Module Four: Classroom Management

Introduction

Recent academic research has shown that teachers’ actions in their classrooms have as much impact on student learning and achievement as school policies relating to curriculum development, assessment and testing, individual teaching styles and cultural attitudes towards educational institutions. One of the classroom teacher’s most important jobs is managing the classroom effectively as students cannot learn in a chaotic, poorly managed environment. Although the term ‘classroom management’ is often used to mean behaviour management, classroom management covers a variety of aspects including maintenance of the learning environment, planning and preparation, the meeting of basic needs and management of the physical space in which learning is taking place.

Central to the dynamics of classroom management is the importance of creating a balance between teacher actions that provide clear consequences for unacceptable behaviour and teacher actions that recognise and reward acceptable behaviour. It is also vital to ‘get off to a good start’ when starting a new teaching position or teaching a new class for the first time. How the room is arranged can have a profound effect on the students’ first impressions of a new teacher and can help with identifying and implementing rules and operating procedures. It may seem like common sense but familiarise yourself with the room in which you will be teaching in advance and decide how the physical makeup of the room, such as the arrangement of furniture, can best serve your needs and the needs of your students. If possible, get a class list or register before planning your first lesson and make a seating plan. As students enter the classroom, direct them to an allocated seat (or if possible make name cards and tape them to the individual desks). On occasion, particularly if teaching young adults, you may have to deal with a good deal of resistance to seating plans but it is important to be assertive and insist that students sit where they are told to (at least for the initial few lessons). The effectiveness of seating plans is two-fold. Firstly, on a practical level, armed with a key map of who is sitting where, the teacher can learn the names of his/her new students very quickly and efficiently. Secondly, the seating plan immediately establishes an appropriate level of dominance and control without being overbearing or officious.

An ‘Old School’ myth often repeated to newly qualified teachers in state education in the UK was to ‘not smile until Easter’ and although this austere approach is now considered something of a relic of the 1950s grammar school system, it is important to maintain a clear distance between yourself and your role as a teacher on the one hand and the students on the other. In this respect, the quality of teacher-student relationships provides the benchmark for all other aspects of classroom management. Teachers who are able to uphold efficient teacher-student relationships generally have fewer discipline problems and are able to manage situations more effectively. Effective teacher-student relationships are not directly related to the teacher’s personality or building what is sometimes referred to as a ‘critical friendship’. Rather, the most effective teacher-student relationships are characterised by specific teacher behaviours: modelling and projecting suitable
levels of dominance; exhibiting appropriate levels of cooperation; and showing sensitivity and awareness of students with additional needs.

Modelling And Projecting Suitable Levels of Dominance.

‘Dominance’ in this sense is not taken to mean implementing influential control and authority over others, dominance in the classroom is taken to mean the teacher’s ability to provide clear principles and strong direction. Teachers can develop and project dominance by implementing clear behaviour expectations and learning targets and by being assertive. Teachers can establish the expectations for behaviour in two ways: by establishing clear rules and procedures and thereby providing consequences for student behaviour via rewards and sanctions. The rules and procedures relate not only to day-to-day ‘housekeeping’ matters such as arriving on time for lessons, use of mobile phones and food and drink in the classroom, but also to the use of classroom materials and equipment and how the students interact with each other.

Ideally, the class should establish these rules and procedures through discussion and mutual consent between teacher and students. On the weekend course your teacher trainer will have introduced you to the Classroom Contract method (see Unit Two: Getting Started). This can be a useful tool for getting to know your students and for establishing clear expectations but how are these ground rules put into effective practice?

Stop Reading And Reflect:

Think for a few moments about your own experience of education as both a child and an adult, how did your most effective teachers maintain control of the class? What techniques did they use?

The Use of Non-Verbal Communication In The Classroom

Many skilled and experienced teachers use a variety of non-verbal cues and signals to interact with their classes. These can vary from placing a finger to their lips or raising a hand for silence, to counting down numbers on their hands. One useful technique is to encourage students to signal back to the teacher that they are ready to learn. For example, when the students enter the classroom, many may be holding private conversations in their own language which continue as they take their seats and get out their books and equipment. The teacher stands at the front of the class with his hand raised. This is to signal to the class to also raise their hand when they are ‘ready to learn’; students who continue to chat will quickly become aware when most of the class is sitting quietly with their hands raised. The teacher could reinforce this by making a game out of it – who is ‘ready to learn’ first? – with an appropriate reward for the winners and/or appropriate sanctions for the student who is the last to raise their hand. Another variation on this method is to issue the students with two flash cards which they are required to bring to every class they attend. One card is green and one is red, when they are ‘ready to learn’ they hold up the green card, if they have a problem and are not able to start the class they hold up a red card (this can be adapted for young learners by using animal pictures or other fun symbols). This process of establishing a consistent routine to be followed at the start of each
class allows the teacher to model and emphasise their expectations consistently and effectively.

**Targets And Learning Goals**

One method for educational practitioners to develop and maintain strong strategies for classroom management is through imparting clearly the content and format of a lesson. Important teacher actions to achieve this goal include:

- Setting up clear aims and objectives in relation to learning targets at the start of a lesson or course.
- Providing regular feedback on progress and achievement.
- Revising and, if necessary, modifying the learning targets and goals.
- Providing comprehensive feedback at the end of the period of instruction through the use of plenary questions and summaries.

A useful technique for instigating transparent learning targets is through the use of rubrics. A rubric is a series of statements that set up learning targets by outlining the criteria for achievement and providing descriptors for levels of attainment. For example, a teacher has planned a lesson on uses of the present perfect continuous tense when talking about hobbies and interests. The teacher could then present the students with the following three-point rubric:

**Point 3:** I can understand the form and structure of the target language. I can successfully solve test exercises. I can reproduce the present perfect continuous tense in authentic conversation. I understand the relationship of present perfect continuous to other tenses such as the present perfect simple and past simple.

**Point 2:** I can understand the basic structure of the target language. I can successfully solve test exercises. I can reproduce the present perfect continuous in controlled practice exercises but make some mistakes. I am not confident that I fully comprehend the relationship of the present perfect continuous to other tenses such as past simple.

**Point 1:** I have some confusion or misunderstandings with one or more of the following: the form and structure of the target language and its application and uses. I can attempt practice exercises and solve some test questions.

The students are invited to place themselves on the scale of previous achievement and competency at level 1, 2 or 3 and to decide which level they will aim to be at by the end of the lesson or course. The majority of students will make realistic assessments of their current abilities and potential and this self-reflective approach helps students to take ownership of their learning and negotiate their own targets, goals and personal ambitions.
Task: 3A

Think of a specific teaching point, not necessarily English language-related (could be an element of mathematics such as long multiplication or division) and write down a simple three-point rubric using the ‘I can understand…’ model above. Make sure to clearly differentiate between the points with point 3 for high competency and points 2 and 1 with elements to improve upon.

Strategies For Assertive Leadership In The Classroom

We have mentioned above about the need for new teachers to develop suitable strategies for classroom management and project a position of dominance in the classroom without infringing upon the natural rights of their students to express themselves and explore their own self-development. The key here is for teachers to exhibit assertive behaviour in the classroom via a series of common and familiar strategies. The use of assertive body language can be maintained by adopting an upright posture. When dealing with a student who has transgressed the classroom rules, face the offending student but be mindful of keeping an appropriate distance from them so as not to directly intimidate or threaten. The teacher’s facial expression should remain consistent with the message being imparted. Tone of voice is very important in such situations. Speak clearly and directly at a level slightly above the usual level of instruction but avoid shouting or speaking too quickly. Keep the message clear and concise, do not labour the point and avoid any negative emotions such as anger or irritation. It is important to be vigilant regarding inappropriate behaviour and be consistent in flagging it up. Be wary of becoming drawn into a negative conflict situation by being preoccupied with student denials, arguments or blame apportioning. It is also important to listen to the students who can proffer legitimate and reasoned explanations for their actions.

Appropriate Levels of Cooperation

Cooperation is characterised by a concern for the needs and opinions of others. Although not the antithesis of dominance, cooperation certainly occupies a different realm. Whereas dominance focuses on the teacher as the driving force in the classroom, cooperation focuses on the students and teacher functioning as a team. The interaction of these two dynamics – dominance and cooperation – is a central force in effective teacher-student relationships. Several strategies can foster appropriate levels of cooperation.

Take a Personal Interest in Students

A key method of developing appropriate levels of cooperation is to take a personal interest in each student in the class. Most students appreciate personal attention from the teacher. Although busy teachers do not always have the space between lessons and planning commitments for extensive interaction with all students, some teacher actions can communicate personal interest and concern without it becoming too time-consuming. Talk informally with students before, during and after class about their interests. Acknowledge students outside of class and make an effort to
speak to them informally whenever possible. If a student is involved in extracurricular activities, such as sports or performing arts, show support and encouragement and congratulate them on their achievements and ask them to reflect upon them.

Positive Strategies for Classroom Interaction:
It is important to project balance and fairness in classroom interactions and this can be achieved by following a few simple strategies. Maintain eye contact with each student by scanning the room and moving freely around the classroom space. Make sure that the seating arrangement allows the teacher and students clear and easy access to aisles and exits. Always attribute the ownership of ideas to the students who initiated them. In a class debate or discussion or when summarising it is good practice to say ‘as Hanna has just mentioned’ or ‘David has just made an interesting point’, etc. This helps to encourage all students to participate in class discussions and interactions and helps them to feel that their ideas are valued and relevant. Always allow an appropriate waiting time for all students to gather their thoughts in response to questions, encourage and cajole them, making it clear that there is nothing wrong with getting it wrong.

Awareness of High-Needs Students
Classroom teachers meet daily with a broad cross section of students. In general, 12–22 per cent of all students in school suffer from mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties, and relatively few receive specialist treatment. Teachers working in a private institution may find that information about a particular student’s needs may be imparted only on a need-to-know basis. Although the classroom teacher is certainly not in a position to directly address severe emotional and behavioural problems, teachers with effective classroom management skills quickly become aware of high-needs students and have a repertoire of specific techniques for meeting some of their needs.

- Passive students fall into two subcategories: those who fear relationships and those who fear failure. Teachers can build strong relationships with these students by refraining from criticism, rewarding small successes and creating a classroom climate in which students feel safe from aggressive people.
- The category of aggressive students comprises three subcategories: hostile, oppositional, and covert. Hostile students often have poor anger control, low capacity for empathy and an inability to see the consequences of their actions. Oppositional students exhibit milder forms of behaviour problems but they consistently resist following rules, argue with adults, use harsh language and tend to annoy others. Students in the covert subcategory may be quite pleasant at times, but they are often nearby when trouble starts and they never quite do what authority figures ask of them. Strategies for helping aggressive students include creating behaviour contracts and providing immediate rewards and consequences. Most of all, teachers must keep in mind that aggressive students, although they may appear highly resistant to behaviour change, are still children who are experiencing a significant amount of fear, anxiety and pain.
• Students with attention problems fall into two subcategories: hyperactive and inattentive. These students may respond well when teachers contract with them to manage behaviours; teach them basic concentration, study and thinking skills; help them divide tasks into manageable parts; reward their successes; and assign them a peer tutor.

• Students in the perfectionist category are driven to succeed at unattainable levels. They are self-critical, have low self-esteem and feel inferior. Teachers can often help these students by encouraging them to develop more realistic standards, helping them to accept mistakes and giving them opportunities to tutor other students.

• Socially Withdrawn/Excluded students have difficulty making and keeping friends. They may stand too close and touch others in annoying ways, talk too much and misread other’s comments. Teachers can help these students by counselling them about social behaviours or placing them with students who model good behaviour and display a capacity for empathy and understanding.