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# CHAPTER 4

## Classroom Management

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### **TEACHERS' CONCERNS**

Language teachers are familiar with the intended outcomes of Communicative Language Teaching, namely, for students to use the new language in speech and in writing for a variety of purposes and in a range of contexts. Teachers also have access to many textbooks setting out activities for doing this. What they often struggle with in their own classes is how to manage classroom learning to achieve these ends. The following comments are grouped into three broad categories: motivation, constraints, and the teacher's role.

Some teachers are concerned about *students' motivation*:

Students in our school are learning English because they have to. It makes motivation really difficult for the teacher.

Students don't want to use English in class when they can say the same thing faster in their own language. What do other teachers do if one or two students refuse to speak?

For others, *constraints* are things that teachers believe are stopping them from managing an ideal learning atmosphere:

How can we organize group work when the desks are all fixed to the floor in rows?

Our classes are huge. Whenever I organize tasks, things get messy, such as some students finishing ahead of the others and wasting their time.

How do experienced teachers manage when all the students are at different levels?

We have to achieve examination results. Anything that doesn't lead there is not valued by the school or the parents.

It's hard to access authentic materials for my teaching.

Finally, some comments relate to *new roles for teachers* in language classrooms.

In this school, the tradition is for the teacher to be at the front by the board all the time, but in our teacher-training course they mentioned walking around the room. How could I keep control if I did that?

I was trained to teach in a traditional way and now the government has decided to introduce Communicative Language Teaching. My English isn't good enough to answer students' questions.

Elsewhere in this volume, writers address general principles and approaches to language teaching. This chapter deals with the "how" of classroom management. The concerns just cited are discussed in three sections: motivating students, managing constraints, and managing the teacher's role. The situation will be presented first, followed by some solutions.

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## MOTIVATING STUDENTS

### THE SITUATION

The statement about learning in general, that it "never takes place in a vacuum" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 188), is even more true in the language class. When it comes to creating a classroom climate for language learning, Williams and Burden point to three levels of influence: national and cultural influences on the language being learned, the education system where the language is being learned, and the immediate classroom environment. Influences on the language being learned are already determined, as is the education system. School policy, the textbook, and a national curriculum all influence the way students feel about language learning in general and about learning English in particular. However, teachers do influence the classroom environment by motivating unmotivated students. There are many ways in which students can be "off-task": They fail to take part by sitting in silence, they distract other students by talking off the topic, and they provide "nonlanguage" entertainment. All of these call for teachers' management skills. Even taking into account differences from country to country and class to class, teachers of a range of learners and subjects believe that they can make a difference, as the examples that follow show.

### TEACHERS' RESPONSES

In language learning, motivation is more specific than in a content-based subject. The history teacher can motivate students to take an interest in the subject, but the language teacher is looking for more than interest. Language is a skill, and a skill needs to be applied, not just stored in the head or admired at a distance.

Teachers encourage language use through both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Some students have strong intrinsic motivation; they know the benefits of learning a particular

language. Others need to be reminded of where success could lead. For example, in societies where studying literature is an important part of the education system, teachers emphasize the benefits of being able to read English poetry, short stories, and novels in the original. In other contexts, teachers build on the career and commercial benefits to students: Fluent speakers of English are employed as interpreters, they travel abroad on business, and they work in tourism. Reminding students about the jobs waiting for fluent language speakers can be an important part of motivation.

Extrinsic motivation can come through rewards. Teachers supply interesting additional reading materials, they show a video to follow a difficult language task, or they invite guest speakers so that students can use the new language in an authentic way. Occasionally, though, rewards can take over and destroy enjoyment, as van Lier (1996) reports from one of his classes. He had organized a grammar game involving two teams as a means of motivating students, but unfortunately the teams became so competitive that they argued over every point and were quickly diverted from the grammar point.

In monolingual classes teachers report particular difficulty in persuading students to speak English. The following ideas have worked in small and large classes in different countries:

- Role-play, with one student taking the role of a foreigner
- Native-speaking visitors answer questions on specific topics
- Pen friends, by mail or E-mail
- Group presentations of topics students have researched
- Interclass debates
- Speech competitions
- Concerts with plays and singing

Although the ultimate goal is to speak English, in classes where students speak different first languages, it can help motivation to allow limited use of the first language in class for specific purposes. For example, the L1 helps in clarifying a difficult point or planning the organizational part of projects, particularly when the teacher does not speak the languages of all the students.

An ongoing aspect of motivation is dealing with the behavior of particular students. Experienced teachers usually have a scale of responses to off-task behavior, which helps them decide whether to ignore or attend to the problem. Here are three examples of how a teacher might move through stages in managing a particular type of behavior.

#### **CASE 1: THE BACK-ROW DISTRACTOR**

The same student always sits at the back and distracts others.

- Use eye contact while continuing to speak.
- Stop mid-sentence and stare until the student stops.
- Talk with the student after class to investigate the cause.

#### **CASE 2: THE NONPARTICIPANTS**

Several students are not taking part in the assigned activity.

- Ignore them if they are not distracting others.
- Walk past their desks and ask if there is a problem.
- Ask colleagues how the same students participate in other classes.

### **CASE 3: THE OVEREXUBERANT STUDENT**

In a language class, teachers want students to speak. Sometimes, though, the pleasure of hearing the language in use sours when one outgoing student dominates question time, comment time, and all the rest of the talking time. This calls for tact, because the person is often a good language model for others.

Interrupt with “Thanks for that” and call on someone else to continue.

Remind the student that there will be more talking time soon in groups.

Talk to the student individually later.

In summary, making quick decisions on what to do about a problem depends on answers to questions like the following:

Does the behavior hinder other students’ learning?

Is this just a single occurrence not worth wasting time on?

Is it a whole-class problem or specific to one or two people?

Teachers also know that if large numbers of students are failing to attend to the lesson, there could be a problem with the lesson itself. The task may be too difficult, or it may have continued for too long, or the content may be boring. On the other hand, the problem may not be within the class at all. A forthcoming sports match or even unusual weather can change the mood of a class and signal to the teacher the need for a change of activity.

The suggestions in the rest of this chapter are intended to prevent off-task behavior before it starts.

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## **MANAGING CONSTRAINTS**

### **THE SITUATION**

There are very few contexts in which students learn English only for the purposes of listening and reading, without any need to interact with others in speech or writing. When it comes to giving students opportunities to talk, constraints such as large, multilevel classes with fixed furniture, traditions of learning (“Games are for children. This is an adult class”), an examination-oriented curriculum (“We have to pass exams. Exams are not about group work”), and difficulty in accessing resources all seem to stand in the way of organizing talk. Resources frequently head the list of constraints. Some teachers have no photocopiers or no funds to make copies for the whole class, no tape recorders or video recorders, and their students have no source of interesting reading material, even in a library. The teacher may have a single copy of a useful article, colored photographs relevant to the topic but too small to be seen at the back of a large class, or half a dozen copies of commercial readers at the right level for a class of forty students. Managing with scarce resources is a challenge, but rather than abandoning these great resources, teachers often find ways around the problems.

### **TEACHERS’ RESPONSES**

Reading the many accounts of how other teachers have overcome constraints is one practical way of picking up ideas. For example, the encouraging news about group work despite large numbers and fixed furniture is that it happens in many parts of the world. The journal *English Teaching Forum* is a good source of articles, many of them written about classroom contexts where conditions seem less than ideal. Teachers have described how they organize group

work in large classes with benches fixed to the floor by asking students to turn around and form groups of four with the students sitting in the row behind. Sometimes the group leader scrambles over desks to reach the teacher to discuss progress.

If traditions of learning make students reluctant to join in group work, then the first step is to overcome their preconceptions and “sell” the idea of groups.

- Explain that groups are a chance to speak without the teacher noticing mistakes.
- When students complain about having to listen to all the other students’ bad English when they get into groups, point out that communication involves listening to everyone and making sense whether people speak slowly or fast, formally or informally.
- Make the activities age-appropriate. Avoid the word *games* with older learners.
- Make the purpose of each activity clear beforehand.
- Call for student feedback on group activities. What went well? What could be changed?
- Start with self-selected groupings, so that students are working with people they know or like.
- Show connections between group activities and the rest of the program to overcome the belief that group work is an extra.

In some cultures, students are very anxious about making mistakes in front of others. Oxford (1999) suggests a number of ways of reducing anxiety, including talking about the problem and minimizing conditions that might increase it. In particular, she recommends laughter and music as antidotes to anxiety.

To overcome photocopying constraints, a single article can be photocopied just once and cut up so that each student has one sentence. This becomes the basis of a “divided information” communicative activity. Colored photographs and a limited number of readers can be supplemented by self-access worksheets so that students work through the tasks and materials individually or in pairs on different days. Another resource is the blackboard sketch. Observation in many classrooms in different countries suggests that teachers underestimate their own artwork, whereas students enjoy it. Quick drawing while talking can enliven a dialogue, illustrate word meaning, or prompt student talk.

If the barrier to group work is managing large numbers, the teacher could experiment with different types of group work which call for different management skills: free discussion, projects, and the particular type of group work described as “tasks.” In free-discussion groups, the teacher can use the multilevel nature of the class to advantage by appointing specific roles to avoid problems such as having one student dominating the group and others sitting passively. A chairperson invites people to speak and holds back those who have talked long enough; a timekeeper watches that the group moves on to the various stages of the activity; a reporter takes notes ready for reporting back.

Another type of group work is the project. Projects involve collating material from a number of sources – inanimate and human. The teacher needs to check out availability beforehand with librarians and specialist informants. The informants could be students from other language classes, in which case time-tabling needs to be checked, or other teachers whom students interview between classes. E-mail informants also appreciate hearing from the class teacher before spending time answering questions from students.

The most specific type of small-group activity in the language class is the task. Tasks are described in detail elsewhere in this volume, but the concern here is how to manage

them in large classes. A task requires input data, procedures, goals, and specific roles for teachers and learners, all of which need to be explained to the class. If photocopying facilities are limited, an alternative is to use the board or an overhead transparency. For example, a collection of words which students have to categorize and label can be written up in just a couple of minutes. Some teachers play music as the task input. Procedures can also be listed on the board, or, if they are short enough, the teacher can dictate them.

Whether the group activity is a discussion, a project, or a more specific task, it can have a variety of goals, which students select depending on their level and their interest. In a multilevel class, goals can be graded for different members of the group, according to their language competence, by modifying:

- the topic (more abstract or more applied)
- the language difficulty (two versions of the same text)
- the amount of input
- the graphic support (more or fewer pictures)
- the time taken to finish
- the level of language students are expected to use for the same purpose
- the length of the final “product”
- the amount of support from the teacher and from other students

Because some groups finish before others, teachers often organize an individual activity to follow, and return to a discussion of outcomes when everyone has finished. May (1996, p. 8), in his book *Exam Classes*, suggests:

- different word limits for different groups of students, since it takes the same amount of homework time for individual students to complete different amounts of material.
- providing more able students with different extra tasks rather than just more of the same.

An alternative is not to treat the discussion of goals as a whole-class activity, but to discuss with students group-by-group how their goals have been reached.

As with any other form of organization, group work can be overdone. The teacher’s challenge is to decide which class activities can best be done individually, which work well in pairs or groups, and which call for whole-class work. Creative thinking will show teachers on a particular day with a particular class which form of organization to choose for activities such as the following:

- marking homework
- solving a word puzzle
- practicing new language
- answering students’ questions
- listening to tapes
- writing a letter

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## MANAGING THE TEACHER’S ROLE

### THE SITUATION

The final aspect of classroom management is the role of the teacher. Teachers sometimes fear losing their central classroom role as practiced in the traditional classroom, where students asked questions that teachers could answer. In communicative language classrooms, on the

other hand, they may ask how to say something that the teacher or textbook has not yet introduced or even that the teacher cannot answer.

The teacher's role includes relationships with colleagues. A typical situation is that one teacher is encouraging everyone to talk in pairs, and the talk is so successful that the teacher next door complains. Often it is not a question of actual noise level. Anyone who has taught next to a room where fifty students are chorusing drills loudly will know what noise is. It is more a question of the type of noise that people are accustomed to. When a whole department operates by the same approach, there are fewer misunderstandings.

### TEACHERS' RESPONSES

One way of considering a teacher's role is in terms of metaphors. The teacher of a traditional grammar-based class could be described as a tap pouring water into an empty vessel. The teacher has all the knowledge about the new language and the empty vessels have to be filled with the grammar rules and the meaning of words. Then, in situationally based classrooms, where there was an emphasis on memorizing fixed dialogues, the teachers' roles changed. They became conductors of orchestras, bringing in the different players in turn and stopping the orchestra from time to time when someone hit the wrong note. In communicative language classes, there is far more scope for imagination in finding a metaphor: for example, the teacher is a gardener, supplying materials for growth (resources, encouragement) and rearranging the environment (the furniture) for this to happen. Stevick (1996, p. 180) uses the metaphor of a chessboard on which the teacher is "the most powerful single piece." According to this metaphor, the teacher is the most powerful player in classroom dynamics and determines the class structure.

Whatever the metaphor, the teacher has to manage a number of situations, predictable as well as unpredictable. Let's consider two aspects of classroom management: one being the way time is managed, and the other the managing of students' questions. These two are selected because the former is an example of something which can be planned, whereas the latter involves more spontaneous management skills.

One way of managing the large, multilevel class is to plan for the teacher to work with different groups of students at different times during the lesson. An example of this has been reported elsewhere (Lewis, 1998). In summary, four time slots can be used as follows:

| Organization  | Activity                                      | Purposes   |
|---|---|--|
| whole class   | theme-based building on individual interests  | social, language input, fluency  |
| class in two halves, one with self-access materials, the other with the teacher | 1. independent tasks<br>2. direct teaching    | language practice, self-assessment<br>preparation for independent work |
| as above, reversed  | 1. communicative tasks<br>2. independent work | focus on meaning<br>follow-up to direct teaching                       |
| individual, pairs, or small groups  | choice of tasks                               | one-to-one interaction with teacher and other students                 |

In this model, the teacher has different roles at different times. For example:

- answering or asking questions
- up-front roles or supporting individuals
- language informant or eliciting language
- congratulating or encouraging individuals
- designer of tasks or materials

In detail, the lesson could flow like this: When the class arrives students work together on something that builds group dynamics. For example, the teacher might show graphics (on the overhead projector, for example) of a theme of common interest. Because of the graphics, the topic is accessible to everyone. The language input is oral and comes from both teacher and students. At the second, divided phase, each group builds on the theme that has been introduced. The more advanced group works independently on extra reading, on a traditional exercise, or in the computer laboratory. Meanwhile, the more elementary group is with the teacher, receiving further input on the theme.

At the third phase, this elementary group is ready to work independently, either individually or in pairs, practicing the language that has been introduced, while the advanced group has direct teaching from the teacher. Students in both groups could start by reviewing whatever they were doing at Phase 2 or they could move on to new work. Finally, everyone in the class is working at materials and tasks at their own level. This gives the teacher freedom to move around the room, responding to questions and identifying needs.

A second, and unplanned, aspect of classroom management is dealing with students' spontaneous questions. Teachers have to make quick decisions about whether to answer, postpone, or dismiss a question. As usual in classroom-management decisions, there are many possible responses. Being honest about why a question is not being answered can give students information about the learning process. Saying "Let me look that up so I can check all the details" is a reminder that everyone, teachers as well as students, should make use of reference material. Postponing the question is something teachers do whether or not they need to look it up. They might say, "That's an important question, but if I answer it now I think it will muddle you about the grammar point we are looking at today. Let me come back to that next week." Making a scribbled note of the question as the students watch lets them see that the teacher is taking the question seriously. If a student asks a question about a point the teacher has just explained, the first step is to gauge whether others too need further explanation ("Please put your hands up if you would like to hear the answer to that"). A huge show of hands suggests that more explanation is needed. If only a few hands go up, the teacher can ask those students to listen later when most of the class has started an exercise.

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## CONCLUSION

Many themes run through current interpretations of Communicative Language Teaching: cooperative learning, authenticity, and task-based syllabuses, to name just three. Underpinning them all is the ability of a teacher to manage students and the environment to make the most of the opportunities for learning and practicing language.

The final word in this chapter goes to Stevick (1996, p. 250), who brings a lifetime of teaching to his six-point summary of what he hopes for in a classroom. He has three hopes for students and three for teachers. He wants students to be involved, to feel comfortable while involved in intellectual activity, and to be listening to one another as well as to the teacher.



He wants teachers to be in general control, to allow and encourage originality in students, and to look “relaxed and matter-of-fact . . . giving information about . . . appropriateness or correctness . . . , rather than criticising or praising.”

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