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Managing Disruptions in Adult Foreign Language Classes

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Abstract: Classroom management for adult students is challenging and invites the teacher of foreign languages, and not only, to master the skills for establishing a favourable learning atmosphere. Effective classroom management is much more than simply administrative corrective measures when a student misbehaves; it is also about developing efficient ways to deter potential learning distracters. Disruptions, when they occur, call for mild management techniques. Classroom management is largely explored in the context of mainstream education, nevertheless there is little focus on the foreign language classroom management of either children or adults. The different types of adult student misbehaviour in foreign language classes involve various strategies preferred by teachers in order to prevent such disruptions. Analysing these under the umbrella term *classroom management* helps us to understand the foreign language classroom management

Keywords: *classroom management, disruptive behaviour, adult education, foreign language teaching, foreign language classes, ESP, EFL*

1. Introduction

Classroom management in adult student education may often prove to be a genuine minefield for teachers. Indeed, when teaching adults one does not constantly have to deal with discipline issues the way they do in primary or secondary education, but even with adult students, teachers need to be able to defuse tense moments in class in order to achieve high academic performance. In terms of foreign language classes, thorough knowledge of classroom management techniques and the ability to employ such techniques at the right time are the key to success for teachers who know how to keep their students focused on attaining their goals. This is an even more efficient trump card up the teachers' sleeves in ESP classes, where special concentration is necessary for students to reach their desired level of proficiency. Just like children, adults also have bad habits to display, opinions to express loud and clear, personal pride to manifest and complex relationships to be involved in, all of which may eventually disrupt the EFL/ESP classroom.

Disruptive behaviour interrupts or slows down the pace of the learning process and results in frustration both for teachers and for students. Poorly applied classroom management techniques not only have ineffective teaching and/or learning outcomes, but, in the worst-case scenario, may also exacerbate student misbehaviour and add to the distractions they cause. Therefore, there is good reason for teachers

in higher education to strive to preserve the right balance of the class environment and deter upsetting interferences.

2. Classroom management

Classroom management is an important part of the teaching process for creating a favourable environment where instruction and learning can conjoin in an efficient way. Many specialists in the field, like Harmer (1983), Emmer (1997), Marzano (2003) state that the effectiveness of a teacher and their instruction is fully dependent on how a classroom is managed and all have agreed that there is a positive correlation between effective classroom management and students' achievements. Classroom management encompasses a wide variety of skills that teachers use in order to keep students focused, organized, attentive on tasks and also productive during a class. All these strategies are related to efficient teachers who tend to promote strong skills in terms of classroom management, while the less experienced and successful teachers are faced with disorderly classrooms and dismissive students.

Effective classroom management is necessary for all teachers and facilitators because it involves all the aspects of what is going on in the classroom while a lesson is being taught, the ways in which the teacher or facilitator delivers the curriculum, and also the way in which the students interact with the teacher or among them and all together provide the learning environment. The effective classroom management focuses on rules and strategies that teachers use to improve student learning, which include several elements, such as:

- learning environment (a welcoming and cheerful classroom equipped with purpose-designed materials and devices),
- behaviour (positive approach and fair treatment of students),
- learning resources (texts, hand-outs, equipment),
- activities (the learning experiences that raise students' interest and spur intellectual curiosity),
- prospects (the students' output quality expected and aimed at, by teachers).

From this perspective, we may ascertain that good classroom management and good teaching become, to some extent, identical.

3. Disruptive behaviour or misbehaviour

The process of teaching is complex, difficult and very demanding and requires a lot of patience, higher thinking, empathy, processing more sources of information in a short period of time and the capability to relate to lots of followers at once. Therefore, teaching could be quite stressful sometimes and teachers could respond in a different way, which might be conceptualized as misbehaving. Teachers' misbehaviour does indeed also exist, but it is less studied in comparison with students' misbehaviour, which will be the focus of our next paragraphs.

Despite the fact that classroom management has been largely analysed from the teachers' perspective, quite a few important studies have noticed students' perceptions and expectations as well. Professor Moshe Zeidner (1988) stated that there are notable differences between teacher and student perceptions of classroom management behaviour with regard to severity in particular. He also claims that each student in one class may perceive any behaviour differently from their peers and these differences may derive from students' varying expectations of education. Adem Turanli (1999) in his MA thesis "*Students' Expectations of Teachers' Classroom Management Behaviors in ELT Classes*" showed that teachers first need to understand the reason behind problem behaviour in order to analyse students' misbehaviour. (Cabaroglu, 2010:100) Other studies (Cabaroglu, 2010) have shown that students expected their teachers to manage their class and one of the conclusions was that students wanted teachers to manage time, student behaviours, and environment effectively, and expected teachers to be considerate about time management.

Considering that misbehaviour requires a great deal of attention and interest, we may say that it is an important topic to tackle. Students' misbehaviour automatically leads to disruptions during classes, and when these occur, they call for mild management techniques.

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines the verb *to disrupt* from three (similar) perspectives: 1. *to break apart*; 2. *to throw into disorder*; 3. *to interrupt the normal course or unity of* and also gives three definitions of the word behaviour: 1. *the way in which someone behaves*; 2. *the manner of conducting oneself (e.g. criminal behaviour, adolescent behaviour)*; 3. *the way in which something functions or operates*.

4. Types and possible causes of disruptive behaviour

Disruptive behaviour in adults may comprise several manifestations: *lack of attention*, *acting-out* and/or even *threatening* or *violent* outbursts and may be the result of multiple causes.

4.1. According to their degree of severity and intentionality they can be classified into three *types*:

- *Lack of attention* is the least harmful for the teaching and learning environment, but it has serious effects on the disruptive learners themselves. Whether it is lack of focus on what is being taught and on the tasks to be performed or day-dreaming or even conversations with the peers, this type of disruptive behaviour is not intended to disturb the class or to draw attention on the disruptive person, who is mostly not even aware that their behaviour is reason for disruption.
- Whereas lack of attention is most likely unintentional and certainly not meant to draw attention, *acting-out* is a manner to disregard the class and the teacher and to overtly vent negative emotions by expressing personal anger or frustration.
- *Threats* and *violence* pose the most serious peril for a safe and trouble-free learning environment. They are always intentional and are meant to cause distress to both teacher and peers and include manifestations such as swearing, harassing, threatening, destruction of school property and even fighting with peers.

4.2. The *causes* of the afore-mentioned types of disruptive behaviour are manifold and they can at times only be inferred from the way a disruptive person behaves. Moreover, according to the behavioural pattern of individuals one particular cause may lead to any of the manifestations shown above.

- Specific *attention deficits*, health *disorders* or *disabilities* in adult students may be associated with lack of attention in class.
- The *social background* of students of any age with restricted possibilities to develop social skills may result in all types of disruptive behaviour based not only on individual patterns of conduct but also on circumstantial contexts. Thus, any learner may have different reactions to various stimuli in the classroom environment.
- *Emotional stress* caused by *job-related* or *financial safety issues* may lead to disruptive behaviour from adults in the classroom. They feel that they have more important problems to deal with and when the learning process does not evolve smoothly they react (sometimes) uncontrollably, expressing their frustration.
- *Difficulty in reaching a proficient level* is often the main cause of *frustration* which is aggravated when the student feels *misunderstood* or maybe *neglected* by the teacher and resorts to various manners of reaction, either consciously or not.

These factors have been considered (Dobmeier, 2008:46) to work synergistically, so that the more of them impacting a learning activity, the higher the likelihood for disruptive behaviour to arise. Any type of disruption may have more than one sole root. This is why teachers should stay alert in order to prevent classroom distractions or to step in on multiple levels according to the pertaining causes.

5. Disruptive behaviour in EFL classes

Disruptive behaviours in a language classroom may affect both the language teaching and the language learning process to a great extent, especially in EFL classes. Therefore, foreign language teachers should consider classroom management as a set of instructions to ensure the flow of the teaching process. These strategies help teachers to deal with breakdowns of class order and discipline. If teachers are aware of the problems that may occur during the learning process, they can take preventive actions to keep their students well behaved during class. In order to do that, they should establish behavioural expectations from the first day of the term based on various criteria such as students' attendance, participation in class, types of evaluation and other strategies in the syllabus and discuss them together with their students.

There are also less hostile different types of misbehaviour likely to pop up during the language learning process such as:

- lack of concentration, indifference towards the lesson,
- talking out of turn when not supposed to talk,
- lack of motivation,
- students talking among themselves, or interrupting others,
- passive students who do not participate in the lesson,
- tardiness,
- getting away from the task,
- forgetting to bring supplies and books.

The main question to pose here is “What are the English teachers' perceptions of misbehaviour and its causes?” There are two aspects to take into consideration when answering this question:

1. the student-related factors (personal or health problems, lack of concentration or motivation, unsuccessful or know-it-all students, the socio-economic level, class size)
2. the teacher-related factors which could also cause misbehaviours in class (incompetent teachers, not fond of the teaching act, teachers' injustice, bad treatment of students, teacher's psychology).

Therefore, all these cases of disruptive behaviour should and could be prevented by help of rules or various intervention strategies used to deal with when misbehaviour occurs:

- ignore it,
- give verbal warning (call the student by name, raise the voice while teaching as to attract attention or remind the rules),
- non-verbal warning (eye contact, roam about the classroom, show finger, proximity control),
- deal the misbehaviour with the student after classes.

Among these strategies, according to a large scale of teachers' observations, ignoring and verbal warning are the most used.

Researchers (Cabaroglu, 2010:115) find that there is *evidence that boredom [...], modelling peers [...], [...], and teacher behaviour towards their students [...] are among the basic reasons of student misbehaviour.*

It is important to provide an effective and desirable educational environment both for teachers and students. In order to do that, teachers should be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to deal with the classroom challenges. Furthermore, teachers should provide positive support by praising students and giving positive feedback. It is also essential for teachers to fully understand the forceful factors behind student misbehaviour. Not all teachers use a special approach in dealing with bad behaviour, not all teachers know how to cope with it, therefore they should be made familiar with preventive management concepts and required to try out some behaviour management skills during their

teaching act. In order to be successful in this respect, teachers should be encouraged to work in close cooperation with psychological experts to cope with student misbehaviour.

6. Managing disruptions in adult foreign language classes

Disruptive behaviour can occur in all types of classes, however our goal is to focus on foreign language classes, with reference to adult learners. Class management for adult students is challenging and invites the teacher of foreign languages, and not only, to master the skills for establishing a favourable learning atmosphere. In this respect, Khasinah (2017:83) quotes H.D. Brown (2001), who, in his widely acclaimed methodology text used in teacher education around the world "*Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*", encourages teachers to build up a rapport, *to balance praise and criticism, and to generate energy*. What is a rapport? *It is a relationship or a connection between teachers and students that produces a positive energy in the language classroom. This rapport can be developed by showing interest in each student as a person, soliciting their ideas and feelings, valuing and respecting what they think and say.* [Moreover,] *teachers should give feedback on students' progress in English, work with them as a team and not laugh at them, but with them.* As a matter of choice, teachers should criticize and praise students as well in order to make them become more effective. Thus, students are energized by the praise and welcome the criticism. Last but not least, the experience during the learning process stimulate both teachers and students to take the energy with them at the end of the class and bring it back for their next meeting.

Penny Ur (1996) acknowledges that these distractions should be dealt with before they occur and suggests three methods of preventing them:

1. by *thorough planning*: that means teachers should have a well-prepared lesson plan to draw students' attention;
2. by drawing up *clear instructions*, especially when teaching ESL or EFL, to pass on important information regarding the tasks and activities students should carry out;
3. by *keeping in touch*: that refers to teachers' alertness in class from beginning to the end, meaning they are in constant contact with the students, who, in turn, are aware of the fact that teachers control them and can easily detect disruptions which may arise in the classroom.

Nonetheless, ESL/EFL classes and ESP classes have a totally different syllabus and separate not only in the nature of the learner but also in the goal of instruction. As ESP stands for *English for specific purposes*, it combines subject matter and English language teaching. The teaching material is in accordance with students' main field of study, be it maritime, military, medicine, law, business management, economics or accounting. ESP programmes focus mainly on reading skills and appropriate vocabulary in the respective field which help them learn English faster and increase their motivation. The teacher's skill of communication is also very important, and interactions with students should be done frequently as students are not capable of using their native language competence in order to present themselves as well-informed adults. Hence their frustration of not being able to encompass the large amount of specific vocabulary and all of a sudden misbehaviour occurs. In this situation misbehaviour is often translated into ignoring the teaching act, side conversations or inappropriate cell phone and laptop usage. In order to prevent such disruptions, the teacher should create an atmosphere in the language classroom which supports the students and makes them feel comfortable and self-confident.

Generally speaking, people learn foreign languages when they have opportunities to work with the respective language in a context they understand; that is why ESP is an influential medium for such opportunities. Students become attentive and do not misbehave if they work with authentic materials which they find interesting and relevant for their future professional work. If they have to focus only on isolated language structures, not in a context, or on the linguistic input, they are less motivated to be attentive, hence the disruptions we have already discussed beforehand. The ESP student is willing to focus on meaning in the subject-matter field and is eager to get acquainted with the specific language he or she will need to perform in their future jobs.

No matter the type of language class, teachers should create a positive climate in terms of classroom management, and in this way, students can communicate better and more easily adapt to the course. If classes lack positivity, there could appear a high increase in unwanted behaviours which may lead to academic failure. Teachers should address the difficulties of the students, bolster their successful behaviours, maintain a favourable learning environment for students to reach their goals, and guide them with advice through their achievements and failures in an effort to provide motivation. Encouragement and motivation are considered (Kayalar, 2018:194) a powerful means to attain such goals, therefore students who are not motivated are not expected to focus on a subject or what is being taught and show interest in withdrawal behaviour rather than strive for better understanding the subject-matter.

In higher education, the relationship between teachers and students should be built on respect and considered in terms of mutual role play. Both parts treat with consideration their own roles and assignments. *Likewise, the teacher's role interpretation determines the social relationship of the learners and thus the mode of communication. Similarly, the teacher-student relationship is reciprocal, because the predominant social relationship structure affects attitudes and decisions against others.* To conclude, an adequate class atmosphere, purposeful teacher-student communication, and clear class rules established mutually are necessary for an effective education, and classroom management (Kayalar, 2018:193).

7. Conclusions

Many teachers find themselves faced with the daily challenge to secure a classroom environment that stays focused and free of distractions. Classroom management is what enables teachers to keep their class on track and prevent disruptions from occurring. By means of well-founded classroom management techniques, we can effectively remain in control of our classroom activities, taking care that our students can learn in a productive atmosphere, free of distraction or disruption.

Distractions from their peers can inflict on students major setbacks in the learning progress, especially when it comes to EFL classes. Learning and practicing a foreign language requires attention and concentration to a great extent, so any disruption in this process may lead to disappointments in terms of outcomes, both for teachers and for their students. This issue is even more grievous in an ESP context because any particular new piece of knowledge needs to be acquired as accurately as possible and any obstruction in the learning process can be perceived in a negative manner also by fellow-students, not just by the teacher.

This article has outlined only a series of possible types of disruptive behaviour in adult foreign language classes. Apart from the more “aggressive” interferences in the foreign language classes, there are also other types of negative participation, such as reluctance or even refusal to speak in the target language, inaudible answers, poor attendance or failure to complete tasks. Teachers have to use their skills to identify possible causes of various disruptive behaviours in a given situation, and to implement classroom management strategies appropriate to the immediate circumstances.

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