

Chapter 3 Classroom management

This chapter provides the basics of classroom management for you as you teach your first few lessons. Issues such as seating, gestures and ways of using the board effectively are covered so that you are well-equipped. Section 9 then looks at some common ways in which teachers can inadvertently prevent learning from taking place.

1 What is classroom management?

Your most important job as a teacher 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:

Activities

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

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

Authority

- Gathering and holding attention
- Deciding who does what (ie 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, eg rearranging the chairs. The decisions are about whether to do these actions, when to do them, how to do them and who will do them.

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 *perfect lesson*, 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. You cannot know whether alternative routes might have been more effective – but, post-lesson, it’s useful to reflect on what you did and didn’t do – and let this inform your future lessons.

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 summarised as follows:

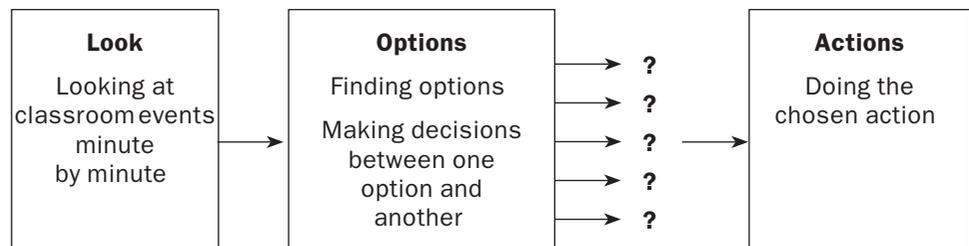


Figure 3.1 Basic skills of classroom management

Task 3.1 Choosing classroom management options

Write two or more options for 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 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.

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

- 2 You could stop the activity.
You could let it continue (postponing the next activity).
You could announce a time for finishing (eg *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 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.

Task 3.2 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 quiets 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 join in the conversation using English. After a while you slip into your conversation one or two examples of the language items you had planned to focus on in the lesson. Draw students' attention to these items and slowly change the focus of the lesson so that the students get 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?
- 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.



You could now use **Observation Task 5** on the DVD to look at the options and decisions made in the classroom.

2 Classroom interaction

Some common types of student grouping in the classroom include:

- 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 maximising useful interaction in class.

Teacher talk and student talk

The language classroom is rich in language for learners, quite apart from the language that is the supposed focus of the lesson. Students learn a lot of their language from what they hear you say: the instructions, the discussions, the asides, the jokes, the chit-chat, the comments. Having said that, it would be unsatisfactory if your talk dominated the lesson to the exclusion of participation from as many learners as possible.

Task 3.3 Classroom interaction

In the list of statements below, tick any that you feel you can agree with.

- 1 a It is more important for learners to listen and speak to you than for learners to listen and speak to each other.
b Students should get most conversation practice in interacting with other learners rather than with you.
- 2 a People usually learn best by listening to people explaining things.
b People usually learn best by trying things out and finding out what works.
- 3 a The teacher should speak as much as possible in classroom time.
b The teacher should speak as little as possible in classroom time.

Commentary

The arguments for statement 1a usually grow from the idea that you know more of the target language and that by listening to you, the learner is somehow absorbing a correct picture of the language; that by interacting with you, the learner is learning to interact with a competent user of the language; that this is far more useful than talking to a poor user. Thus, by this argument, time spent talking to another learner is not particularly useful time. This is OK as far as it goes, but there are a number of challenges to the statements. Some are to do with available time: if you talk most of the time, how much time will learners get to speak? If the only conversation practice learners get is one-to-one with you, they will get very little time to speak at all. In a class of 25 learners, how much time will you have available to speak to individuals? Divide a one-hour lesson by 25 and you get just over two minutes each. That doesn't sound very much.

Statement 1b suggests that we could maximise learner speaking time at certain points of the lesson by putting them into pairs or small groups and getting them to talk to each other. Thus, instead of two minutes' speaking time in a whole lesson, they all get a lot of speaking practice within a short space of time. You could use this time effectively by discreetly monitoring what the students are saying and using the information collected as a source of material for future feedback or other work. (I am, of course, making other assumptions; I'm assuming that it is important to give learners opportunities to have useful interaction with others.)

Statements 2a and 2b are about different ways of learning. I believe, from my own learning experiences and from observing teachers at work, that the most efficient way of learning is for a student to be really involved in a lesson. Explanations, especially long ones, tend to leave me cold; I get bored; I switch off. (A learner might also have real problems in following what is being said.) But challenge me, give me a problem to do or a task I want to complete, and I will learn far more – by experimenting, by practising, by taking risks.

I think you can guess my views on statements 3a and 3b by now. (Neither the extremes of (a) nor (b), but closer to (b) than (a).) Observers who watch new teachers at work often comment that they talk too much. An essential lesson that every new teacher needs to learn is that 'talking at' the learners does not necessarily mean that learning is taking place; in many cases, TTT (Teacher Talking Time) is actually time when the learners are not doing very much and are not very involved. Working on ways to become aware of unnecessary TTT is something to add to your list of priorities.

Task 3.4 Increasing student–student interaction

When working in a whole-class stage, a large amount of interaction tends to go from teacher to student and student to teacher, as shown in Figure 3.2. How could you get more student–student interaction?

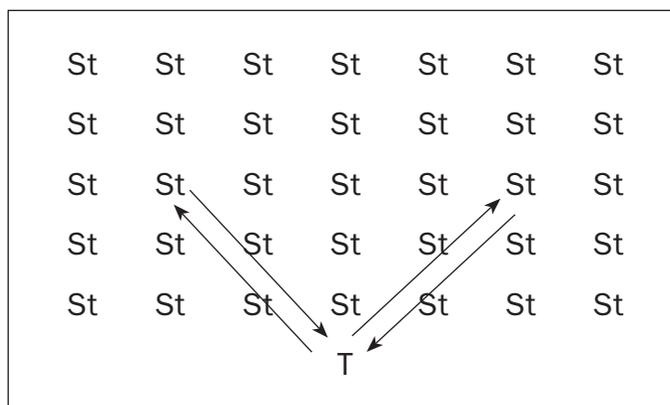


Figure 3.2 Interaction between teacher and students

Commentary

Some ideas for maximising student interaction in class:

- Encourage a friendly, relaxed learning environment. If there is a trusting, positive, supportive rapport amongst the learners and between learners and you, then there is a much better chance of useful interaction happening.
- Ask questions rather than giving explanations.
- Allow time for students to listen, think, process their answer and speak.
- Really listen to what they say. Let what they say really affect what you do next. Work on listening to the person and the meaning, as well as to the language and the mistakes.
- Allow thinking time without talking over it. Allow silence.
- Increase opportunities for STT (Student Talking Time).
- Use gestures (see Section 6) to replace unnecessary teacher talk.
- Allow students to finish their own sentences.
- Make use of pairs and small groups to maximise opportunities for students to speak. Do this even in the middle of longer whole-class stages, eg ask students to break off for 30 seconds and talk in pairs about their reactions to what you've just been discussing and also allow them to check answers to tasks before conducting feedback.
- If possible, arrange seating so that students can all see each other and talk to each other (ie circles, squares and horseshoes rather than parallel rows). (See Section 3 on seating.)
- Remember that you don't always need to be at the front of the class. Try out seating arrangements that allow the whole class to be the focus (eg you take one seat in a circle).
- If a student is speaking too quietly for you to hear, walk further away, rather than closer to them! (This sounds illogical, but if you can't hear them, then it's likely that the other students can't either. Encourage the quiet speaker to speak louder so that the others can hear.)



See *Encouraging quiet students* teaching technique on the DVD

- Encourage interaction between students rather than only between student and you, and you and student. Get students to ask questions, give explanations, etc to each other, rather than always to you. Use gestures and facial expressions to encourage them to speak and listen to each other.
- Keep a diagram like the one in Figure 3.3 in your head as a possible alternative to the one in Figure 3.2. Think ‘How can I get students speaking and listening to each other as well as to me?’

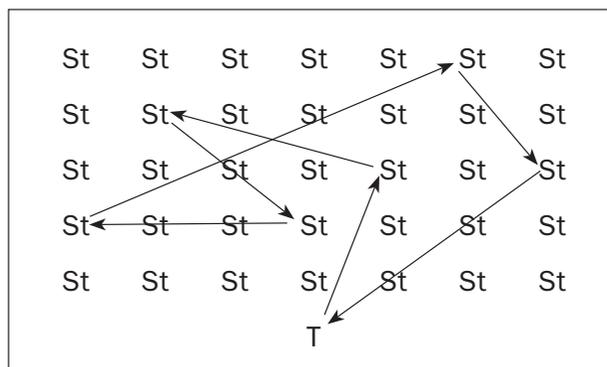


Figure 3.3 Interaction between students

Task 3.5 Your skills in enabling interaction

Carry out a self-assessment, comparing yourself against some of the guidelines on these pages. What skills do you have in enabling effective classroom interaction? What do you intend to work on?



You could now use **Observation Task 4** on the DVD to analyse interaction in an observed classroom.

3 Seating

However your classroom is laid out and whatever kind of fixed or moveable seating you have, it is worth taking time to consider the best ways to make use of it.

- What different seating positions are possible without moving anything?
- Are any rearrangements of seats possible?
- Which areas of the room are suitable for learners to stand and interact in?
- Is there any possibility that the room could be completely rearranged on a semi-permanent basis to make a better language classroom space?

Important considerations are:

- Can learners comfortably work in pairs with a range of different partners?
- Can learners comfortably work in small groups with a range of other learners?

For each activity you do in class, consider what grouping, seating, standing arrangements are most appropriate. Changing seating arrangements can help students interact with different people, change the focus from you when appropriate and allow a range of different situations to be recreated within the classroom, as well as simply adding variety to the predictability of sitting in the same place every time. It's difficult to sit still for a long time; it's worth including activities that involve some movement, even if only to give people the chance to

stretch their legs. Students might not like it if there is a constant movement every five minutes, but some variety of working arrangements is often helpful.

In some cultures, students may have clear expectations as to what is acceptable. For example, asking students to sit on their desks may be taboo; a teacher who sits on the corner of his desk may be considered unprofessional. Respect cultural constraints, but don't let them put you off experimenting a little. Be clear about what is genuinely unacceptable and what is merely unknown or unexpected.

Remain aware of the possibilities of using the space you are in; sometimes a complete change in the room can make all the difference. Even with the most immovable of fixed seating, it is often possible to be creative in some way.

Fixed, semi-fixed and large seating

You could ask students to:

- turn around and sit backwards, working with the people behind them;
- sit on the ends of their row and work with people in the next row;
- sit on their desks and talk with people nearby;
- stand up, move around and return to a different seat;
- stand in the aisle space between rows;
- all come to the front (or another open space) to talk.

In the long term, if you have exclusive use of a classroom, or share it with other language teachers, it's worth considering whether a longer-term rearrangement might be useful.

Figure 3.4 shows a school I worked in that had large, one-piece seats / desks for three people fixed in every classroom. They were always used in rows because, although only lightly fixed, there seemed to be no other way to arrange them.

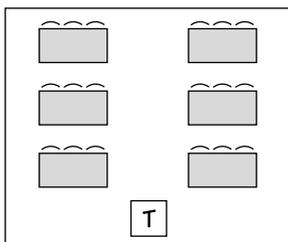


Figure 3.4 Original seating plan

However, when we started thinking about it, we found a number of other arrangements were possible (see Figure 3.5). The horseshoe arrangement, particularly, proved very suitable for the English classes.

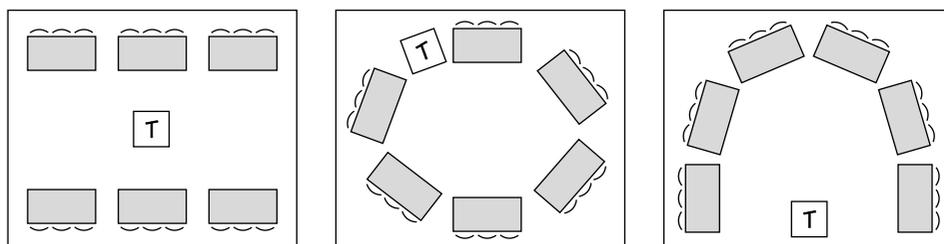


Figure 3.5 Alternative seating arrangements

Task 3.6 Standing and sitting

- 1 Why might a circle or horseshoe shape be more effective for language teaching than straight rows?
- 2 What difference does it make if you sit in a circle with the students rather than standing in front of them?

Commentary

- 1 In a circle or horseshoe, learners can make eye contact with everyone else in the group and thus interact much more naturally. There is also a much greater sense of equality. Weaker students tend to hide away less and stronger students to dominate less.
- 2 Having you in the circle helps to clarify your role as an equal rather than as someone separate and different.

Moveable seating

Some ideas for investigating and exploring the possibilities of moveable seating:

- Ask students to move seats when you create pairs or small groups. Don't let students get stuck in unsuitable seating arrangements when a move is preferable.
- If it's really too noisy, make the discussion of that (and the finding of a solution) part of the lesson as well.
- Figure 3.6 shows some patterns to think about.
- If the students normally sit in rows, try forming a circle.
- Turn the classroom around so that the focus is on a different wall from normal.
- Make seating arrangements that reflect specific contexts, eg a train carriage, an aeroplane, a town centre or whatever.
- Push all seats up against the wall and make a large, open forum space in the middle of the room.
- Deliberately place your seat off-centre (ie not at the front). This is an interesting subversion of expectations and immediately challenges expectations about who a teacher is and what a teacher should do.
- Divide the class into separate groups at far corners of the room.
- Ask *How can we reorganise this classroom to make it a nicer place to be?* Let the class discuss it and agree, then do it.
- Push the seats or desks up against the wall. Sit on the floor (only if it's clean!).

Task 3.7 Seating options in the classroom

Look at Figure 3.6. Which of these ideas for arranging seating have you not tried? Which would be worth trying? Draw a simple sketch of your classroom. Mark in seats for one new arrangement. When might you use such an arrangement? How can you organise it in class? What might be the benefits? The problems?

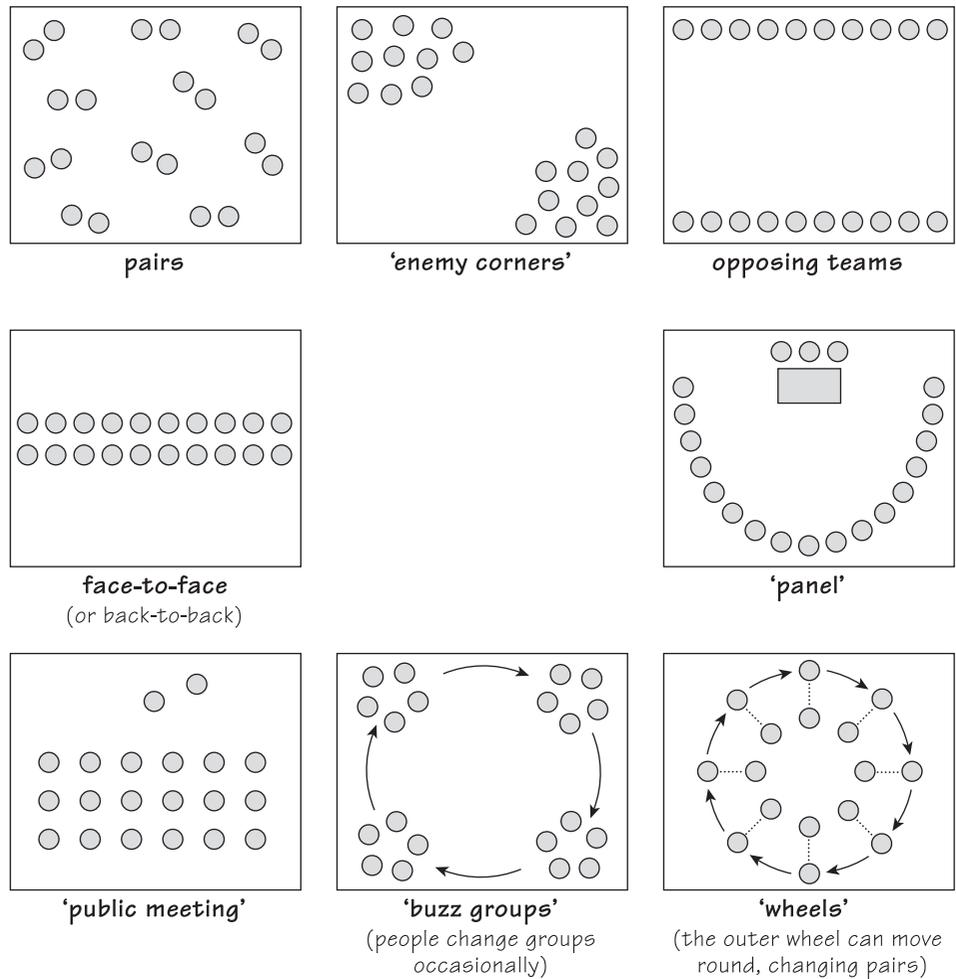


Figure 3.6 Seating possibilities in a standard classroom

4 Giving instructions

In a multilingual class you have to use English for instructions. But, in monolingual classes you have a choice: English, native language – or some mixture of both. I have met a number of teachers who say that they would like to give instructions for activities in English rather than their students' own language, but find that there are often so many problems with comprehension that it seems impossible. It is certainly possible to use only English (and it's often really helpful in creating an 'English' atmosphere in the classroom), but it's often problematic because of the quantity and over-complexity of language used.