

Classroom Management: Difficulties Facing Fast-track Teacher-trainees in the Tutoring Program

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to shed light on the difficulties facing teacher-trainees while conducting the Tutoring Program, as perceived by both teacher-trainees and supervisors. By gathering questionnaire data from 18 teacher-trainees, interview data from three teacher-trainees as well as two supervisors and observation data from eight lessons, this study indicated that teacher-trainees of the University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University did encounter a number of difficulties in classroom management while conducting the Tutoring Program. The most remarkable finding of this research is that managing time and dealing with students' misbehaviours turned out to be the most challenging tasks for teacher-trainees. Based on such findings, pedagogical implications were discussed. The study will hopefully benefit not only researchers and teachers interested in the same topic but also teacher-trainees who are going to be involved in this activity in the future.

KEYWORDS: classroom management difficulties, teacher-trainees, tutoring program

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Introduction

In education, classroom management skills have been an important area for a long time. These skills, according to Oliver (2007), have been displayed by effective teachers while the hallmark of the inexperienced or less effective ones is a disorderly classroom. In other words, the fact is that a crucial challenge often reported by beginning teachers entering the profession relates to classroom management (Ralph, 1994). To this cause, classroom management skills of teachers especially those of novice ones merit careful attention from educators and/or administrators, who work with these beginners, to bridge the proverbial “theory-practice gap” between pre-service preparation for effective classroom management and its actual implementation in the real context (Ralph, 1994, p.182). That is why a number of activities including Practicum or Tutoring are included in most curricula of teacher education departments and institutions to help sharpen the teaching skills of student-teachers in general and their classroom management skills in particular.

Normally, tutoring is often referred to as a program in which students are tutored by peers or paraprofessionals in order to better the academic performance and attitude of the learners. In Vietnamese context, besides the Practicum (at the end of year four), there has recently been a Tutoring Program (during the first semester of year four) involved in the curriculum of the University of Languages and International Studies for senior teacher-trainees. However, it focuses on developing these future teachers’ teaching competence. In other words, it is organized in an effort to help prospective teachers translate theory into practice through real-life teaching where tutees are enrolled in a course organized by tutors (teacher-trainees) under the supervision of master teachers (supervisors). In the aspect of practice, the program faced a number of problems, one of which was the difficulties of teacher-trainees in classroom teaching, especially in classroom management. Although there is a large body of research to investigate such challenges in the practicum (Macías & Sanches, 2015), there has been no study on the difficulties of the Tutoring Program.

Though the nature of the two projects (i.e. the practicum and the tutoring program) is seemingly the same, the contexts in which the teaching takes place are different. Thus the challenges that emerge might be different. All of the aforementioned factors have encouraged the researchers to conduct this study.

Aims and objectives of the study

The impetus for this research is to (1) point out the difficulties in terms of classroom management skills that fourth-year student-teachers in fast-track Division at the University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University (ULIS-VNU) encountered while carrying out the Tutoring Program 2012; and (2) identify the causes of these difficulties. It is hoped that the completed research will answer the following research question: What are the difficulties in classroom management faced by fourth-year fast-track student-teachers at ULIS-VNU while carrying out the Tutoring Program?

Definition of classroom management

There is a variety of definitions for classroom management. As presented by Duke (1979), classroom management refers to the provisions and procedures necessary to establish and maintain an environment in which instruction and learning can occur. The concept, according to David (1996), involves a positive classroom environment, appropriate standards of behaviors for students, effective management of daily routines and instructions, and engaging the students in classroom activities throughout the lessons to ensure quality of education. Later on, the term has been expanded to involve not only the complexity of the setting where the strategies and

procedures are enacted but also the scope of the teacher's goals in carrying out management behaviors (Emme & Stough, 2001). If any of these components is neglected, the whole process is compromised, leading to poor quality in education. Thus, from a broad view, classroom management could be understood as actions taken by teachers to create and maintain a favourable teaching and learning environment and to deal with all the arising problems which may disrupt effective teaching and learning. This perspective will be the guiding principle for the rest of the paper.

Since the research aims to investigate the difficulties encountered by fourth-year fast-track teacher-trainees while participating in their Tutoring Program, there is a need to devise a checklist that can both cover as many classroom management components as possible and be suitable for the research context. Based on the definition of the term, researchers also have a closer look at the elements that construct classroom management. Wright (2005) asserts that classroom management includes three elements: managing time and space, managing students' participation and managing students' engagement. To et al. (2008, p.58) have proposed a more detailed list of seven domains, which acts as the framework for the present study:

- (1) Managing time;
- (2) Managing space;
- (3) Giving and checking instructions;
- (4) Checking students' understanding;
- (5) Dealing with students' misbehaviour;
- (6) Giving feedback; and
- (7) Motivating students.

Methodology

Setting

Fast-track program

In the academic year 2001-2002, Fast-track program (or Honours program) of the English Language Teacher Education Faculty was established. This is an accredited training program achieving the regional and international quality standard in tertiary education, according to the regulations of Vietnam National University (VNU), Hanoi (Bachelor Degree: Fast-track Program). The program underscores a concrete philosophy with a list of criteria:

- ✓ career preparation is an expected outcome of a college education;
- ✓ college should develop students' problem solving and decision making, evaluating, and interactional or interpersonal skills;
- ✓ students must learn how to manage change;
- ✓ students can learn in a variety of ways; all must be understood and fostered;
- ✓ students must be able to use IT and other technologies;
- ✓ students should learn to interact in a variety of cultural environments; and
- ✓ education is a lifelong process.

With such criteria, when being compared to trainees from the mainstream division, teacher-trainees in the fast-track program are required to conduct more activities in order to acquire:

- ✓ in-depth knowledge of their first language and the target language as well as the culture;
- ✓ competent use of the knowledge in various communicating activities; and
- ✓ personal qualities such as teamwork, tolerance, confidence and the ability for personal and peer assessment.

Tutoring program model at fast-track division

One of the most important activities helping to sharpen fast-track teacher-trainees' teaching skills is the Tutoring Program. The program takes its origin from the idea of "training of trainers" by the Asian Institute of Technology Centre in Vietnam (AITCV) with the learning methodology of "learning by doing". Specifically, teacher-trainees could improve their teaching skills as they are exposed to an authentic teaching environment by means of organizing real classroom teaching, supporting students who are freshmen coming from the same faculty. This activity is designed with the view to helping fourth-year fast-track teacher-trainees to:

- (1) enhance their skills and confidence in tutoring and teaching small groups of learners at the intermediate level, especially in areas such as:
 - ✓ designing the lesson plan;
 - ✓ managing the classroom; and
 - ✓ evaluating learners' needs and study progress
- (2) develop their autonomy in developing their teaching and learning competence; and
- (3) be familiarized with working with learners in a structured program and develop suitable interpersonal skills necessary for their future teaching jobs.

Participants

The researchers decided to apply purposive sampling in choosing participants with expertise in the Tutoring Program. Besides, it is noteworthy that there was only one fast-track class majoring in Pedagogy at that time. As a result, this whole class including 18 senior teacher-trainees and two supervisors being in charge of monitoring this activity were chosen to be the participants of this research. The teacher-trainees were around twenty-two years of age and in their senior year. Two of them were male and the other sixteen were female. They were all competent in English (almost all of them had already reached C1 level) and well-equipped with English language teaching theories. With regard to the two supervisors, they both had experiences as lecturers in English Language Teaching. Both of them had been teaching for more than 15 years.

Data collection instruments

In search of the answers to the aforementioned research question, both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interview and observation) methods were employed. See Figure 1 for the stages of data collection.

The questionnaire used to collect data was designed based on the Classroom management's framework of To et al. (2008). The respondents indicated on their questionnaires (which were based on a 5-point Likert scale) the difficulties facing their teaching practice during the Tutoring Program. Moreover, eight different lessons were videotaped to gain a deeper and multi-faceted understanding of the contexts and participants with the hope to find out the student-teachers' difficulties in managing their classroom. Then all the related events emerging in the classroom recorded in these videos were noted down carefully in accordance with the checklist of different classroom management aspects. Finally, after having collected the data from the questionnaire and observation, the researchers invited three teacher-trainees who were reported to have encountered most, fair and least difficulties while conducting the Tutoring Program. By means of the semi-structured interview, the researchers aimed at elaborating on the causes of the classroom management difficulties. Simultaneously, the researchers also conducted interviews with two supervisors of the program in order to get an insight into their evaluation of the teacher-trainees' performance as well as their explanation of the causes of their difficulties in classroom management and the solutions. The design of this interview session was divided into two parts: problems and suggested solutions.

Data analysis procedure

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods were employed. In the first place, data observed from eight videos were noted down and coded based on the researchers’ checklist to identify the most noticeable problems. These videos were named as vid1, vid2, until vid8. SPSS was then employed to analyse the questionnaire data. Accordingly, mean and SD values were presented in a table to demonstrate the level of difficulty of each classroom management aspect the teacher-trainees encountered during their teaching practice. Finally, all of the recorded interviews were carefully transcribed and coded to find out the causes and solutions to the teacher-trainees’ challenges. The three teacher-trainees and supervisors were labelled as SX, SY, SZ and TA, TB respectively.

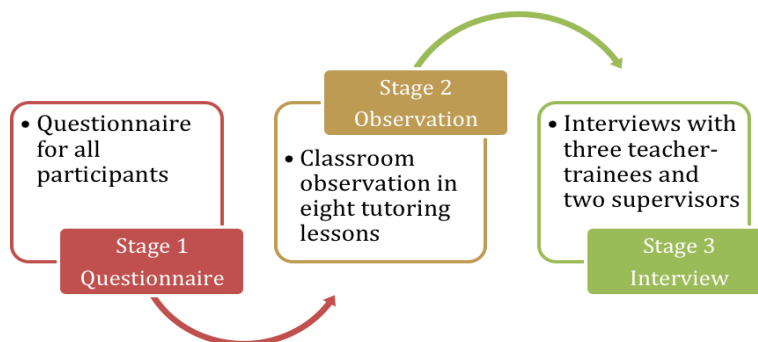


Figure 1: Data collection stages

Findings and Discussion

In the search for the answer to the research question, both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed in this part. The questionnaire in total was designed to identify the level of difficulty from the viewpoint of the pre-service teachers themselves, in which 18 participants were asked to choose a number from 1 (very easy) to 5 (very difficult) for each item on a Likert scale. The quantitative analysis of the responses from the teacher-trainees is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Level of difficulty in classroom management reported by student-teachers

No	Skills	Level of difficulty		
		Mean	SD	
1	Managing time	3.94	0.44	
2	Managing space	Arranging work among students	2.19	0.75
		Finding suitable positions to stand and ways to move	2.44	0.73
		Using non-verbal cues	2.56	0.73
		Using blackboard	2.53	1.06
		Keeping eye contact	2.19	0.83
		Using voice	2.50	0.97
3	Giving and checking instructions	Giving instructions	2.81	0.54
		Checking if students understand the instructions	3.13	0.62
4	Checking for students’ understanding	3.44	0.81	
5	Dealing with students’ misbehaviours	3.63	0.81	
6	Giving feedback	3.38	0.62	
7	Motivating students	3.63	0.72	

As indicated from the table, the mean scores range from 2.19 to 3.94, which meant within the classroom management skill, some sub-skills were considered more difficult than the others.

Among all, ranking first is the problem of *Managing time* ($m=3.94$). This is followed by the difficulties in *Motivating students* ($m=3.63$) and *Dealing with students' misbehaviors* ($m=3.63$). On the contrary, the lowest Mean score belonged to the difficulties in *Arranging work among students* ($m=2.19$) and *Keeping eye contact* ($m=2.19$). These were relatively important factors to build up a successful tutoring session; however, they were not considered a problem and most of the participants found them rather easy.

It was also necessary to pay attention to the Standard Deviation (SD). Among all of the items appearing in the questionnaire, the difficulty in *Using the blackboard* had the highest Standard Deviation ($SD=1.06$). In other words, there was the largest range among the choices of the participant in the sample. Coming next was the difficulty in *Using voice* ($SD=0.97$). On the other hand, the minimum SD belonged to *Managing time* ($SD=0.44$), which showed almost all the informants agreed that they found it difficult to manage time well.

Hopefully, those statistics have provided the overall picture. Nonetheless, they are only referential and need to be clarified and justified based on the qualitative analysis that follows.

Managing time

The interview data revealed the fact that the participants had a lot of difficulties in time management and there was little difference among the answers. In fact, out of the eight observed lessons (vid1-8), five exceeded the time limit (from ten to 15 minutes). The reasons might lie in the setting of lesson objectives and the inappropriateness in choosing activities. SY and SZ said: “*Maybe our objectives are a little overambitious as we want to include as much knowledge as possible without setting the priority*” and “*some activities had been expected to take only ten minutes but actually turned out to be 20 or more.*” Both TA and TB further explained that the unawareness of the gap between the lesson plan and the real teaching was the main cause of the problem in managing time. Interestingly, the two supervisors reported a gradual improvement in time management during the course of the program. After five consecutive weeks, the problem became less severe as a result of constant feedback from peers and supervisors. Indeed, vid6, vid7, and vid8 showed the student-teachers observing perfect timing.

Managing space

Space management skill involves a lot of other sub-skills. With the modest mean scores ranging from 2.19 to 2.56, it is apparent from the quantitative analysis that the teacher-trainees themselves considered those aspects not a big problem. In contrast, from the views of outsiders, both the two supervisors pointed out certain problems with the performance of teacher-trainees regarding some aspects of managing space.

In terms of *Arranging work among students*, as observed by the supervisors, the teacher-trainees tended to focus more on group work while pair work and individual work were neglected, especially in the first four weeks of the program. To the teacher-trainees, in a class with a fixed setting of tables and chairs and the number of students ranging from 60 to 80, group work appeared to be much easier to control. However, “*if they [tutees] are working in groups, there would be chances for lazy students or inactive students to stay passive*” (TA) but *in fact, if students are given more chances to work in individually and in pairs, they would be forced to practice more*” (TB). Therefore, the excessive use of group work proved to be less efficient for learners.

The neutral attitude of the pre-service teachers towards *Finding suitable positions to stand and ways to move* could be explained by the fact that they often stood on the stage, near the computer

or the projector screen when they were explaining because this was their habit. It also enabled them to refer to the slides easily and from that position they could see all of the students (SY & SZ). In her lesson, though SX had the best performance with positioning and moving, she still did encounter the difficulty due to the rigid class setting. *“It’s a little tougher to communicate with tutees at higher rows”* (SX). Besides, SX also admitted that *“Occasionally, as I am too indulged in lecturing, I forgot to move.”*

As for *Using non-verbal cues*, the responses from 18 informants were in line with the data in the observations. In the eight recorded lessons, fourth-year fast-track student-teachers demonstrated their relatively effective use of body language. All interviewees emphasized it was worth noting that before the Tutoring Program, the teacher-trainees had obtained certain experiences with public speaking and giving a formal presentation in previous subjects of the curriculum. However, some of the bad habits were hard to be changed, that was why some student-teachers still did not have good gestures and postures. For example, there were instances of overusing hands or leaning against the table.

As reported, for *Using blackboard*, the response was neutral among the participants. It could be seen from the interviews with three teacher-trainees that they did not have to use the blackboard much due to the support of the projector. SX shared she only found it a bit difficult as her handwriting was not so good, whereas SY and SZ found it harder in finding the ways to organize ideas on the board. Although TB did not regard this aspect as a major problem, she emphasized that the student-teachers *“had not yet exploited the blackboard as a teaching tool.”* In her opinion, they tended to overuse the slides and underestimate the role of the blackboard as a teaching tool, thus as her observation, few student-teachers were able to present information on the board neatly and clearly.

Similar to the skill of using postures or gestures, *Keeping eye contact* was fortunately not a big deal to the teacher-trainees because they considered it an easy skill. To some extent, the explanation was the same as *Using non-verbal cues* due to various chances to practice presentation skills, including *Keeping eye contact*. Interview and observation data also confirmed this finding.

As reported in the table, the teacher-trainees also found it not so hard to use their voice effectively in their lesson. Actually, the interviewees still faced difficulty in controlling the volume, since SY reflected that she *“spoke loudly more than enough, which sometimes causes discomfort for students.”* On the other hand, SZ reported that she could not have spoken loudly enough without using a microphone. While the student-teachers had a tendency to associate voice with volume, TA raised another important problem with tone.

I think attention should be paid to the change in the tone. The variety of tones should be used. Not all the students have this kind of disadvantage. But I could recognize some. For example, a monotone or very frequent use of the falling tones (TA).

Needless to say, the variety of tone makes it more interesting for the students and gets them to stay attentive to the most important content that the tutor would like to emphasize.

Giving and checking instructions

It could be concluded from the result that the participants of the study had a neutral attitude towards *Giving instructions*. While SX said that she had never been in the situation when: *“tutees struggle to understand her instructions,”* SY and SZ reflected that they did. The factor

that hindered students' comprehension of instructions "*is probably because of the way we deliver the instructions or the ability of the tutees*" (SZ).

SY even faced the challenge when she chose the wrong time to give instructions such as when the class was noisy, tutees had not been settled down yet or tutees did not fully concentrate on the lesson. Regarding lengthy instructions, it can be explained that SY wanted everything to go smoothly. Hence, the teacher-trainees explained the task very clearly.

Student-teachers reported that *Checking if students understand the instructions* was at the medium level of difficulty as almost all students seemed to thoroughly understand their instructions. However, it could be seen from the videos that the teacher-trainees tended to use "OK", "Do you understand", "Are you clear" and "Alright" too frequently. "Students might say "Yes" but in fact they have not got the point. They just act like that because they are shy or they want to be polite to their tutors" (TB).

Checking students' understanding

As noted from the eight videos (vid1-8), when *Checking students' understanding*, the teacher-trainees could not vary their questions. As a result, questions like "Am I understood enough?", "Are you clear about the tasks?", "Do you have any questions/queries?" were overused. All SX, SY and SZ agreed that they found checking students' understanding rather difficult since they could simply ask "Are you sure?", "Am I clear enough" or "Do you understand" and then "guess from students' reactions and check the exercises" (SY). Being consistent with the data from the questionnaires and students' interviews, interviews with teachers revealed that checking students' understanding had emerged as a typical challenge for the teacher-trainees during the lessons. TB pointed out that the reason was in the big class size (as presented in aspect 4.2), which made it hard for the teacher-trainees to check each tutee's comprehension. Interestingly, TA added although the student-teachers often checked students' understanding, they were not skilled enough. *Some tutors tended to repeat common structures many times during the lesson, such as "Do you understand?" "Is it clear?"* (TA). However, in many cases, students said nothing in response even when they still did not understand, which, according to TB, was because they were polite. They wanted to please the student-teachers and did not want to do anything that offended their student-teachers.

Dealing with students' misbehaviours

Apparently, *Dealing with students' misbehaviours* was one of the most challenging skills in the list of classroom management. As observed, the common problems related to managing students' behaviours concerned students' misbehaviours like not going to class on time, forgetting to turn off the ring tone before class as well as dealing with dominating tutees while doing group work (vid2, vid3, vid5, vid6 & vid8). However, these were not considered students' misbehaviours. The two supervisors shared the same view with the researchers. TA gave further explanation by saying:

I haven't noticed anything like the misbehaviors. I can see the difference between the tutees this year and the tutees from the last batch. And I could see that this is an advantage that they come here to learn and they highly appreciate what the tutors have brought to them. And they see, and they do not try to do anything like the misbehaviors (TA).

Giving feedback

Both supervisors perceived this aspect as one of the most prominent sources of challenges for the teacher-trainees. The teacher-trainees had the tendency to give more oral feedback than written feedback. For example, two participants indicated that

“I gave feedback in presentation skills, grammar, vocab and pronunciation” (SY); “I normally provide feedback in terms of language skill, pronunciation, logical thinking/ building arguments” (SZ).

On-the-spot feedback was given on students’ mistakes in pronunciation or grammar, *“but not very often”* (TA). The two supervisors stressed that it was a shortcoming of the student-teachers when they did not give feedback for the tutees at the end of the lesson. The supervisors reasoned that the big class size made it harder for the teacher-trainees to give feedback to an individual student. This difficulty was also resulted from the poor time management skill of the teacher-trainees.

Motivating students

Motivational strategies also caused difficulties for teacher-trainees to some extent. As observed, teacher-trainees’ difficulty in this aspect was that they could hardly vary their compliments. Some common ones such as *“That’s right!”*, *“That’s correct, excellent!”*, *“Good job!”*, *“Give him/her a big clap/ applause”* were repeatedly used in every lesson. Besides, in speaking lessons, the student-teachers did not provide their students with vocabulary, so they did not know how to do the designed tasks (vid1, vid4 & vid7). Another factor that might make it difficult for the teacher-trainees to motivate students was that *“the students might feel tired”* (TA) despite the fact that teacher-trainees had used games or gifts as sources of motivation. However, *“sometimes, it [game] is a little bit unrelated, for example, the warm up activity and the main content. I don’t see any connection between the warm up and the main activity”* (TA).

Conclusion

The study, using both qualitative and quantitative data from questionnaire, classroom observation and interview, has yielded significant findings in terms of the classroom management difficulties that fourth-year fast-track student-teachers encountered in the Tutoring Program. Firstly, according to the participants’ self-reports and the researchers’ observation, there is an agreement that *Managing time* and *Dealing with students’ misbehaviours* were the most problematic aspects for the teacher-trainees. Interestingly, there was a difference in the data from the interviews between the teacher-trainees and the supervisors. While the pre-service teachers found that some skills did not pose any challenge, the supervisors could point out evidence of poor performance in terms of such skills. Thus, the student-teachers should also pay attention to *Forming group work*, *Using the Blackboard*, *Giving and Checking instruction*, *Checking for students’ understanding*, and *Giving feedback*.

Based on the research findings, several pedagogical suggestions are given to help teacher-trainees overcome difficulties in classroom management.

Managing time

Alicia (2006) has proposed some helpful hints on how to make the best of classroom time while maintaining a realistic approach to how much you can accomplish. It is important to raise the awareness of the student-teachers about the possible mismatch between the planning stage and the actual implementation of a lesson. Moreover, teacher-trainees should prepare a detailed

lesson plan with anticipated problems. In case the lesson goes over the time limit, they can try to summarize the lesson, and leave out some less important activities and send the students materials for self-study.

Managing space

In order to manage space effectively, the teacher-trainees need to consider the following aspects:

✓ *Forming group work*

First of all, pre-service teachers need to be fully aware of different group formations and their benefits. Secondly, appropriate task types should vary with the type of group work to make sure every student is on-task. In addition, careful planning of setting is also important. To put it differently, teacher-trainees should have in mind the ideal space for different types of activities.

✓ *Using non-verbal cues*

In resolving this difficulty, immediate feedback to teacher-trainees from supervisors would help them to be more aware of their weaknesses.

✓ *Using blackboard*

It is recommended that student-teachers prepare beforehand what to write on the board. The board should be divided into separate sections for the main contents of the lesson, drafts and feedback. Teacher-trainees are also advised to use mind maps and take note that their handwriting is legible.

✓ *Using voice*

Teacher-trainees should not only speak loudly and clearly but also vary their tone to make their speech more interesting and direct students' focus on the points that they want to emphasize.

Giving instructions

To give effective instructions, the tasks should be carefully designed in the lesson plans. In addition to that, when instructing, it is advisable for student-teachers to stress on the key words of the task as well as use simple language. The purpose here is not to showcase the teacher's language competence but to help students understand in the easiest way. Refer to Nguyen (2010) for useful models for giving and checking instructions in the classroom.

Checking students' understanding

When teacher-trainees would like to check students' comprehension, they are advised to use various techniques such as asking questions or giving examples/models. The stages for effective questions as given by Walsh and Sattes (2005, as cited in Fisher and Frey, 2007) are useful guidelines. If they are competent enough, they could tell from the students' reactions or non-verbal language.

Giving feedback

Feedback is an indispensable part of a lesson, which should be given in both written and oral form and not only at the end but also during the lesson. For more details refer to Petrie (2011).

Motivating students

It is agreed that motivating students in EFL classroom is often a complex and difficult task, even for experienced teachers as it requires the involvement of a multiplicity of psycho-sociological and linguistic factors (Dornyei, 1998, as cited in Rima, 2011). There are numerous ways pre-service teachers can apply in motivating students. Firstly, if they provide students with practical useful knowledge in accordance with their needs (such as exam-oriented contents), they will be eager to learn. Secondly, teacher-trainees need to give students constructive comments and suggestions for improvement. Furthermore, during class time, using games is a good way to create a conducive classroom atmosphere because games are able to help involve students and

increase their competitiveness in the lesson. However, attention should be paid to the relevance of the games and the connection of each game to the knowledge presented. In addition, compliments can be given and gifts may be offered but in moderate doses.

In conclusion, the Tutoring Program does offer teacher-trainees opportunities to enhance their teaching skills when they are exposed to an authentic teaching environment. That is to say, only when working in a real classroom context can they have first-hand experiences with emerging difficulties in their own teaching, including problems with classroom management skills. To handle such problems, self-reflection and feedback from the supervisors and friends would be of great help.

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