

Classroom Management - art or skill?

jeremy_harmer I sometimes think that managing classes is sort of taken for granted, yet organising classrooms correctly/appropriately is one of the best ways of creating good conditions for learning. Yet some areas - like discipline, for example are problematic for many. Likewise use of L1 etc. That's what I thought we could all have a look at. So what do the rest of you think?

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#### Student teachers

**Bob** I don't speak the L1 of most of my students - any tips for managing low-level classes?

**jeremy\_harmer** Bob, in what kind of way?

**Bob** Explaining ideas/concepts, that kind of thing. I feel exercises don't work because the sts don't understand.

**jeremy\_harmer** Yes, Bob, I know what you mean. That's when we call upon all our skills as demonstrators, mime artists, clear context providers to make things clear. Does that make sense? Or are there other aspects of 'management' that you want to talk about?

**Babble** Would this be an ideal opportunity to take advantage of stronger students to actually model the task or activity?

**jeremy\_harmer** Babble, yes, that's a wonderful idea. I mean teachers have always selected stronger students to do some tasks first (you don't generally get the weakest student to act out in front of the class before the others), but if you can get students to help you do things physically and/or help in weaker groups, that can be good, I think.

**Bob** I have tried that, but I don't want them to feel they are 'teaching' the class.

**jeremy\_harmer** They shouldn't have to feel they're teaching, though there is the danger that their colleagues will get fed up with them (the old peer correction resentment thing) but I think we are bound to rely on students to help us along, since it's what they're doing that concerns us.

**Babble** I think it depends on the nationality of your classes. Some students, for example from Spain or Greece love 'teaching' as they are confident to learn in this way.

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Stages of a lesson

sarah I would like some advice on new and effective ways to do feedback after fluency tasks - that involve everyone rather than just reporting back. Any ideas?

laura I think it's important that learners know what's going on in a class rather than being passive active participants, if you understand what I mean Getting them to realise what you're doing at different stages of the lesson. That way they take more responsibility for their part in the classroom learning environment.

jeremy_harmer Laura, I'm with you there. It starts at the most basic level with staging lessons clearly so that they know where they are 'at'. But I suspect you mean more than that. Don't you?

Babble I agree, and important they realise what THEY are doing. This is often taken for granted when it shouldn't be.

jeremy_harmer Babble do you think it is enough to explain what *you* want them to do or is it more than that?

Georgina Does anyone have any good suggestions on getting them to realise what they are doing? Would you discuss your lesson plans with your students?

Bob At our school, we have to have our weekly lesson plans on the classroom wall so sts can see what they are doing, and have done.

jeremy_harmer Bob, is that a good thing? And how easy is it to stick to those plans?

Bob Well, then you get the problem that if you change your plans the sts want

to know why.
jeremy_harmer And one of the teacher's management 'skills' - or perhaps we should say abilities, is to be able to indicate by their behaviour which of these things students are expected to do/encouraged to do. Do you think that the physical layout of the class - having students move around has a lot to do with this?

Babble Jeremy, it's more than that, how about them discovering for themselves why they are doing it and evaluating it themselves?

laura I think it's useful to go over some key jargon at the beginning of a course things like accuracy practice, fluency, etc so they can relate to what's expected of them and then when they feel overwhelmed, for example, in a listening activity, you can remind them what the expectations are.

jeremy_harmer Or, Babble, going further, how about getting them near the beginning of a course to think about the various things they will be called upon to do and gradually as the course goes on having them suggest alternatives and say how they feel about what's been happening.

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### Young learners

**Georgina** Here's a question related to noise about young learners from Cat  
**cat** Any tips for young learner management? Especially in after school classes?  
**jeremy\_harmer** Cat, what problems (if any) do you encounter with after school classes? And how do you cope with them?

**Humphrey** Yes, what about Young Learners - I'm tearing my hair out!

**zak** Yes Cat, that's a good question. Any experiences from you?

**jeremy\_harmer** Babble, yeah, it can be. But just simple things like allowing students to say what they liked/didn't like in the last two weeks starts to give them some 'ownership' of the class.

**cat** They don't take it seriously and tend to shout a lot because they don't think they are still in school.

**jeremy\_harmer** Please don't tear your hair out Humphrey (mine disappears all on its own!) Young learners respond well to action, things to do, content, content, content. Yet some of the best moments of all in L1 primary classes are story circles when they sit and just listen to the magic of stories.

**zak** Maybe lots of total physical response, songs, games etc - that actively encourage exuberance.

**cat** Yes, but if they have to move around it gets out of control!

**zak** Moving around is OK but my colleagues complain about noise.

**Bob** Yes, noise is an issue for other teachers.

**laura** That's true. Any ideas for quiet communicative practice that's fun?!

**jeremy\_harmer** Laura, there are some wonderful written communicative activities, of course like giving students email facsimiles (if you're not in a computer suite) and having them write emails to each other.

**Bob** Chinese whispers?

**jeremy\_harmer** And Bob beat me to it with cws. And of course you can always make group work competitive in some way so that students don't want anyone else to hear that tends to make them talk very quietly.

**Babble** Yes Jeremy it's a great idea! unfortunately such practical considerations as time, space, noise, no of students etc often make some teachers feel that letting students think for themselves is a recipe for disaster. And change..... Young Learners have very small attention spans so activities need to be varied regularly.

**jeremy\_harmer** A place to start with noise is the teacher's voice, of course. Quiet voices (in principle) force people to listen!

**Georgina** That's a good point Cat. when I taught YLs, I found that the promise of an 'exciting game' at the end of the session was enough to keep them motivated throughout with, as Babble mentioned, shorter activities to keep their attention.

**Humphrey** Good point!

**laura** But maybe they only move around in a restricted way. E.g. sitting in their

seats and pointing, putting their hands on their heads etc some 'silent activities' but which involve intensive listening and response and are quite fun.

- Humphrey** Try Eko & Tina. It's a course which allows Ss to do all the activities at their desks.
- cat** Nice idea, who publishes it?
- Georgina** I think you'll find it's Longman.
- laura** Also try some singing with actions standing up near their seats, for example not tearing around but not workbook exercises.
- laura** Ultimately however, the threat of workbook can help make them behave a bit better I can't blame them for being restless after a full day, can you?
- jeremy\_harmer** Laura, that's it. of course they're going to be restless, so we have to engage them somehow, and all the ideas here seem to me to be going some way towards doing just that...

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Large groups

- laura** Jeremy. Have you had much experience with large groups. And if so, do you alter your approach?
- jeremy_harmer** When I taught in Mexico for a number of years I regularly taught 30 students at a time. But for many people around the world that's not large. How large do you mean?
- Babble** Yes.... in many countries teachers have more than 35 students in a class. Is this art, skill or luck?
- jeremy_harmer** Well more than 35 is bad luck in some ways, of course, but it has advantages too.
- jeremy_harmer** I think what I believe is that you lose some things (like the individual interaction) in a big class, but you gain something else, like the possibility of creating a really special group atmosphere. The trick, I think, is in showing interest in individuals whilst maintaining (creating?) a great group feeling.
- sarah** Well in teacher training sessions I'm sure you've managed bigger groups than this and you actually get them to do things. How different is this that c/r management with efl learners?
- Humphrey** I think it's in some ways easier to manage larger classes as we select appropriate activities on the basis of size. Is that a terrible cop out?
- Georgina** Jeremy, do you have some basic tips and suggestions for everyone. The basic skills a teacher needs - for any number of sts.
- sarah** I think what would be interesting is if we could define some basic skills for getting people to do things - however big the group.
- jeremy_harmer** Well Georgina, I'd say that the first thing a teacher needs to do is engage students right off the bat, and that may be with the first activity, the first story, the first contact that ss have with the new T. After that what matters to me (well, to students) is that somehow (how difficult is this?!!) we show we recognise them as individuals I'll never forget the teenager who told me that a good teacher is 'someone who knows our names' but then (help I'll stop in a minute) we use eye contact, we encourage students to contribute, we set at least some tasks that can be done by students working in pairs and groups, and, and.... comments?
- laura** agree!!!!
- sarah** Does it come down to confidence?
- Bob** or personality?
- jeremy_harmer** What, Sarah, you mean the T's confidence?
- laura** I think the art is that - being a natural engage. Many of us have to learn skills but there are naturals, I think, that students follow. Am I alone in this?
- jeremy_harmer** No Laura, you are not. I remember a bunch of teens telling me about the best teacher in a school and when asked how she kept control they said well, 'she just looks at us!' How do you train Ts for that?
- Georgina** Perhaps you can't train them for that, but they can certainly learn different

tricks along the way. I taught a class of sts who though I could read their minds

jeremy_harmer Georgina, that's very interesting since it's exactly what ss say about some of their teachers how amazing that they seem to know exactly what's going on, and I think that's a clue isn't it?

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### Professional classroom managers

**sarah** We can all become professional classroom managers and effective teachers without being pied pipers, but if you are lucky enough. To get a 'natural' who is really into your learning and your progress, that's a real plus.

**jeremy\_harmer** Teacher confidence comes from experience, planning (for the insecure, especially) and support from colleagues, doesn't it?

**sarah** explain

**jeremy\_harmer** If teachers are permanently watching, listening, smelling. absorbing, just immersed in understanding what students are doing it contributes a lot towards the way they handle the class.

**jeremy\_harmer** I still keep quoting researchers in Oxford who identified a major aspect of good teaching, namely that when asked about good classes they had given they always replied by talking not about themselves but about what their students had done.

**Georgina** and don't forget to come to next month's chat with Jeremy and also Gerald Kelly, author of How to Teach pronunciation on Feb 26th at 17:00 GMT

**Babble** Jeremy that's a good point... listening. Its Sts who we want to speak and we want them to speak meaningfully. This will only happen if they believe we are listening not just to how they say it but what they actually say too.

**jeremy\_harmer** Yes, Babble, that's it. Though of course the ability to hold a class by an activity or something you're saying or doing is also pretty important if you can manage it.

**Georgina** Great point Babble.

**Humphrey** It's not only a question of interest in content but respect and sensitivity to them as learners.

**jeremy\_harmer** Yes, Humphrey, that's absolutely it. And of course, Humphrey, that's where the whole behaviour thing comes in and why we say to trainee teachers that dealing with non-cooperation can make or break a class.

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The best?

Georgina Oh, one last question Jeremy...

zak Who's the best teacher you ever had and does s/he fit in this category?

jeremy_harmer Gosh, Zak, that's really difficult. The best teaching *session* I ever had was from a rather grumpy Rinvoluceri because he made me see something I hadn't understood before but the best lesson was a private music one when my teacher lit up a light bulb in my head. At university? David Crystal. The best lecturer I've ever had because he knew that a good lecture needs exceptional content, and some breaks for laughs and relaxation.

zak He's very good, I agree.

Georgina Thanks everyone. The next live chat session with Jeremy Harmer and Gerald Kelly (author of How to Teach Pronunciation) to discuss Pronunciation on 26th Feb at 17:00 GMT (Please check in The Forum at www.eltforum.com/forum.html as this may change.