

DEALING WITH DISCIPLINE

Luke Prodromou and Lindsay Clandfield touch on motivating techniques for taming the beast. Here are two claims about discipline problems:

'A discipline problem is any action, overt or covert, that undermines the cohesion of the class.' *'When you can get students' attention and keep it (for the duration of a lesson), then it is safe to say you do not have discipline problems.'*

In our article in *ETp* Issue 44, 'Do you have a discipline problem?', we looked at what constitutes a discipline problem and what causes it. We also set out a hierarchy of 'teacher needs' to deal with it and discussed the bottom three 'levels' of our pyramid.

Rapport
Attitude
Presence
Motivation
Techniques
Classroom management
Responses to misbehaviour
Rules, regulations and rewards

Here we'd like to continue by moving up the pyramid and looking at techniques and then at motivation, and how they can help you deal with discipline problems in your classes.

Discipline-friendly Techniques

In the language classroom, some techniques encourage good discipline (they are 'discipline-friendly') and other techniques, however interesting and relevant they might be, may have a tendency to disrupt the class (they are 'discipline-unfriendly'). We are not advocating you use only discipline-friendly activities, but it is true that every once in a while you do need a break.

! Think of classes you have had which are prone to discipline problems. Which of the following activities would you consider discipline-friendly? Which would you consider discipline-unfriendly?

- Writing a composition
- Playing a team game
- Writing a dictation
- A pairwork speaking activity
- An activity in which everyone is moving around
- A groupwork decision-making activity
- A grammar workbook exercise
- A written test
- Standing up on hearing a particular word
- Taking notes
- Listening to an instruction and then performing the action
- A simple 'Simon Says' game
- Sending and receiving written messages to students in other parts of the room

Writing

Writing is a classic case of a 'discipline-friendly' activity. This is especially true in large classes. If the class is getting out of control, or if you wish to test the students' composition skills in preparation for an exam, then doing a writing task in class in the traditional way is a legitimate option. The moment of glorious silence (bar the sound of pencils scratching) can give you a much needed break.

Dictation

Dictation is another writing activity that is particularly discipline-friendly and is easy to administer in large classes. It is a

wonderfully rich activity if the teacher knows how to take full advantage of it.

Dictation can be conducted in its classic form: the teacher reads a text twice, the students write, the students check their version against the correct model. This is not only a 'peaceful' activity to do in a large mixed-level class, but it is also a good testing and teaching device.

There are two drawbacks to simply giving lots of compositions and dictations:

1 They can be terribly boring if overused – and end up causing resentment, thereby fuelling the discipline problem.

2 The prospect of having to correct 40 pieces of writing can be a powerful deterrent for the teacher.

However, there can be more inspiring and co-operative ways of doing writing and dictation in class. Have a look at the following ideas:

Writing

Circular compositions

Get all the students to write on a separate piece of paper and continue each other's texts.

Musical writing

Play music which students react to by writing a story that goes with it. A variation on this is for them to imagine the music is in a film and they have to write the scene that accompanies it.

Truth or lie

Prepare slips of paper beforehand, one for each student. On half of these slips write an X. Set a simple writing task (eg write about your favourite person). Distribute the slips of paper and instruct the students not to show theirs to anyone. Tell them to write a short composition about the topic. Those with an X on the slip of paper must make up everything they write (ie it should not be true) while the others answer truthfully. Afterwards, ask the students to exchange compositions and guess if their partner's composition is true or not.

Write as your partner Ask the students to sit in pairs. Read out questions and tell them that they must write the answers, but as if they were their partner. For example, you say: *What would be an ideal holiday location?* Student A writes an answer as if he/she were student B, and vice versa. Get the students to check back after they have written all the answers.

Using their words

Choose sentences from the students' homework and use them for a dictation. Don't tell them you are going to do this at the beginning. They will enjoy the surprise of hearing their own words read back to them.

Using their voices

Have one of the students give the dictation instead of you. (A possible strategy would be to give a ringleader/troublemaker the responsibility of giving the dictation.)

Whistle dictation

Give the students a dictation of sentences, but omit key words and whistle where the gap is. They write the complete sentence, including the missing word. For example: *The students were completely prepared (whistle) the test.*

Degrees of 'friendliness'

In large mixed-level classes, the most economical and pedagogically sound approach to writing is to get students working together, writing together and learning from each other. Keeping control of the class is paramount: without control there will be no creativity! It is important to point out, therefore, that there can be degrees of discipline-friendliness, even with writing tasks.

Collaborative writing

For example, if you choose to conduct a writing task as a collaborative activity in which students write the beginning of a composition and then pass their paper on to the student sitting next to them for that student to continue the text, this will probably make the writing task more interesting than a traditional writing task, but it will also tend to raise the noise level and sense of excitement as the papers are passed around the room.

Running dictation

The dictation activities described above are highly discipline-friendly, although in varying degrees they increase the participation of students. The price we pay for greater participation may be a greater risk of disorder in the classroom. This risk is very clear in a 'Running dictation', in which the dictation text is posted up on the walls around the room. The class is divided into teams, and team members take turns to read the text from the wall, run quickly to their team secretary and dictate as much as they can remember. The next member of the team then goes to the text, tries to memorise the next part, rushes to the secretary and continues the dictation. This intensely energising and enjoyable activity inherently involves disruption, albeit creative and pleasurable disruption, especially when it is accompanied by music. It is a good example of a (potentially) discipline-unfriendly technique. It is worth pointing out, however, that the

sheer eccentricity of the activity may involve a strong element of surprise which will add variety and, thereby, increase your students' motivation and rapport with each other.

An element of surprise

Variety in your classes, and something that takes students by surprise, can make even traditionally discipline-unfriendly activities work. Imagine setting up a competitive quiz, but having the school director come in and act as judge of points and answers. Here are some other ways you could surprise your students:

- Stand in a different part of the classroom to do an activity.
- Do an activity with everyone standing up, sitting on the edge of the desks or on the floor.
- Ask a colleague to 'team teach' with you one day (make sure you return the favour!).
- Don't speak your instructions, write them on the board.
- Write the instructions on the board but jumble the words so the students have to work them out.
- Whisper your instructions to a student who then explains to the class what they have to do.
- Get a student to take the register.
- Get a 'good' student to take part of the lesson while you sit in their place and 'become' a student.
- Dictate a brief summary of the 'lesson plan' so students know what's coming next – this means early finishers can get on with the next stage of the lesson if it is based on a written text.
- Vary the tone of your voice and even your accent – for example, do part of the lesson in an accent you're good at mimicking.

Hot spice

Lessons have a natural tendency to drag or to run out of steam unless we build in moments of revitalisation. Attention level is generally high at the beginning of the lesson and high at the end, but low in the middle. Once you are aware of this, you can build up a habit of having something up your sleeve to recapture attention, a bit like a magician. This could be a joke, a quote, a proverb, a funny anecdote, a quick word game or even (why not?) a magic trick itself. The activities below recapture attention and add a bit of hot spice.

Listen up!

Think of a sentence in English that your students will understand. After you finish an activity tell everyone in a firm voice to STOP WHAT THEY ARE DOING RIGHT NOW. Wait for attention. Tell the students you are going to test their listening. You are going to spell out a sentence, one word at a time. After the first word, pause and signal for someone to call out what you said.

For example:

Teacher: A-R-E. (signals student)

Student: Are.

Teacher: Good.

Repeat the process with the other words, asking each student to repeat everything that has been said up to now.

Teacher: Y-O-U. (signals another student)

Student: Are you.

Teacher: Good. S-I-T-T-I-N-G. (signals another student)

Student: Are you sitting.

Teacher: Good. C-O-M-F-O-R-T-AB- L-Y question mark. (signals another student)

Student: Are you sitting comfortably?

Teacher: Good. Can you repeat for everyone?

Student: Are you sitting comfortably?

Teacher: (indicates for the class to answer) Are you?

Class: Yes!

Teacher: Fantastic. Let's continue.

It's magic!

On a piece of paper, write a number which is twice the present year; for example, if it is 2006, write '4012'. Put this piece of paper in an envelope.

Ask the class to write down:

- a) the year in which they were born;
- b) the year of an important event in their life;
- c) their age at the end of the current year;
- d) the number of years that have passed since the important event. Ask them to add up the four numbers and to tell you

the result. Now open the envelope with the piece of paper inside containing the magic number, which will be the same as the number the students have arrived at.

Motivation

Whole books have been written on the importance of motivation in the classroom, indeed it is often described as the single most important factor in learning anything. It follows that if we can motivate learners, discipline problems will wither away. A bad or boring teacher will certainly demotivate learners and provoke the construction of paper aeroplanes in the classroom (literally or metaphorically). Here is a checklist of the mistakes many teachers make when they fail to engage their learners' attention. Try to ensure you do as few of these things as possible!

How to be boring

- Make a poor first impression.
- Have no objectives.
- Be dull and dry.
- Stand or sit frozen in one spot.
- Make no eye contact.
- Have a miserable look on your face.
- Have no humour.
- Be unprepared.
- Do not involve the class.
- Show no enthusiasm.
- Have poor visual aids.
- Don't use the students' names.
- Drone on and on.
- Be inaudible and write illegibly.
- Ask impossible questions.
- Make your explanations incomprehensible.
- Fly off the handle.
- Pounce on students' errors.
- Don't talk about anything but what's in the book.
- End on a flat note.

Having a sense of humour does not necessarily mean being a stand-up comedian, though the ability to tell the odd joke, like the ability to perform magic tricks, is a distinct advantage in the never-ending struggle to get the attention of students and keep it. So to end this article, here is a joke to help you teach the structure *wish + would* and to remind you of the importance of humour in taming the beast in your restless adolescents:

Boring teacher: Smith! I wish you'd pay a little attention.

Pupil: I'm paying as little as I can, Mr Osbore.

This joke also illustrates how 'little' words in English can lead to big misunderstandings and often exacerbate rapport in the classroom. In the third and final part of this series on discipline, we will turn our attention to the importance of RAP in the classroom: Rapport, Attitude and Presence.

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