

Classroom Management

1. What is classroom management?

Your most important job is perhaps to ‘create the conditions in which learning can take place’. The skills of creating and managing a successful class may be the key to the whole success of a course. An important part of this is to do with your attitude, intentions and personality and your relationships with the learners. However, you also need certain organisational skills and techniques. Such items are often grouped together under the heading of ‘classroom management’. Common classroom management areas include:

Grouping and seating

- Forming groupings (singles, pairs, groups, mingle, plenary)
- Arranging and rearranging seating
- Deciding where you will stand or sit
- Reforming class as a whole group after activities

Activities

- Sequencing activities
- Setting up activities
- Giving instructions
- Monitoring activities
- Timing activities (and the lesson as a whole)
- Bringing activities to an end

Authority

- Gathering and holding attention
- Deciding who does what (i.e. answer a question, make a decision, etc.)
- Establishing or relinquishing authority as appropriate
- Getting someone to do something

Critical moments

- Starting the lesson
- Dealing with unexpected problems
- Maintaining appropriate discipline
- Finishing the lesson

Tools and techniques

- Using the board and other classroom equipment or aids
- Using gestures to help clarity of instructions and explanations
- Speaking clearly at an appropriate volume and speed
- Use of silence
- Grading complexity of language
- Grading quantity of language

Working with people

- Spreading your attention evenly and appropriately
- Using intuition to gauge what students are feeling
- Eliciting honest feedback from students
- Really listening to students

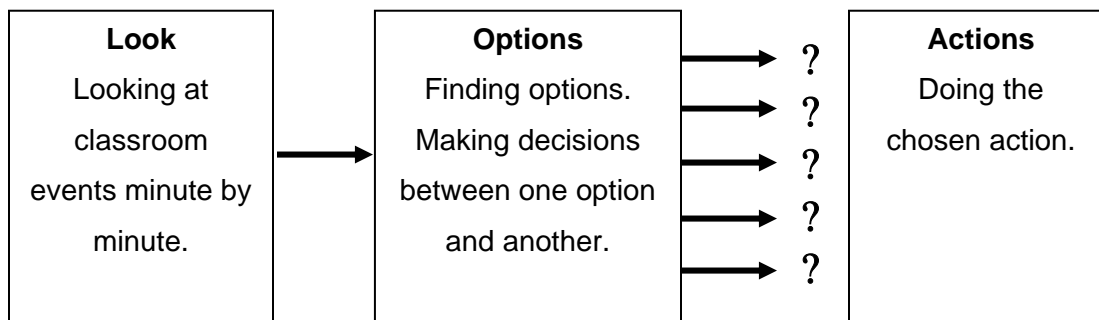
Classroom management involves both decisions and actions. The actions are what is done in the classroom, e.g. rearranging the chairs. The decisions are about whether to do these actions, when to do them, how to do them, who will do them, etc.

At any classroom moment, there will be a range of options as to possible actions. To say one thing or to say something different. To stop an activity or to let it continue for a few more minutes. To take three minutes to deal with a difficult question or to move on with what you had previously planned. To tell off a latecomer or to welcome him. To do something or to do nothing. These options continue throughout the lesson; at every step, your decision will take you forward on your particular route. No one can tell you the 'right' way to do something. There is no single correct answer, no single route through a lesson, though some routes may in the end prove to be much more effective than others.

Different people or different situations create different solutions. Your total lesson is created by your choices.

The essential basic skill for classroom management is therefore to be able to look at and read classroom events as they occur and think of possible options available to you, to make appropriate decisions between these options, and to turn them into effective and efficient actions. As you grow in experience, your awareness of possible options will grow.

Thus the basic skills of classroom management can be summarized as follows:



Task: Choosing classroom management options

Write two or more options for each of the following situations:

1. A student says ‘I don’t want to do this exercise’.
2. You expected an activity to take five minutes. It has taken twenty so far, and the students still seem to be very involved. There is something else you would like to do before the lesson ends in ten minutes.
3. The next activity involves students working in groups of five. At the moment, all the desks (which take two people) are facing forward in rows. They are movable, but it takes a few minutes of chaos to do it.
4. The students are working in groups of three. Two groups have finished the task you set them and are now sitting looking bored. The other groups still seem to have a long way to go before they finish.

Commentary

Here are a few possible options:

1. You could say 'Fine.'

You could say loudly 'Do it!'

You could ask why the student doesn't want to do it.

You could offer an alternative exercise or activity.

You could say 'Choose something you'd like to do.'

You could explain the point of the exercise.

You could ask other students for their opinion.

Note that in all the above options, you also have further options regarding your attitude and behaviour: you could be patient or impatient, defensive or open, sound as if you mean it or sound as if you don't, etc.

2. You could stop the activity.

You could let it continue (postponing the next activity).

You could announce a time for finishing (e.g. 'Two more minutes').

You could ask the students how much longer they need.

You could offer the students the option of stopping and doing something else.

3. All the students could move the desks.

A small number of students could move the desks while you give instructions to the others.

You could do the activity without moving the desks.

You could ask the students whether it is a good idea to move the desks

4. You could tell the groups which have finished that they can chat or do something else while the other groups finish.

You could give the groups which have finished a short extra task to keep them busy until the rest finish.

You could set a time limit (say two minutes) for the others to finish. You could bring the groups which have finished together to compare their answers with each other.

You could invite the finishers to join other groups and help them or listen to them.

Increasing your options

Some options come at key moments the beginning of the lesson, the start of an activity, the end of an activity, when a discipline problem occurs in the lesson, etc. and your decision at such critical moments has a greater knock-on effect. After a lesson, it may be useful to recall what happened and reflect on (or talk through with a colleague) why certain critical options were taken and to hypothesize about what the outcomes might have been if other things had been done.

Becoming a more effective teacher is partly a matter of increasing your awareness of what options are available. It is also about the skilful selection of the most appropriate option at each point and the ability to efficiently, effectively turn these into actions. Reading books like this, talking to other teachers, observing other teachers at work, getting feedback from observers of your lesson — these are all ways of increasing your range of options and your skill at deciding and acting on decisions appropriately.

Task: Selecting alternative options

Read this description of a classroom situation and consider any alternative options available to you at points (a) and (b).

You come into the classroom at the start of the lesson. There are 25 teenage students in the room. About half of them seem very involved in a loud discussion (in their own language, not English) about a current political situation. (a) You shout out ‘OK OK, let’s start the lesson; you can continue that later.’ The room quietens down a bit; some people continue whispering animatedly to each other. ‘Now, today we are going to look at ways of talking about the future,’ you continue. One student asks, ‘But this subject is very interesting. Could we continue the conversation if we use English?’ (b) You say, ‘I’m sorry, but we have to get through Unit 9 of the book today. Perhaps we can have a discussion next week. Open your books at page 47.’

Commentary

The following are a few of the many possible options for (a):

- You sit down and wait for the class to conclude the discussion in its own time, waiting until they indicate that they are ready for you to start.
- You join in the conversation, but using English.

- You join in the conversation using English and subtly manipulate the discussion so that the students are involved in using the language items you were planning to work on in the first place.
- You stand in front of the class in a way that indicates that you want their attention (making eye contact with as many people as possible, looking authoritative, etc.) and wait for silence. Having established silence, you put to the class the decision about what to do: 'We can either continue the discussion or do what I have planned to do. Which would you prefer?'

Here are some options for (b):

- You say 'OK'.
- As in the fourth option above, you ask the class to make the decision about what to do.
- You explain your aim for the lesson and then offer the possibility of continuing the discussion after some other work. You suggest allowing ten minutes at the end of the lesson and ask the students for their opinion.

How can you decide what's best to do?

What influences and informs your decisions between different options? The following are some factors to bear in mind:

- What is the aim of this activity?
- What is the aim of the whole lesson?
- Is what learners are doing useful?
- What is hindering the effectiveness of what we are doing?
- What have I planned to do?
- What would be the best thing to do now?
- Is it time for a change of mood or pace?
- Are we using time efficiently?
- How do the students feel?
- How do I feel?
- What are the possible outcomes of my doing something?

I could add two further factors that are frequently involved in teacher decisions and actions:

- I don't know any other options;
- I know some other options, but I'm avoiding them because they are difficult or troublesome or nerve-wracking.

Classroom decisions and actions are also greatly determined by your own attitudes, intentions, beliefs and values. What do you believe about learning? What is important for you in learning? What is your genuine feeling towards your students? For example, you may ask a student to write on the board (rather than doing it himself) . This decision may have grown from your intention to involve students more in the routine duties of the class. This may itself have grown from your belief that trusting your students more and sharing some responsibility with them is a useful way of increasing their involvement in the learning process.

Task: Teacher beliefs and attitudes

What teacher beliefs or attitudes might underlie the following classroom actions?

1. The teacher includes a lot of student-to-student communication activities in her lessons.
2. The teacher uses recordings of authentic, natural conversations.
3. In every lesson, the teacher includes at least one activity that involves students moving around the classroom.

Commentary

She might believe that ...

1. it is useful to give students opportunities to speak to one another;
people learn by trying to do things themselves;
activities like this promote more fluent use of English;
the students will get to know one another better;
it will give more students time to speak than if the whole class did something together;
it gives them a chance to listen to someone other than the teacher.
2. listening work is important;
students need practice in listening to real, conversational English;

they need to hear a variety of voices and accents.

3. a lesson needs changes of pace and mood;
a game is a good way of adding variety to a lesson;
sitting still in one place for a long time can be difficult;
getting people to do physical things can be a good way of waking up their mental powers.

Classroom interaction

In Chapter 3, Section 1, I listed some common types of student grouping in the classroom:

- whole class working together with you;
- whole class moving around and mixing together as individuals (a 'mingle');
- small groups (three to eight people);
- pairs;
- individual work.

In any one lesson, you may include work that involves a number of these different arrangements. Varying groupings is one way of enabling a variety of experiences for the learners.

In this section, we examine the rationale for making use of pairs and small groups as well as whole-class work. There are some suggestions and guidelines for maximizing useful interaction in class.