

Effective classroom management is important because it has a very positive impact on your ability to teach and your students' ability to learn. Without good classroom management, a negative learning environment can emerge where students are demotivated and distracted, and teachers are stressed and eventually feel burnt out. Proper classroom management, on the other hand, results in a situation where a teacher's time and energy are primarily focused on teaching with less time wasted on dealing with behaviour management.



While successful classroom management requires planning, preparation, and effort in the early stages of a course, it does make teaching easier in the end. It also results in improved student progress because they are learning in an environment where expectations are clear and there are minimal interruptions. Students can just get on with the business of learning. This article will cover some of the key areas to consider when developing an effective classroom management plan.

Arranging the Physical Environment

The physical setup of your classroom is perhaps the most obvious place to start. This can have a significant impact on the way your classes run. Some thought is required for how furniture and materials are arranged within the classroom. There is no one size fits all answer for this aspect of classroom management as teachers find themselves in a variety of situations and circumstances. For example, classes often vary in terms of size. If you are teaching a small class, perhaps using a horseshoe arrangement might work best, but for large classes, arranging the tables in groups may work better. You might have classes in which students are required to access certain materials, so you may need to think about where the materials are kept and how students can easily access them without causing too much disruption to the lesson. Not all classrooms are designed well so when thinking about how to arrange desks, make sure all students are in clear view. This ensures that you can easily check that all students are on task and that they can clearly see anything you are explaining or demonstrating.

As the course progresses and you get to know your students better, you may want to play around with your seating arrangements. You could develop a seating plan to manage certain unwanted behaviours. You can decide to seat disruptive students at the front of the class, separate pairs who are continuously talking in their first language, or you can arrange the class so that groups contain a mix of weaker and stronger students. Do what you can to ensure a suitable physical environment for learning. Reorganizing classroom seating also allows for easier movement from student-to-student or group-to-group and this has the benefit of preventing time wasting.

Establishing and Maintaining Appropriate Authority

While it is appropriate and beneficial for teachers to have a friendly relationship with students, language classes require a certain amount of structure and discipline that ensures that classes are productive and meeting learning outcomes to at least a satisfactory level.

Authority begins with teachers having the necessary self-confidence in their teaching ability and their capacity to lead a group of learners. For some new teachers, confidence may be in short supply, but rest assured in the knowledge that all teachers feel slightly nervous before a new class. It is normal and very human. You may feel nervous, but your students do not need to know this. As far as they are concerned, you are a hardy professional. The key is to present yourself with confidence.

It helps if you have prepared thoroughly for the lesson as this will give you some reassurance that things are likely to go to plan. It also helps to project a sense of professionalism to your students by dressing the part and arriving early to set up the classroom and greet students as they arrive. If you are lacking a sense of confidence and feeling anxious, simply fake it. By not coming across as hesitant and unsure, you are more likely to get a sense that your students have a good initial impression of you. This is something you can take to your next class and build from there. In a short time, any insecurities you may be feeling about your teaching abilities will subside, and you will find your classes becoming increasingly more rewarding. With a sense of confidence, establishing authority in the classroom becomes easier.

Creating a Balance between Friendliness and Authority

While maintaining a friendly relationship with students is required to build a positive learning environment, it should not be forgotten that the teacher has a certain responsibility to maintain an orderly, safe, and respectful classroom environment. For this to be achieved, teachers need to establish a certain level of authority. Authority is not something that is automatically bestowed upon the teacher and is something that needs to be developed and earned. Building authority is fairly straightforward and common sense. First, establish clearly defined rules and boundaries. When there is a clear and easy to understand set of academic and behavioural expectations, students are less likely to make transgressions. Get the students involved in creating a set of rules and corresponding penalties as this helps ensure more buy in and compliance. It is also important to enforce class rules with consistency and fairness.

Take time to listen and get to know your students. When students feel heard and respected, they are more inclined to act in a reciprocal manner as they will not want to disappoint someone who they respect. Also, if you are seen as open and approachable students are more likely to open up about any issues they may be experiencing in the classroom. In getting to know your students, you will build empathy for them and will be less likely to disparage them, embarrass them, or talk down to them.

A positive learning environment often stems from the teacher's energy and demeanour. Projecting enthusiasm for a lesson or topic sets a model for students to emulate. Students are less likely to be motivated if they sense the teacher does not believe in what they are teaching. Using appropriate humour is also a good way to reduce anxiety among students and shared laughter helps bring the class together.

It is also important that you do not unconsciously undermine the authority you have worked hard to establish. Often as teachers, we may share aspects of our personal lives as a way of building bonds with our students or to even illustrate a teaching point. However, show discretion in what you decide to share as this could weaken your authority. For example, refrain from sharing anything controversial as this may impact negatively on the way certain students view you, especially if what you share relates to any prevailing cultural or societal taboos. A situation like this could also result in a teacher being disciplined by the school authorities, which if made known to students, may harm your ability to control the class.

Getting Classes off to a Good Start

Thinking about the way we begin our classes is important as the beginning stages can set clear signals about the general tone of the class and what is expected of students. It is often the case that classes do not start on time. It is very difficult for teachers to get the class underway as soon as the bell rings as students arriving late eventually disrupt the first activity. To deal with this, it may be a good idea to set the students a task that is productive and academic as soon as they arrive at their desks. This could be as simple as having students read independently until all students are present. By assigning specific tasks for students as they enter class, the teacher is establishing a routine that helps instill in the students the right mindset for successful language learning.

Activities

A language lesson is essentially a simple collection of related activities designed to meet a set of clearly defined learning outcomes. Thus, the way activities are managed is a crucial area of consideration. When setting up an activity, make the learning objectives of the task clear from the outset as this imparts a sense of purpose and provides a focal point for the lesson. In addition, it is important to preview content and highlight and examine any important or challenging language or concepts, which if followed up with some concept checking, gives you and the students confidence in completing learning tasks.

When giving instructions, use clear and precise language. Repeat or rephrase your directions if necessary as it is often the case not all students are paying attention or were able to comprehend. Take time to explain the purpose of the task and make sure your students understand. Use an appropriate tone. If you use an enthusiastic tone, this will project onto the students and contribute towards building their enthusiasm for the task. It is important to describe the specifics of the task as this gives students a clear idea of what your expectations are and what the challenges involved include. This helps learners prepare appropriately. Where possible, provide examples of the end product. Especially for complex tasks, break them down into manageable chunks. So, this might require taking the time to pause and review at various critical stages.

Dealing with Critical Moments

No matter how good your class is, there is always the chance of inappropriate behaviour raising its head. The way inappropriate behaviour is dealt with can determine how disruptive the behaviour ultimately becomes and how likely it is to be repeated. Whatever the circumstances, it is always best to remain as calm as possible. A teacher who handles inappropriate behaviour with a certain amount of grace can gain empathy from the remainder of the class who can then exert some positive peer pressure on the disruptive student. Depending on the nature of the incident, the teacher may wish to deal with the issue after class to avoid disrupting the class or the teacher can also decide to deal with it immediately in the presence of the class as a way to ensure that the behaviour is not replicated by others. As a rule, it is recommended that if you deem the incident serious, you should consult with a supervisor as they can provide advice, assistance, or inform you of any necessary school disciplinary protocols.

Monitoring

Another key element of classroom management is monitoring. Monitoring involves teachers moving around the classroom, observing how well or poorly students are progressing through a task and working with students one-on-one as required. Most successful teachers have systematic procedures for supervising and encouraging students while they work. Monitoring allows teachers to assess the progress of individuals and the class as a whole and informs what needs to be re-taught or practised further.

There are some reasons why monitoring is a powerful classroom management tool. Firstly, it helps you to become aware of whole class dynamics. You can ascertain whether the pace of the lesson is too fast or too slow, and which students may need individual attention. This helps shift the focus from simply following the lesson plan to focusing on the needs of the learners themselves. While monitoring, teachers can listen for errors in the target language and address these immediately or in subsequent teaching. Monitoring allows teachers to intervene and address problems such as helping individuals or pairs who have clearly not grasped the aim of the task, or the language point being taught. Continual and consistent monitoring also provides a type of formative assessment for both individuals and the whole class, which becomes a good source of information for end-of-course reporting and feedback.

Monitoring also allows you to assess a task. We all know that some activities are more successful than others. Through monitoring, a teacher can evaluate the task and then decide whether to make future modifications or decide to replace it.

Monitoring can help maintain discipline as it helps ensure that learners, simply through the teacher's presence, stay focused and on task. Also, large classes can become restless and bored when some students finish a task early. In this case, the teacher can provide some short backup activities for early finishers or could use these faster learners to assist weaker students.

Using Rewards

The use of rewards as a classroom management tool is somewhat controversial. On the positive side, reward systems make behavioural expectations clear to students and make it easy for them to conform to those expectations. Rewards can have an immediate positive impact on motivation with students showing more interest, participating more, and acting more responsibly to receive rewards. However, according to some, rewards are a form of bribery and manipulation and do not result in the more valued intrinsic form of motivation. Children, it is argued, are more focused on the reward and less so on their learning and developing good behavioural habits. However, if we shift the intention of using rewards from one that seeks to control behaviour to one that aims to provide positive feedback, rewards can help foster intrinsic motivation. For this to happen, it is important to highlight a student's specific skills or achievement and their hard work when giving a reward. Instead of saying, "Well done! You completed the task. Now take this sticker.", say something like, "Wow! You worked really hard, and now you are writing very clear paragraphs that always begin with a topic sentence. Here's a little reward for your achievement." In this way, the student becomes aware of what they did well, which helps them become a more reflective and independent learner more capable of repeating that success.

If you do decide to implement a reward system in your class, there are three simple approaches you can choose from.

A token-based system: with the individual student, set a shortlist of achievable goals which are rewarded with things like stickers or points when they are achieved.

Group points: based on a class-wide set of learning and behavioural goals, groups or tables collectively earn rewards competing against other groups or tables.

Class points: The entire class earns rewards together for meeting previously identified goals.

You can decide to use a combination of the three approaches as this ensures that all students, at some point, have a realistic opportunity of receiving a reward.

To sum up, classroom management is a fairly broad topic, and this article has discussed just some of the more important areas to consider when looking at ways to help your classes to run more smoothly and effectively. It is an area where all teachers, no matter their level of experience, can improve, and develop. Hopefully, this article has provided you with some useful tips and information which can be used as a springboard for further reading and discussion with colleagues.