

CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE AND MANAGEMENT PERCEPTIONS OF A TESL STUDENT TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the importance of classroom discipline and management and how it influences the teaching and learning of English. Suggestions are made based on the writers own teaching experience with the hope that they may be of use to those concerned. This article is especially relevant to English teacher trainees who have not been exposed to real classroom situations prior to their teaching practice.

There is no denying the fact that English is important especially today. English teachers are being trained to teach English in schools so that future Malaysians will at least have a basic command of English. However, these trainees are often in the dark over how to manage real classroom situations before embarking on their teaching practice. The closest substitute they have is micro-teaching where their own peers take on the roles of primary or secondary school students. It is an inaccurate picture of what a real classroom situation is, leaving these trainees with little idea of what to expect from real school students. Therefore, a crucial element which will either make or break the trainees performance in teaching practice is good classroom discipline and management.

"Classroom discipline and management" here means the ability to keep a class under control with students paying attention during a lesson. It also entails respect between a teacher and students for each other. It is not a license for a teacher to terrorize the students. Discipline in a classroom is only possible if a teacher has the students' welfare at heart.

Classroom discipline and management is vital before actual teaching can begin. In fact, veteran teachers strongly believe that it alone decides on the success or failure of a lesson. It will be pointless for a teacher to have prepared a flawless lesson and outstanding teaching aids and be unable to carry it out just because the students are moving all over the room and making a din at the same time. Classroom discipline is necessary not only for a teacher to teach in the class but also out of consideration for colleagues teaching nearby. If Teacher A has no class control, Teacher B next door will also not be able to teach because the noise from Teacher A's class will disrupt his own. The relevance of good classroom discipline and management in effective teaching cannot be over-

emphasized. The following are strategies on how to achieve it, based on the writer's own teaching experience.

'Face'

The concept of 'face' is extremely important. This is an Asian concept and is difficult to explain because it has many overlapping areas. Put simply, it is when people make conscious efforts not to embarrass or humiliate each other, especially in public. Face-saving is a delicate matter and should be handled carefully. The teacher should never make any student feel small. 'Face' also involves mutual respect and consideration between teacher and students. If a teacher wants respects from the students, it is only fair that the students be treated in the same way. 'Face' operates on the basic principle of never hurting anyone's feelings (McDonald, 1970). Students become very receptive when teachers treat them as human beings rather than subordinates. No matter what racial background students come from or how academically inclined they are, all students understand the concept of 'face' and appreciate it when teachers give them 'face' and they will respond in kind. Below are a few points which the writer, as an inexperienced student teacher, found necessary to consider:

(a) Consideration

Face-saving means not humiliating or embarrassing anyone, especially in public. The key word here is consideration. Weak students are usually too shy or fear being laughed at if they ask questions in class. Picking on them would make them feel victimised. According to Ojemann (1960), their insecurity would increase if ridicule and sarcasm were directed at them. The writer would speak to such students privately and explain work to them where necessary. Practically speaking, it is not easy for a teacher to give special attention to each and every student because an average class has almost 40 or more students. However, where possible a teacher should try to give some attention to students who need it. Since the writer gave her weak students 'face', some of them tried speaking 'broken' English in class. They also participated more in class activities. The writer had told her students that she valued the fact that they were trying to speak in English and that she was not so much concerned with what the students were producing. Formerly indifferent about English, they became more receptive towards it and more willing to use it in their communication.

(b) Self-control

A teacher must always maintain self-control before thinking about classroom discipline. A teacher has to remain calm and professional at all times. Any respect students have for the teacher would disappear if the teacher were to insult or purposely humiliate them. For example, despite repeated warnings against copying, the writer found a case of copying involving the class monitor and his deskmate. She dealt with them privately, making it clear to them that they could have been embarrassed in front of their friends but chose not to because she wanted to give them 'face.' Jessup (1971) showed that students were sensitive to action the teacher took which would impair their standing with their peers. Because of his position, the class monitor was especially relieved that he was not exposed in class. Subsequently, neither student ever gave the writer cause to haul them up again for copying.

(c) Peer Pressure

It is rare when a teacher gets a 100% class participation in any activity planned. More often than not, there will always be students who choose to be as inconspicuous as possible. The writer experienced this frustrating problem when a few hardworking but quiet students seldom responded in her English class. She let the class know that she was aware that some of them were not "cooperating" but she did not name anyone as she wanted to give them 'face.' She let peer pressure from the more vocal students force the inactive ones to be involved in class. Peer pressure can therefore play a strong role in promoting greater classroom interaction.

'Face' has a place in the English classroom, both for the teacher and the students. However, one has to be careful lest it overpowers all aspects of the teaching and learning environment. As has been mentioned, it involves consideration. According to Faerch and Kasper (1984), in order to save 'face,' learners may prefer to find solutions themselves to their problems and opt for non-cooperative strategies. This means that students are likely to say that they understand whatever has been taught when in actual fact, they do not. In trying to solve problems encountered in English on their own, students could pick up misinformation or as in most cases, forget to pursue the matter altogether as soon as their class is over. The teacher is lulled into a false sense of security because students appear to have received the lesson well enough. The teacher must realise that one cannot always accept students responses at face value.

The main thing to remember about 'face' is to always put oneself in a student's shoes and to empathise with the student. If you do not like being embarrassed by someone, then you should not do it to anyone else. Students can see and understand when a teacher is giving them 'face.' They also sense when a teacher is being fair and cares for them. It is actually consideration for the feelings of another.

Trust and Faith in Students

Students have an uncanny ability to sense what teachers think of them and to modify their behaviour accordingly. Having trust and faith in students is an ideal way of maintaining good classroom discipline and ensuring effective teaching and learning. When faced with two disruptive students in her English class, the writer "volunteered" them to represent their class in the school English debate and quiz. She impressed upon them that they had the responsibility of defending their class honour as well as proving to others that they had the necessary ability. Their behaviour improved and they could always be depended upon to be active in class. If the writer were teaching next-door to their class, the two students would discourage their classmates from making too much noise lest they disrupted the neighbouring class.

Giving students some form of responsibility would mean that someone has faith and trust in their abilities. The writer found that students who believe they are responsible, considerate and well-behaved became exactly that.

Fun But Firm and Fair

While it is necessary for a teacher to have good classroom discipline, there is always the danger that one could go overboard. Students will never approach a teacher they are afraid of.

Humour is one excellent way of easing tension. For example, the writer was strict with her class for the first few lessons. After she had established her authority, she told funny stories and joked with her students to encourage them to come to her with problems they faced in English. Though the writer was willing to laugh with her students and never at them, she did not tolerate any form of misbehaviour from them. As a result, she was able to deal with their problems and the whole class learnt together from their mistakes.

Mutual Respect

Everyone wants respect. In a classroom, teachers expect respect from students. Students will only respond in kind if the teacher has respect for them. In other words, what you get is what you give. The teacher has to be sensitive towards a student's reputation among his peers (Jessup, 1971). The writer always stressed respect and politeness in her classes. She told them that if they wanted respect from their friends, they had to be prepared to also give respect. She encouraged them to use "please" and "thank you" whenever requests were made and granted. The writer occasionally called her students "Mr" or "Miss" followed by their surnames for several reasons. Her students found it amusing and became more willing to open up in class. It was also a way for her to accord them respect and treat them as young adults. Lastly, it was to instill in them some basic good manners which she felt would help them in their social interaction, especially in their working lives later on.

All in all, it was found that mutual respect contributes towards effective classroom discipline and management.

Learning of Other Languages

All languages facilitate communication and in a multiracial society, it is useful to know as many languages as possible.

Learning other languages contributes towards maintaining classroom discipline. With regards to this, Mouly (1982) stated that "teachers who were afraid to let students know they are human lest students take advantage of them, adopted a cold, aloof and rigid stance, hoping to awe students into submission. Such a move brings on apathy, personal animosity and often defiance from students." In the writer's case, she encouraged her Chinese and Indian students to teach her Chinese and Tamil respectively. Her students were thrilled that she, their teacher, was keen to learn from them because that meant that she had an interest in them as people. The writer made many mistakes when she was learning other languages but did not hesitate to ask students to help her improve. The writer also became more aware of the difficulties students face while learning English. On the students' part, they began to view her as a person and not just as a teacher who was supposed to know everything. Her students were more cooperative and less inhibited in her class as they found that she was approachable. They also realised that teaching was not an easy task as they struggled to teach her their own languages. Therefore, there are mutual benefits to be reaped from such an experience.

When applied carefully, learning other languages benefits both the teacher and the student. However, caution should be exercised. Students could just stop trying in the target language as they might assume that the teacher would be able to understand them in other languages. Therefore, the focus should always be on the target language during English classes.

Conclusion

The suggestions made on how to maintain good classroom discipline and management are based on the writer's own experiences as a student teacher. It is especially hoped that other teacher trainees may find this useful in preparation for their teaching practice. There must be a balance between discipline and freedom in the classroom if teacher and students are to benefit. The heart of good classroom discipline and management is to treat students as human beings. It is only when teacher and students have reached a relationship of mutual respect that is relaxed yet serious that all can get down to the business of teaching and learning.

References

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