to define exactly what we mean when we talk about classroom management. To our point of view, there are a number of key concepts to consider, namely: preparation, procedures and behavior. Cultural norms are also different. So there are a lot of classroom management questions and answers that every novice teacher wants to know. Teaching is only the half of it. A large part of our "teaching" time is spent not on developing lesson plans or introducing new material, but doing something else entirely. Unfortunately, there doesn't exist a simple bound of tips that will work in all situations. To get to the heart of how-to-effectively manage the classroom, we'll have to go deeper.

In this article, we'll examine some key questions and elements that we all, as educators, need to consider when deciding on our own approaches to classroom management. We give some ideas that seem to work effectively, but personal observation, experience and reflection is what matters. Our best advice is, reflect on what works and adapt the approach accordingly.

Keywords: *classroom management, need-to-know questions, inexperienced teachers, interaction procedures behavior.*

¹ J. Richards and D. Nunan, *Second language teacher education* (Cambridge Language Teaching Library, 1990), 10.

Introduction

What is classroom management?

It's worth defining what we mean when we talk about classroom management. A number of crucial concepts need to be considered, like: *preparation, procedures and behavior*. The ending goal of effective classroom management is to optimize the students' learning experiences. There are a lot of classroom management questions and answers that every novice teacher wants to know. In our opinion:

- classroom management requires *what* to use for learning and *how* to use it
- classroom management is independent of methodology
- is complex but simple
- it's the way we manage students' learning by organizing and controlling what happens in our classroom.
- classroom management should not be considered as classroom discipline or refer to the ways of keeping order in class.

I. Novice teachers and some need-to-know classroom management questions

Many "inexperienced" teachers stand in front of the classroom, instruct students, give explanations, assign homework and are convinced that they have done the best possible job. However the question still remains if the students "got it"?! It's worth to stop here and define exactly what we mean when we talk about *classroom management*. So classroom management is independent of methodology, is complex because it covers issues like: location, cultural norms, time available, relationships, moods & many other factors, it's the way we manage students' learning by organizing and controlling what happens in our classroom. On the other hand, classroom management should not be considered as classroom discipline or refer to the ways of keeping order in class. There are many *easy-to-learn*, practical techniques that can be tried out and used as teacher's repertoire.

II. Let's get started with 11 crucial need-to-know issues, proper for classroom management:

- a. *Classroom layout* (arrangement of seats/desks/tables) But a precious advice for novice teachers: *avoid chaos when rearranging the room*. (One tip that helps here, is to give learners responsibility, to make use of their ideas in rearranging the class). The way students are seated in the classroom will often determine the dynamics of the lesson. Indeed, a simple change in the seating pattern can make an incredible difference to group coherence and

student satisfaction. In many cases the seating has been a crucial element in the success or failure of the lesson.

Sometimes, the desks are fixed to the ground or the school has strict rules about not moving the furniture. The increasing number of *students is* also an issue of concern. Teachers have different preferences for seating arrangements. Some layouts suggested by Jim Scrivener² are:

- Semi-circle or U
- Tipped U
- One large table
- Curved rows
- Full circle
- Diagonal
- Separate corners, etc.

In any case, whatever seating pattern we choose or is imposed on us, the class is likely to be more successful if we keep the following principles in mind:

- Try and maximize eye contact.
- Make sure students are seated at a comfortable distance from each other.
- Think in advance about how you will organize changing partners or changing groups.
- Fix Students' Names

b. varying teacher's position

Too often I have heard teachers, trainees and inexperienced teachers come out of a lesson and ask each other the same question; *standing or sitting?!* Norms may differ, culture context too, especially when teaching in an unknown environment. However there's no rule book that teachers have to stand all the way through their lessons. Sitting down is not illegal. It can have certain uses:

- give oneself a rest
- signal changes in the pace & tone (a slower pace / a different tone)

(Varying teacher's position is also connected with the fact "*how do I want the learners to view me*" - *as an authority, as a distant figure, a manager, a friend, a mentor, or a facilitator!?*) .

c. planning, preparation and clear expectations.

² Jim Scrivener, "Classroom Management Techniques" CPU (2012), 79-84.

Planning allows for effective transitions between activities, teachers should have clear, explicit learning objectives, sufficient activities to achieve these objectives, and enough teaching materials (visual aids, flash cards, photocopies, online immersion, videos). Having the appropriate materials help to make the lesson run smoothly and achieve the desired learning outcomes. Teachers make sure that students always know and are aware of what is expected from them at each stage of the lesson. Instructions should be *brief, explicit* and ***consistent***.

d. appropriate sequencing of activities

It is worthwhile giving some time to the sequencing of activities. Teachers need to think about the time of day their lessons are taking place. *A Friday afternoon may not be the proper time to undertake a grammar lesson.* Teachers should vary the way they use exercises, recycle tasks, thus using the course book selectively,³ and consider sequencing within the structure of their own lessons.

e. cultural context and support

It is important to bear in mind that every school has its own *school culture* and *conduct code*. This will help when we consider our approach to classroom management. It's also important to get a feel for the local teaching culture when teaching in an unknown context. Sometimes difficulties are best resolved by a local teacher. Good working relationships with colleagues, *parents, help to face successfully discipline issues.*

f. use of students' mother tongue

If used *carefully* and with a *well-thought* plan, student's mother tongue can be a very effective classroom management tool. If we can not speak the mother tongue of the students that we are teaching, then we seek for aids and facilities, one of which is *learning a few key phrases*, this can help us manage our classroom, better.

g. ignore disruptive behavior in the classroom

Ignoring low-level disruptive behavior disturbances in the classroom may at times be necessary. It may seem absurd but sometimes teaching, like politics, becomes "the art of the possible." There are occasions when a particular student becomes something of a black ship for our attention. Of course, we don't give up on a student, but we cannot always find a "*quick-fix*" solution in the middle of a

³ Penny Ur, *Penny Ur's 100 teaching Tips* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10-13.

lesson. Instead, we may have *to build rapport with disruptive students over time*. We rarely know the real reasons of misbehavior. It may be that students just don't like our class, but we should be sensitive to the possibility of other reasons. Find out what they are interested in and try to engage them in a little conversation when possible. Taking it slowly at the start, and having patience will make us understand that *classroom management is more of an art than a science*. "To maintain order and to keep the group on task and moving ahead, not to spot and punish those students who are misbehaving."⁴

h. consider the advantages and disadvantages of punishment

Punishment is an event that takes place after a behavior. Punishments are designed to reduce that behavior in the future. It depends on the kind of punishment. Punishments for bad behavior should be compensated / balanced by rewards for good behavior to avoid discouraging students. Teachers may be strict and hard when students plagiarize or cheat in an exam or written assignment, but they may give high marks for good research work.

i. group & pair work

*Some students say: "Why do we have to do pair work and group work?"*⁵

Group work allows students to reveal subconsciously or unconsciously *who* they are, *what* they expect from the course, and *how far* they want to interact with their peers. Students vary a lot in the way they like to learn, some enjoy working in groups, others prefer to do things alone, or in teacher-led full class activity, and dislike collaborative work.⁶ Teachers need to have a good reason to use group work. Group work is useful for certain purposes, such as getting students to talk and interact, but novice teachers tend to avoid it, because of concerns that it may result in poor-disciplined and uncontrolled classes, with little learning going on. Practical advice always counts:

- make collaboration worthwhile
- do group work in the middle of the lesson
- combine pair work and group work together
- organize groups quickly
- design and plan the activities for group work in advance

⁴ Greenwood and Parkay (1989) cited by Gary Sturt, "Classroom management," <http://www.garysturt.free-online.co.uk/classman.htm>

⁵ J. Leo, *The Student-Centered Classroom* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3-7.

⁶ Ur, *Penny Ur's 100 Teaching Tips*, 37-43.

- let students work together in discussions or in role-plays, sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences
- make them interact with the teacher and the whole class, asking questions or brainstorming ideas
- give advice and encouragement while students are working together
- move around the class and monitor the students working in groups
- as soon as they finish working together, and the class is reassembled, the teacher gives them feedback, offers suggestions and advice, makes corrections, and answers questions.⁷

When students work together, they:

- Are more involved
- Talk more
- Learn from each other
- Share their ideas
- Feel more secure and less anxious
- Use English in a genuine, realistic way
- Enjoy using English to communicate

But a few of them may:

- Speak in their native language, not in English
- Feel nervous, embarrassed, or tongue-tied
- Speak English and make a lot of mistakes
- Not enjoy working together

They see the teacher as: an instructor, a facilitator, as an observer who makes use of strategies in order to encourage an appropriate interaction among language learners.

j. timing

How long will an activity take? A time limit encourages students to take their time, and in doing so, have a stimulating exchange of views as they explore a topic in depth and share ideas. It's better for students to be given this time limit, so that they can pace themselves and deal with questions in details. This is important because some groups will finish quickly, while others will take longer and feel frustrated. Knowing how long they have, students will feel they can say more and share their ideas and opinions in a more relaxed way.

⁷ J. Scrivener, *Learning Teaching*, 3-d edition (Macmillan Books for Teachers, 2011), 54-58.

k. gestures & facial expressions

Time and again teachers make use of gestures or facial expressions in the classroom. This helps to reduce teacher talking time and increases the opportunity of students' talk. I've seen teachers using gestures to indicate 'time'. Pointing our forefinger to the ground, means now, at the moment of speaking, pointing behind our shoulder, indicates the past and pointing ahead, means the future. But be careful, students need to know what we mean through our gestures, so at first times the use of gestures need to be combined with oral instructions, until students get used to them. Also remember that gestures can mean different ideas in different countries. So if we are teaching in another culture, we should learn which gestures to avoid of using.

Conclusion

English language teaching happens in a variety of contexts and locations. There is not a recipe book to instruct novice teachers what methodology to use or what techniques or activities are proper for classroom management. Through this article we give some ideas that seem to work effectively, but *personal observation, experience and reflection is what matters*. As Richards puts it: "Teachers entering the profession may find their initial teaching efforts stressful, but with experience they acquire a repertoire of teaching strategies that they draw on throughout their teaching."⁸ Step by step novice teachers learn to be themselves, establish and maintain rapport, become supportive, assert authority, give encouragement, feedback and praise, thus becoming better teachers with lots of teaching options for classroom management. To be really good at classroom management *we suggest them* to hang on:

- their own source of expertise, i.e. "their own experience and experimenting - the more, the better"⁹
- other teachers expertise or professionals
- being part of teachers' workshops and conferences will help them to refresh ideas and be critical on what counts good & adaptable in classroom management.

What we highlight through this paper will serve as a "start-up" for them, it's only the beginning of a long process. *Our aim is to help them be themselves and do their own thing.*

⁸ Jack Richards, *Towards Reflective Teaching. The Teacher Trainer*. 5 (1991).

⁹ Ur, *Penny Ur's 100 Teaching Tips*, 118.

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