

## Strategies for appropriate and helpful teacher response to stressful situations caused by disruptive students in the classroom

Azra Jakupi, Neda Radosavlevikj & Milica Matoska  
South East European University, Macedonia

**Abstract:** *Whether you have been teaching for 20 years or have just started your teaching career, there's always a possibility you will have a student in your classroom with disruptive behavior. This behavior can go beyond the limits of what is considered to be acceptable in a learning environment. An obvious example of disruptive behavior is when the student verbally attacks, is late for class, experiences angry outbursts, social problems, etc. or simply rebels against something that is happening beyond the classroom door. However, very rarely are we, as teachers, aware of the possibility that the student might be having a mental health crisis. We, the Language Centre at South East European University, have encountered various stressful situations, while at the same time we struggle for balance and try to find appropriate responses for students' complaints about grades, "unfair" treatment, the policy of the faculty, etc. In an effort to resolve this dilemma, we will conduct research within the Language Centre through interviews with the academic and administrative staff as well as the students and their supervisors. In our presentation, we will present several strategies to deal with stressful situations that affect the entire learning environment, including the teachers themselves, such as: defining the problem, the reason behind it, the time of occurrence, its impact, introducing meta-communication and early communication by setting early expectations, ways to stay calm when responding to a crisis event and setting limits. We will also explore basic principles related to classroom management and a variety of strategies for early intervention in order to create a dynamic learning environment that promotes learning safety.*

**Keywords:** *Disruptive behaviour, strategies, safe learning environment*

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## **Introduction**

Students' disruptive behavior may be resolved by selecting effective classroom-management strategies. One of the best management strategies is to prevent disruptions before they occur. In this paper we will discuss effective strategies applied at the Language Centre at South East European University for creating and sustaining a dynamic learning environment, as well as effective methods that we as teachers find appropriate for early intervention and how we deal with these problems when they occur.

The idea for this study emerged from the stressful situations that teachers were exposed to, always struggling for balance as we seek appropriate strategies to answer to students' problems such as "complaints about grades", "unfair treatment" and other difficulties. Language Centre teachers use different management strategies to deal with disruptive behavior, some of which are not very effective. The aim of this research is to investigate the effective management strategies that teachers at the Language Centre use and what they do when a student's behavior disrupts their classes. Furthermore, the research investigates teachers' reactions towards the success or the failure of their methods as well as the most frequent types of disruptive behavior and the reasons that students engage in such behavior.

Discipline problems are listed as the major concern for most new teachers. What can teachers expect and how can they handle disciplinary problems effectively? The key is classroom management combined with an effective discipline plan.

This step-by-step look at classroom discipline will help you see some important steps in dealing with discipline problems that may arise in your classroom. Here is a list of strategies for responding to stressful situations caused by disruptive students in the classroom:

1. Begin each class period with a positive attitude and high expectations. If you expect your students to misbehave or you approach them negatively, you will get misbehavior. This is an often overlooked aspect of classroom management.
2. Come to class prepared with lessons for the day. In fact, over-plan your lessons. Make sure you have all your materials and methods ready to go. Reducing downtime will help maintain discipline in your classroom.
3. Work on making smooth transitions between lesson segments. In other words, as you move from group discussion to independent work, try to minimize disruption to the class. Have your papers ready to go or your assignment already written on the board. Disruptions frequently occur during lesson transitions.

Watch your students as they come into class. Look for signs of possible problems before class even begins. For example, if you notice a heated discussion or problem before class starts, try to deal with the problem there and then. Allow the students a few moments to talk with you or with each other before you start your lesson to try and work things out. Separate them if necessary and try to get them to agree to drop whatever issue they have during your class.

Have a posted discipline plan that you follow consistently for effective classroom management. This should ensure that students will receive a warning or two before punishment begins, depending on the severity of the offense. Your plan should be easy to follow and also should cause a minimum of disruption in your class. For example, your discipline plan might be - First Offense: Verbal Warning, Second Offense: Detention with teacher, Third Offense: Referral.

Meet disruptions that arise in your class with in kind measures. In other words, don't elevate disruptions above their current level. Your discipline plan should provide for this; however, sometimes your own personal issues can get in the way. For example, if two students are talking in the back of the room and your first step in the plan is to give your students a verbal warning, don't stop your instruction to begin yelling at the students. Instead, have a set policy that simply saying a student's name is enough of a clue for them to get back on task. Another technique is to ask one of them a question.

Try to use humor to defuse situations before things get out of hand. Note: Know your students. The following example would be used with students whom you know will not escalate the situation: If you tell the class to open their books to page 51 and three students are busy talking, do not immediately yell at them. Instead, smile, say their names, and ask them kindly if they could please wait until later to finish their conversation because you would really like to hear how it ends and you have to get this class finished. This will probably get a few laughs and also get your point across.

If a student becomes verbally confrontational with you, remain calm and remove them from the situation as quickly as possible. Do not get into yelling matches with your students. There will always be a winner and a loser which sets up a power struggle that could continue throughout the year. Further, do not bring the rest of the class into the situation by involving them in the discipline or the writing of the referral.

If a student becomes physical, remember the safety of the other students is paramount. Remain as calm as possible; your demeanor can sometimes defuse the situation. You should have a plan for dealing with violence that you discuss with students early in the year. You should use the call button for assistance. You could also designate a student to get help from another teacher. Send the

other students from the room if it appears they could get hurt. If the fight is between two students, follow your school's rules on teacher involvement, as many want teachers to stay out of fights until help arrives.

Keep an anecdotal record of major issues that arise in your class. This might be necessary if you are asked for a history of classroom disruptions or other documentation.

Let it go at the end of the day. Classroom management and disruption issues should be left in class so that you can have some down time to recharge before coming back to another day of teaching.

## **Analysis and Evidence/Findings**

In order to find out about teachers' and students' views on disruptive behaviors and how to deal with such situations, we constructed two surveys. One was teacher-specific and the other was student-oriented. We asked both groups the same questions.

The findings from the student-oriented survey are as follows:

1. Both female and male students generally think (98%) that the overall atmosphere in the classroom is positive.
2. 25% of the male students think that discipline is not important and that the current disciplinary methods are utterly inefficient and 20% of female students think that the rules of conduct should be more flexible.
3. The male students (5%) state that the teachers are unable to manage the classroom and deal with undisciplined students, while the female students (2%) think it is due to the lack of a psychologist at the university.
4. 90% of students from both genders think that, in order to deal with disruptive behaviors, teachers should increase students' obligations. While female students (50%) do not hold teachers responsible for disruptive behaviors, saying they cannot possibly know and be responsible for 'everything' in the classroom, the male students (90%) state the opposite.
5. 15% of female and male students think that the students should be involved in designing the curriculum and 90% of them think that students should be involved in setting the rules of conduct.

In conclusion, generally speaking, male students place greater responsibility on the teachers; question their competence to manage the classroom and emphasize the importance of the students' role. On the other hand, female students emphasize the students' responsibility to control their own behavior. Both groups agree that there should be a co-operation between teachers and students in order to improve and eliminate disruptive behavior. While female

students think that behavior is more important than students' inner thoughts and feelings, male students state the opposite.

The findings from the teacher specific survey were the following:

1. Both female and male teachers (98%) describe the overall classroom atmosphere as positive.
2. All teachers agree that discipline is very important. 5% of teachers think disciplinary methods are utterly inefficient and recommend penalties.
3. All teachers agree that they are responsible for shaping the desired behavior in the classroom; it is their responsibility to design the curriculum and to motivate and engage the students. Moreover, they all agree that they cannot possibly be responsible for 'everything' in the classroom.
4. 99% of the teachers think that students can control their behavior, but that they should take their students' needs into consideration.
5. 100% of the female and 50% of the male teachers think that students' inner thoughts and feelings are more important than their evident behavior.

The teachers reject the notion that they could 'know everything' in the classroom at all times. However, they emphasize their own responsibility for managing the classroom and dealing with disruptive behavior (5% of them suggest the introduction of penalization is an efficient method). All of the teachers agree that they should have background knowledge when dealing with infractions. Although the students can control their own behavior, the teachers agree that it is their responsibility to motivate the students, get their co-operation and create a positive atmosphere. The teachers must decide what the students will learn, but they should take the students' needs into consideration. While the male teachers think that students' inner thoughts and feelings are less important than their evident behavior, 100% of the female teachers state the opposite.

## **Literature review**

### **Reasons for and types of disruptive behavior**

There is no specific definition for disruptive behavior since the definition differs according to its relevance to the specific case of each study (Arbuckle & Little, 2004). Nevertheless, many studies identify some types such as self-reported data from schoolteachers that help identify types of the most frequent disruptive behaviors. Ranking which behavior is more frequent differs in Western and Eastern cultures. In China, some studies report that "day dreaming (also called non-attention and off task) behavior" is the most frequent disruptive behavior in some of their schools (Ding, Li, Li, & Kulm, 2008; Shen et al., 2009). Other studies report

that “talking out of turn” is the most frequent disruptive behavior in some schools in England (Arbuckle & Little, 2004) and Australia (Ross, Little, Kienhuis, 2008).

Teachers and students have different perceptions of the reasons behind disruptive behavior. Some students view disruptive behavior as a result of bad teaching skills. Other students mention that they use this behavior to deal with their problems against the whole school system; in other words, they choose to act against teachers’ power in order to assert their own power (Verkuyten 2002). On the other hand, some schoolteachers believe that some students use disruptive behavior as a way of rejecting work and drawing attention to themselves. They also think students use such behavior to defy teachers’ power (Axup & Gersch, 2008; Shumate & Wills, 2010). Further, other teachers mention that students may practice disruptive behavior to establish an identity in order to belong to a “peer group” (Axup & Gersch, 2008). Sometimes the injustice of teachers and the vulnerability of students can be the main causes of disruptive behavior (Miller, Ferguson and Byrne, 2000).

### **The relation between disruptive behavior and the learning and teaching process**

Inappropriate behavior impacts learning and teaching. It wastes classroom time, distracts students from learning and teachers from teaching, lessens students’ motivation and causes stress for students and teachers (Charles and Senter cited in Ding et al., 2008). Many studies have investigated the stressors that lead to teachers’ burnout and annoyance, which could hinder the teaching process. In a study done on 1,386 secondary teachers working in Spanish schools, disruptive behavior was identified as a major source of teachers’ stress and annoyance (López et al., 2008). Furthermore, students’ disruptive behaviors can provoke negative feelings in teachers such as frustration and lack of confidence. As a result, teachers become too stressed to make the right decisions (Arbuckle & Little, 2004; Ross et al., 2008; Thompson & Webber, 2008). For instance, teachers sometimes give up on disruptive students, remove them from their classes and let others deal with them (Egyed and Short, 2006). What is more, some teachers, especially inexperienced ones, decide to quit teaching and change their careers (Ross et al., 2008; Tsouloupas et al., 2010).

### **Teachers’ selection of management strategies and disruptive behaviors**

Some teachers do not always realize that they are repeatedly using ineffective management strategies in order to handle disruptive behaviors in their classes. Before deciding which management strategies to apply, teachers could first try to understand why students are practicing this kind of behavior (Stoughton, 2006). Recognizing how disruptive students think can help teachers decide on which management

strategies to apply in order to deal with disruptive students (Ding et al., 2008). Furthermore, it is advisable for some teachers to realize that if they want to reduce disruptive behaviors, they have to abandon their authoritative identity and maintain a strong relationship with their students (Lee and Powell, 2006). Some teachers lack knowledge of the kind of management strategies that they need to select in order to handle disruptive behavior. Therefore, it is always important to provide teachers with the necessary consultation on this kind of information (Egyed & Short, 2006; Thompson & Webber, 2010). Consultation can help teachers feel more capable of and knowledgeable about handling disruptive behaviors. This may also help increase teachers' confidence and reduce their stress (Egyed & Short, 2006; Reinke, Palmer & Merrell, 2008).

Effective management strategies can help reduce disruptive behaviors and improve the learning process (Reinke et al., 2008). Some teachers believe that positive management strategies such as praise and engaging students in decision-making are the best management strategies for handling students' disruptive behaviors. Other teachers believe that negative management strategies such as punishment and reprimands are more effective than the positive ones. Some studies show that teachers who lack patience, confidence and the necessary consultation skills tend to use more negative management strategies to control disruptive behavior (Axup & Gersch, 2008). On the other hand, some studies show that students' disruptive behaviors decrease when teachers apply positive management strategies and avoid using the negative ones (Reinke et al., 2008). Applying positive management strategies to classrooms is also found beneficial as it increases on-task behavior and enhances students' learning identity (Arbuckle & Little, 2004; Lee & Powell, 2005; Ross et al., 2008).

Most studies that investigated teachers' perceptions of effective classroom-management strategies and students' disruptive behaviors used either questionnaires or surveys in collecting the necessary data. In spite of the limitations of these methods, they remain the most frequent methods of reflecting teachers' real practices in classrooms (Ross et al., 2008). For this reason one of these methods, a questionnaire, was used as the method of collecting data in this small-scale study.

## **Conclusions**

Every teacher should have a set of tips for managing teacher burnout and effectively deal with unforeseen disruptive situations.

Here are some tips to get you started:

1. Recognize the warning signs of disruption. Obviously this comes with practice of classroom management. However, some signs are fairly obvious.

2. Sarcasm should be used sparingly if at all. If you do use it, make sure you know the student who you are using it with well. Many students do not have the capacity to know that sarcasm is not meant to be taken literally. Further, other students could find your sarcasm as inflammatory, which would defeat your purpose of greater classroom management.
3. Consistency and fairness are essential for effective classroom management. If you ignore disruptions one day and come down hard on them the next, you will not be seen as consistent. You will lose respect and disruptions will probably increase. Further, if you are not fair in your punishments, making sure to treat all students fairly then students will quickly realize this and lose respect for you. You should also start each day fresh, not holding disruptions against students and instead expecting them to behave.
4. It's easier to get easier. Start the year very strict so that students see that you are willing to do what it takes to have your classroom under control. They will understand that you expect learning to occur in your room. You can always let up as the year goes on.
5. Classroom rules must be easy to understand and manageable. Make sure that you don't have such a large number of rules that your students can't consistently follow them.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire for the Teachers

Please mark (a) Male (b) Female, Teaching Experience: (a) 0 (b) 1-5 yrs. (c) 6- 10 yrs (d) 11 - 15 yrs. (e) 16+ yrs.

Degree Earned : (a) BA (b) Master's (c) EdS (d) Doctorate (e) Undergraduate

*Directions: On the following scale how much do you agree with the following statement?*

**1. How would you describe the overall atmosphere in the classroom?**

1-very negative    2- barely positive    3- somewhat positive    4- mostly positive  
5- very positive

**2. It is important for students to be disciplined. (Circle one)**

1-strongly agree    2- agree    3-neither agree nor disagree    4-disagree    5-  
strongly disagree

**3. How efficient do you think the discipline strategies are right now? (Circle one)**

1-very efficient    2- efficient    3-neither efficient nor inefficient    4-inefficient  
5-very inefficient



4. If you could change one thing about the behavior management in the school what would it be? Please specify.

*Directions: Please read the following carefully and select one answer from the scale below.*

SA=Strongly Agree

A = Agree

N = Neither Agree nor Disagree

D = Disagree

SD-Strongly Disagree

1. Teachers must have knowledge of group dynamics.

SA      A      N      D      SD

2. Teachers need to have background information when dealing with rule infractions.

SA      A      N      D      SD

3. Teachers are responsible for knowing everything that goes on in the classroom at all times.

SA      A      N      D      SD

4. Teachers should create a "democratic" classroom.

SA      A      N      D      SD

5. Teachers should "invite" student cooperation.

SA      A      N      D      SD

6. Teachers are responsible for "shaping" desired behavior in the classroom.

SA      A      N      D      SD

7. Teachers must take student needs into consideration.

SA      A      N      D      SD

8. Teachers are responsible for controlling the behavior of their students.

SA      A      N      D      SD

**9. Students are able to control their behavior.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**10. Conflict resolution should be employed in the school setting.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**11. Teachers must deal with all students in the same manner when using disciplinary measures.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**12. A "sense of belonging" needs to be created by the teacher within the classroom setting.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**13. Rules of conduct must be set by the teachers.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**14. What students must learn and the tasks to be performed must be determined by the teacher. And, a specific sequence of instruction to accomplish these goals must be followed.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**15. If a student disrupts class, I would ignore the disruption if possible and/or remove the student to the back of the room as a consequence for his/her behavior.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**16. If a student disrupts class, I would express discomfort to the student about being disrupted from my task and then continue on with the lesson.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**17. Rules are never written "in stone," and can be renegotiated by the class; consequences will vary with students.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**18. Teachers should intervene quickly when misbehavior occurs.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**19. Inner thoughts and feelings of students are more important than evident behavior.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

20. Student autonomy is very important in the classroom.

SA      A      N      D      SD

21. Extrinsic “rewards” may decrease intrinsic motivation.

SA      A      N      D      SD

**Questionnaire for the Students**

a. Gender (check a box)    \_\_\_ Female    \_\_\_ Male    b. Age \_\_\_\_\_    c.  
Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_    d. Faculty \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions: On the following scale how much do you agree with the following statement?**

**1. How would you describe the overall atmosphere in the classroom?**

1-very negative    2- barely positive    3- somewhat positive    4- mostly positive  
5- very positive

**2. It is important for students to be disciplined. (Circle one)**

1-strongly agree    2- agree    3-neither agree nor disagree    4-disagree    5-  
strongly disagree

**3. How efficient do you think the discipline strategies are right now?  
(Circle one)**

1-very efficient    2- efficient    3-neither efficient nor inefficient    4-inefficient  
5-very inefficient

**4. If you were a teacher and you could change one thing about the  
behavior management in  
the school what would it be? Please specify.**

**Directions: Please read the following carefully and select one answer from the scale below.**

SA=Strongly Agree    A = Agree    N = Neither Agree nor Disagree    D = Disagree  
SD-Strongly Disagree

**1. Teachers must have knowledge of group dynamics.**

SA      A      N      D      SD

**2. Teachers need to have background information when dealing with rule infractions.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**3. Teachers are responsible for knowing everything that goes on in the classroom at all times.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**4. Teachers should create a "democratic" classroom.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**5. Teachers should "invite" student cooperation.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**6. Teachers are responsible for "shaping" desired behavior in the classroom.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**7. Teachers must take student needs into consideration.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**8. Teachers are responsible for controlling the behavior of their students.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**9. Students are able to control their behavior.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**10. Conflict resolution should be employed in the school setting.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**11. Teachers must deal with all students in the same manner when using disciplinary measures.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**12. A "sense of belonging" needs to be created by the teacher within the classroom setting.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

**13. Rules of conduct must be set by the teachers.**

**SA      A      N      D      SD**

14. What students must learn and the tasks to be performed must be determined by the teacher. And, a specific sequence of instruction to accomplish these goals must be followed.

SA      A      N      D      SD

15. If I were a teacher, if a student disrupted my class, I would ignore the disruption if possible and/or remove the student to the back of the room as a consequence for his/her behavior.

SA      A      N      D      SD

16. If I were a teacher, if a student disrupted my class, I would express discomfort to the student about being disrupted from my task and then continue on with the lesson.

SA      A      N      D      SD

17. Rules are never written "in stone," and can be renegotiated by the class; consequences will vary with students.

SA      A      N      D      SD

18. Teachers should intervene quickly when misbehavior occurs.

SA      A      N      D      SD

19. Inner thoughts and feelings of students are more important than evident behavior.

SA      A      N      D      SD

20. Student autonomy is very important in the classroom.

SA      A      N      D      SD

21. Extrinsic (external) "rewards" may decrease intrinsic (internal) motivation.

SA      A      N      D      SD

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