

Behaviour management

Introduction

We decided to include a chapter on the generic skill of behaviour management since we feel it is such a vital aspect of successful language teaching. It would make sense to read this in conjunction with chapter 19 on motivation since the two are clearly related. It is an old adage that teaching is '90% crowd control'. We can quibble over the percentage, but for both new and experienced teachers, it remains an issue at the centre of attention. Trainee/pre-service teachers usually report that it is their number one priority. If the students are not behaving as you want, it is a source of great stress for you as a teacher and of course it means that the students are not achieving their potential.

Research on the causes of and solutions to poor student behaviour is actually not very widespread, but there have been many surveys of its extent and nature. In the USA, in the school year 2011-12, there were a recorded 130,000 expulsions and roughly 7 million suspensions across all K-12 schools (primary and secondary). According to a Department for Education (DfE) report (2012) there is "mixed evidence" about the extent of poor behaviour reported by teachers in England and Wales. Surveys of teachers generally show that students behave well. All surveys suggest that the main source of misbehaviour in high schools is what is referred to as 'low-level misbehaviour' or 'low-level disruption'. This would include not paying attention, students talking when they should not and using mobile phones inappropriately. Fortunately surveys suggest that although cases of students being argumentative or using inappropriate language are quite common, violence or threats to teachers are rare.

Surveys of students themselves have shown that they see behaviour in their schools as generally good (e.g. research in the UK by BMG (2008), but a majority state that there is some disruption to their learning (e.g. in England, Ofsted reports from 2007 and 2008). International evidence shows that students perceive varying levels of disruption to lessons. The OECD average for answering 'never or hardly ever' or 'in some lessons' to the statement 'The teacher has to wait a long time for students to quieten down' was 72%.

Language teachers may feel that their job offers particular challenges. The fact that you are often, perhaps nearly always, speaking in another language means you may feel students are more likely to 'switch off' and resort to low-level disruption. In addition, in some schools and contexts, students are not always predisposed to want to learn other languages. As a consequence you may face the "why are we doing this?" question even more often than other subject teachers.

We do not have the space to go into great detail about behaviour, but we recommend Tom Bennett's widely read book *The Behaviour Guru: Behaviour Management Solutions for Teachers* (2010). In 2015 Tom was appointed by the UK government to head up a committee, not the first, to look into the whole issue of behaviour in schools. In the introduction to his book he notes that one in three teachers in Britain leave the profession within five years and half of those cite bad behaviour as the main reason. So it's a serious issue which deserves attention.

Here we present our own potted guide to some common approaches to ensuring good behaviour in the classroom, with a focus on the language teacher.

"Why are we doing this?"

Teaching a language can seem like a struggle at times and you may occasionally get the above question from students, so let's face it head-on. It is not an easy response since your well-intentioned and valid arguments about broadening cultural horizons, developing a tolerance to different cultures, providing an experience of language learning and improving general communication skills may not be very convincing for your lively class of 14 year-olds. You never quite know what will motivate a particular student. A British person of our acquaintance who confesses to having been lazy at school reports that what switched him on to French were the words *food*, *women* and *travel*. He is now a fluent French speaker.

Sometimes we need to accept the reality that students are doing a subject they have to or choose subjects for purely pragmatic reasons. One languages advisor reported she had concluded, after years of experience, that the only thing which was almost guaranteed to motivate students was the prospect of an important examination to be done.

Work, holidays, leisure, intercultural understanding, life skills and... exams

With a view to contextualising the learning of languages, you could have a debate about the very nature of education with a class. Your response to the question might begin along the lines: "How useful do you think it will be to do quadratic equations later in life? How useful will it be to understand wave motion? Will your knowledge of glacial erosion stand you in good stead in the future?" Students will, for many reasons, be more likely to value subjects such as maths and science than some others, including languages. Perhaps you could play the utilitarian card and say: "It is quite likely you will, at some point, use your (language X) to help a visitor, when you go on holiday, to understand a menu, even in a job. Do you know how many people live and work abroad?" Some students may not know that there are roughly 45 million Spanish speakers in the USA, that over 250,000 Britons have their main home in France, a greater number still in Spain. They may be unaware that, according to the French embassy, in 2016 at least 300,000 French citizens live in London. You will no doubt at some point talk about the use of languages such as French, German and Spanish across the world and you will also need to dispel the myth that everyone speaks English.

Essentially, of course, we learn languages for various reasons: to be able to speak when travelling or in a job, to engage in leisure pursuits such as watching film, to develop intercultural understanding and tolerance, to further develop general literacy and communication skills and to pass examinations which may help you access further education. Here is a list of arguments, some more serious than others, you could supply or hand out, to students.

Reasons to learn another language

1. If you ever move abroad you will be able to talk with local people.
2. You will need the language for your work in your own country or abroad.
3. You will find the language useful when you go on holiday or travel through the country.
4. You will need to help visitors who speak another language.
5. You may need the language for study or research in another field.
6. You will need it to learn about the culture, civilisation or history of another country.
7. Maybe you just like the challenge of learning another language.
8. It will help you look at your own language or culture.
9. You may just enjoy using different sounds and words. It's fun.
10. Perhaps you enjoy solving grammar problems and translating.
11. It will make you seem clever – people think learning languages is hard!
12. Maybe you do not want to look stupid when you meet non-English speakers.
13. Perhaps you wish to show courtesy and respect to others.

14. You will want to watch films in their original language.
15. You may like to understand songs in the original language.
16. Perhaps you want to have an advantage over others in the job market.
17. Research shows learning languages can make you smarter in other areas.
18. Learning certain languages will help with your own grammar and spelling.
19. You will become a more tolerant and rounded person.
20. You can have secret conversations which others do not understand.

Creating an ordered environment for learning

It is not straightforward to codify what will work for certain with every class on every occasion. To some extent good classroom control will stem from effective lesson planning and your personal organisation, e.g. preparedness and punctuality. An enormous amount will depend on your ability to get on the same wavelength, both emotionally and cognitively, with your students, as well as your ability to adapt as you go along. Let us look at a number of strategies you can employ to encourage the best behaviour.

Classroom organisation and seating plans

Firstly, what about the spatial arrangement of the classroom? There has been research into this issue. For example Dolina MacAuley's (1990) '*Classroom Environment: a literature review*'. She examined studies comparing various arrangements: table groups, horseshoes and rows facing the front. Her conclusion is not very surprising:

Seating children in rows facilitates on-task behaviour and academic learning; whereas more open arrangements, such as clusters, facilitate social exchanges among students.

Having experimented over the years with tables facing the front, group tables and horseshoes, we believe that with large classes, tables facing the front works best. This arrangement discourages inappropriate talking and helps students focus on you when they need to. Tables can easily be moved for group work or just moved to the edge of the class if you need an open space. If you seat students in clusters it may be awkward for them to turn to see you and, in any case, this arrangement will be less than perfect for whole class tasks such as listening, watching a video or doing an assessment. This is not a 'traditional versus progressive' issue, by the way; it is principally one of practical convenience. For advanced level groups which may be smaller and where class control is barely an issue, you may want to move the tables into a horseshoe pattern to facilitate discussion between all students and good listening habits.

Seating plans are strongly advised; indeed, the school or department you work in may have a policy on this. You could consider a boy-girl arrangement where it is feasible and culturally appropriate. You will have sought advice on any combinations of students who need to be kept apart or who may benefit from being together. It could be, for example, that a student with a hearing difficulty, needs to sit just in front of you to read your lips. With brand new classes you may feel that an alphabetical arrangement is just fine. Teachers often use charts and photos of students to help them memorise names as soon as possible.

Starts and ends

If you have your own classroom and classes come to you they normally line up outside in an orderly way in silence. At this point you could greet the class at the door, deal with any dress or appearance infringements and engage in some informal chit-chat (maybe in L2). You would expect the class to enter quietly, possibly in total silence. With younger classes you may have a routine which facilitates a brisk and orderly entry, e.g. a regular song to sing, alphabet to recite or numbers to chant. You could have younger classes count to 20 in L2, telling them to have their classroom equipment out on their tables by the time the number 20 is reached. With potentially unruly classes, on the other hand, where you are going to be doing an oral starter activity with no use of equipment, you may insist that nothing is taken out to prevent students fiddling about with pencil cases etc. This is a professional judgment which only you can make.

Depending on your school's policy, you may expect your class to stand quietly in front of you until completely settled before you give a formal greeting, perhaps with a friendly "how are you?" in L2. Routines like this are valuable; students appreciate the clarity and familiarity of the expectation. You may even carry on with a brief oral 'warm-up' or starter while the class are still standing. If you are going into a class where students are already present it is not unreasonable to ask them to stand up in silence to ensure you have everyone's attention at the outset. Occasionally in this instance you might find it helpful to request the class to leave the room and line up outside so the room can be tidied or rearranged and authority restored.

Preparation for the end of the lesson should be done in a timely fashion so there is no unseemly rush which makes you look inefficient. You need to have a tidying routine of putting materials away, standing up, saying goodbye formally and leaving in an orderly way, for example one row at a time. You do not want students crowding at the door; it is both uncivilised and unsafe. In the early stages it is wise to adhere strictly to your routines until your class is well trained. Persevere until things are as you want them to be. Some classes misbehave simply because they have not been properly trained in routines.

Transitions

Experienced teachers are good at managing transition moments in lessons, those times when you move from one task to the next. To avoid this being a moment when excessive noise is created or behaviour deteriorates, transitions need to be smooth and quick. There are various ways of signalling the end of a pair or group work activity. Some teachers use L2 countdowns, others have a raised arm signal or use a signal such as a clap, a bell, timer, musical cue or tap on the desk. A transition may be the time to recap or do a formative assessment (assessment for learning) task: "Was there anything you wanted to say, but couldn't? What went well?" You then need to move briskly to the next activity with the minimum of fuss, ensuring you have the full attention of every student.

Rewards and sanctions

You need to be familiar with the school's policy on sanctions and apply it rigorously. This includes insisting on any uniform or dress code which may exist. Students may judge that if you are strict on their personal appearance, you are strict on other issues. You have a duty, in this regard, to your colleagues who you hope will be applying the same standards. Good classroom control is far from 'not smiling before Christmas'; it is much more about applying consistent standards in a fair, business-like and often friendly way.

Schools usually have a system of rewards, such as merit points and certificates, which are often highly prized by students, even some older ones. You will need to assess for yourself how much you reward, but the consensus from research is that praise should be selective and focused more on hard work than natural ability. Influential psychologist Carol Dweck (2012) argues that students praised in this fashion are more likely to develop a positive 'growth mindset' (the notion that innate intelligence and talent are just a starting point; they can always be further developed through hard work and dedication).

Positive behaviour management

Managing behaviour is not about reacting to negative situations; it is much more about creating a suitable climate where appropriate behaviour is the norm. These points are adapted from Paul Dix (2011) of the company, Pivotal Education. We have observed excellent teachers using them to good effect:

1. **Set a positive model** – at the door, smile, be enthusiastic about working with the children and about the content of the lesson, change your focus and praise children doing the right thing rather than criticising misdemeanours.

2. **Model the behaviour you expect to see** and make this model overt and easily understood, discuss how successful learners deal with the frustrations of learning.
3. **Maintain an assertive/positive approach** – remove the negatives from your verbal and physical language, be specific about the behaviour you expect, provide clear choices structured around rewards and sanctions, resist hostility or passivity, be assertive even if you do not feel totally in control.
4. **Each day a clean sheet** – make sure that previous incidents have been dealt with and if any reference to them needs to be made, this should be done before entry into the classroom. Make a conscious decision to refresh your expectations for the class and for individuals; you do not know what traumatic event may have led to their behaviour on a previous occasion.
5. **Establish explicit rituals and routines** – for example how you greet the class or how students should ask questions. Some could be written on clear signs and posted in two or three areas of the room.
6. **Acknowledgement** – be unfailingly polite, say thank you, acknowledge every child on a personal level and with an informal tone/register, making sure that even the quietest children are acknowledged for their efforts.
7. **Positive reinforcement and encouragement** – praise good behaviour when you see it and build a positive atmosphere in which children feel emotionally safe.
8. **Praise** – this should be personal, sincere, specific and age appropriate.
9. **Reward** – use positive contact with the home, class rewards negotiated with the children.
10. **Redirect low-level disruption** – use non-verbal cues, movement and positioning around the room, proximity, use verbal cues. Don't be afraid to change the activity to something more engaging at this point as the behaviour may be a sign that the previous activity has run its course, or not been very successful.
11. **Provide clear choices and time to make a decision** – "You can choose to finish the task like the rest of the students or stay behind with me after the lesson. Have a think about what you'd like to do, I'll come back and speak to you in a moment."
12. **Private verbal warning** – use eye contact, from at or below their eye level where possible, using a positive model of the child's previous good behaviour to encourage them to make better choices, making sure that they understand

they have been given a warning and what will happen if they ignore it; make it a significant moment.

13. **Apply sanctions with care** – show empathy, patience, care, your disappointment, concern. Attack the behaviour and don't label the student.
14. **Slow down the process of applying sanctions** - give the child time to make the right choices, find opportunities to reinforce positive choices and comment when they do the right thing.

Demeanour

John Robertson (1989), in his book about classroom control and student/teacher relationships, identifies aspects of body language which contribute to the development of positive relationships.

1. **Body orientation:** facing the student head-on in a one-to-one situation could be perceived as confrontational. Sitting side-by-side may lead to greater cooperation.
2. **Posture:** standing straight with chin held high indicates a desire to dominate in a whole class teaching situation. Leaning towards a student with a smile is encouraging when doing whole class interactions.
3. **Head movements:** nodding is important for signalling permission to speak and agreement. Reticent students can be encouraged to speak using this technique.
4. **Eye contact:** this can be seen as a sign of mutual respect. When speaking to the whole class, regularly scan from left to right and front to back.
5. **Use of voice:** it is worth exaggerating volume, intonation, speed and expressiveness to get across precise meanings. A rising intonation can imply you are making a plea, rather than exerting natural authority. A monotonous voice may lead students to switch off. Projecting the voice well conveys authority, but raising the voice or shouting are best done only rarely. Shouting may be an indication of loss of control. In fact, speaking fairly quietly can have the advantage of getting classes to listen more intently. Classes do not like teachers who raise their voice or shout all the time and, in any case, doing so puts a strain on the voice, especially at the start of the year. A very occasional raised voice can be necessary and effective.
6. **Facial expressions:** exaggerated expressions, smiles, frowns, expressions of enthusiasm, inquisitive or expectant looks, agreement, displays of pleasure – these can all be part of your repertoire.

As far as your general manner is concerned, it helps to adopt a firm, business-like, but pleasant, enthusiastic and usually smiling manner. If you project confidence to classes, they will have more confidence in you. It is worth stressing, however, there is no one way to manage a class and it is a great idea to observe experienced colleagues to see how they put themselves over to their classes. This may vary considerably from person to person: a young teacher, not much older than the students, may need to adopt a demeanour which distances them to a certain extent, whereas an older teacher may need to do the opposite. Humour is a quality rated highly by students, but certainly not sarcasm.

You should normally control your space at the front of the class, but there is merit in moving around the class, occasionally speaking from the back of the class (if your room is arranged in that way). Moving to the back also allows you to see visuals from the students' point of view and check behaviour. Students can find it slightly disarming if you occasionally go to the back and teach from behind. Sitting while teaching large groups is not out of the question as long as students can see you clearly. It can create a more intimate feel. Ultimately you are seeking credibility with students. This comes not only from sound subject knowledge and pedagogy, but from your ability to manage a classroom with confidence and authority.

Troubleshooting six common situations

1. *The class will not settle down at the start of the lesson*

Make sure you have regular routines as students queue and enter. If they enter noisily you can tell them to go out again and restart. Some teachers like to have a starter activity ready on the board, or hand one out to each student as they enter. Others prefer to get them all in and do a teacher-led, whole class task to grab everyone's attention and set the right brisk, business-like tone. This could be a quick vocabulary recap quiz, grammatical drill, word association game or mental maths task in L2. Try to persist with a clear, predictable pattern until the class is behaving as you would like. Don't accept second best.

2. *A student interrupts when you are talking*

This is a common occurrence, a good example of 'low-level disruption', and will become a thorn in your side if you ignore it. You do not need to make a great fuss, but stop, slow things down and explain why you believe it is inappropriate and do not expect it to happen again. It may take a few attempts to instil good habits.

3. *A student uses a mobile phone*

Your school will almost certainly have a policy on phone use and potential confiscation. In most cases they are prohibited unless used for a specific

educational purpose. As a language teacher you may have good reason to use a phone. However, if you catch a student using a phone at the wrong time and there is a confiscation policy, you could discretely approach them and hold out your hand with a suitable facial expression. If the student is reluctant to hand over the device, you might then politely ask them to put it away, see the student at the end and attempt to confiscate once more, explaining the school's policy. It is not normally advisable to create a scene during the lesson. These things can be done with relatively good humour. A sure sign of a phone being on is when you hear interference from an audio device you are playing.

4. *A student uses inappropriate language*

Do not ignore it. An appropriate visual cue might be a good first step, followed by any warning or sanction the school would normally apply. Repeated use of unacceptable language would most likely need to be referred to someone else in the behaviour policy hierarchy.

5. *A student draws attention to him or herself with a comment, sigh or groan*

Do not make a great fuss about something like this, unless the student plays on it and it becomes repeated. It is often wise to choose the right moment or reduce any tension with humour or a simple facial expression. If you fail to react at all, however, students may take this as a message that you are not fully aware of what is happening in the classroom. With more unruly classes other students might be tempted to follow suit.

6. *Students doing pair work go off task*

This is particularly relevant for language teachers who use a lot of student-to-student interaction. The main issue is students failing to use L2. When you first do pair or group work with a class make clear your expectations from the start. It is unwise to get too involved listening to one pair if you cannot hear what the rest of the class are doing. This is often the time to stand back, take a rest, not interfere and listen carefully for any inappropriate discussion. If you hear it starting, you may need to stop the whole class to make expectations clear and explain why you think it is so important to stay in L2. If necessary, explain that if the class cannot get on successfully in pairs you will have to do more 'boring' activities. Facial cues and gestures may be useful if you catch any students off task. Some teachers use rewards to encourage L2 use.

Young or novice teachers often need a certain amount of time to realise how much power and influence they wield and how they can use it for the benefit of students. We offer some tips for avoiding low-level disruption and establishing a disciplined learning environment. There are no silver bullets!

Steve and Gianfranco's tips on behaviour management

- Do not allow students to speak while you are speaking. Use whatever method suits you to insist on this ('deadly stares', non-verbal cues such as a raised eyebrow or hand, a system of warnings).
- If you have asked for silent independent work, insist on it and give an explanation or apply a sanction if necessary to enforce your expectation.
- If you fear control is breaking down consistently, seek help sooner rather than later. Schools are usually very collegiate institutions full of people ready to support you.
- Be assertive. *Tell* students clearly and politely what to do; do not *ask* them. Make all instructions crystal clear, one thing at a time.
- Make time to speak to them individually and get to know them. See if you can remember one interesting thing about each student.
- The most effective way to handle any disrespect is to simply and dispassionately follow your classroom management plan and enforce a consequence. Try to avoid anger, even if it is your natural reaction. Behave with calm and poise.
- Gear your activities to the time of day, what subject the students have just had and even the weather. The students will probably learn more from a quiet comprehension activity on a wet and windy Friday than an unsettled session of oral work.
- While students enjoy computer or tablet-based tasks, this may not be for the right reasons. Ensure you get them to face away from screens and that they are fully aware of the consequences of not engaging in the set work before letting them near the keyboard.
- To avoid a constant stream of requests to repeat your instructions, develop a strategy for checking that students are listening to you, e.g. "what was my last sentence?"
- Where you have students who are a catalyst for poor behaviour, have a predetermined plan for managing them in case you need to exclude them from the classroom, e.g. work ready to take to the exclusion room or a teaching assistant warned in advance where to take them.
- If you have a class which is particularly difficult to manage, acknowledge this honestly as they are probably difficult for others too. Discuss successful strategies and enlist the support of your head of faculty or senior staff. You may be able to mutually support a colleague who will sit and mark or plan in your room, working next to a troublesome child.