

Unit 2 Learning styles and classroom management

Observing classes
pp 9–11

Establishing a
working relationship
with teachers
pp 5–8

Setting up pair work
p 20

Organising groups
pp 19, 53–4

The school culture

Each institution, large or small, rural or urban, primary or secondary, has its own culture. This is a set of unwritten rules regarding codes of behaviour: how staff should dress, how they address each other, how teachers and pupils should work together and how discipline problems are dealt with. Find out what these rules are by discreet questioning and observation. Even if you do not agree with them all you must respect the institution which is employing you. Avoid taking matters into your own hands and rely on the advice of colleagues if problems arise. If you behave very differently from the rest of the staff then the students will not know where to place you and will not necessarily respect you as a staff member or teacher of English. Even if you are only employed to assist teachers, remember that in the eyes of the students you are in a teaching role when you take a class alone. The quality of your preparation and how you manage the classes counts most.

Teaching approaches

Approaches to language teaching vary greatly from school to school, not just from country to country. Even if the national directive is to teach languages communicatively, with emphasis on all four skills, in practice this will not necessarily have been taken up at grass roots level. Even within one school one teacher may favour more speaking and listening work, with videos and lots of communication activities, while in the same building a more traditional colleague may prefer to work with more translation and grammar work. Most teachers help themselves to a variety of techniques which they feel comfortable with.

The assistant should bear the following in mind:

- **All teachers have their own style.** Respect their way of working even if you are convinced through reading, training courses or personal experience that other techniques work better for you.
- **It is unwise to rush in and try to change things overnight.** Your role is to facilitate language use but you need to start with the familiar and gradually introduce new ways of working which suit your purpose.
- **Learners from teacher-centred classrooms need to be taught how to collaborate** and work in pairs, etc. and this has to be done gradually to avoid confusion and chaos.

- **The techniques used very much depend on the age range.** Adult learners in a small group in a private language school respond differently from a large group of excited adolescents in a state secondary school. Ball-throwing communication games are great fun in a primary school (although difficult to handle with twenty-five children), but it will not appeal to most adolescents. You have to weigh up the age range factor carefully. Assess the games and activities in ELT books in this light. Most work well with co-operative adults in a UK language school but need real classroom management skills to work in a continental European classroom.
- **Teaching approaches are reflected in the room arrangement.** You may realise that the ideal layout for a classroom is horseshoe-shaped. In a lot of state schools there are fixed, immovable rows of desks with almost no room for the teacher to move between each one. Shifting furniture for group work may be the answer but be wary of noise and the time it takes. Plan ahead and leave the room as you found it.

'I am in two schools and they are so different as to be untrue! In each school I work in a completely different way. Even within the schools the styles I adopt depend on the member of staff I am working with.'

Martin Skitt, Linz, Austria. Assistant in two Gymnasien.

Learning approaches

All learners in institutions are under pressure to achieve similar levels of competence, yet in a large class you will find a varied range of achievement and will have to cater for all (see below). In addition, a naturally chatty teenager will be more likely to be talkative in the language class than his shy friend. Personality is a deciding factor in attitude and competence.

Some people learn better from seeing things, and enjoy diagrams, writing things down and reading. Other people have an instinctive ear and like learning from hearing and listening, while others prefer action such as making things with their hands, and walking about.

Most of us are a mixture. Clearly lessons which focus solely on the written word with little visual support disadvantage some learners. We need to give a variety of tasks that help students learn in different ways. Accept that during an hour-long lesson the learners' interest will wane at some point if

Management of games
p 93

**Using diagrams
and time-lines**
pp 32–4

**Learner attitudes
to role playing**
p 44

Dictogloss
p 84

Mind maps
p 78

Handling role play
pp 44–5

the activity in hand doesn't appeal to their way of working. It is impossible to please everybody all the time but we can try and stimulate as many as possible in the hour we have. This means it is unwise to spend a whole hour on one activity. Some learners will instinctively take to role play even if their command of English makes it challenging. Others may dislike role play, putting on a show, exposing themselves publicly or *pretending*. Be aware and plan for these learning preferences.

Think about your own preferred learning style:

- What sort of language activities did you enjoy most at school?
- How do you learn new words?
- Are you better at writing or speaking your languages? Have you got an ear for accents?
- Do you like to work alone, in a pair or in a large group?
- Do you need to take notes? Do you like making tables and diagrams to help you study?

Establishing a rapport with your students

The first time in front of a class by yourself can be nerve-wracking. They may well know that you are not a qualified teacher and, particularly with adolescents, you will have to earn their trust and respect. Your main wish might be to be friendly and liked by these students but this will come with time. First you need to establish yourself as the leader of the class. Once you have control of the group and they are working well together with you and each other then there will be time for jokes and friendly banter. This is particularly important with large groups of teenagers who are excited to have a new face but also ready to trip you up if you seem unsure.

**Motivating activities
for teenagers**
pp 99–101

Teacher talking time
p 36

- **Appear confident.** If you are very nervous it will bother them and some will take advantage. Remember the trainee teachers you had at secondary school?
- **Establish a professional and not a personal relationship.** Be welcoming and make a real effort to learn their names and use them. Make a seating plan and get them to make name cards for their desks if this helps you.

- **Be well prepared.** Set the agenda and have a plan which you all follow. Don't ask them what they would like to do or what they want to talk about. They need to see you as responsible and reliable. Later in the year with older learners there may be times when you can choose discussion topics together, but not in the initial stages.
- **Impose your presence.** This does not mean that you take centre stage and do all the talking. Your speaking style (clear and loud enough for all) and your physical presence in a large class help to manage the room. Avoid sitting behind a desk or standing in a corner. Move around, interact with all pupils at the questioning stages, scan the room and make eye contact as if in the theatre. Looking as if you are the teacher reassures learners, and being lively will show that you are enthusiastic about teaching and learning.
- **Listen to the students.** Show interest and listen to their replies to your questions. Be patient if they take time to reply. Wait a bit longer for students to reply as they need to get used to your voice and think about your questions.
- **Pay attention to your own voice and speech.** Modify your speed without distorting sounds or putting in artificial pauses mid-sentence. Pause after each sentence a bit longer than you would for a native speaker.

One disadvantage of working with adolescents is that they are not always enthusiastic when you suggest an activity, but once they get involved in it any objections disappear.

'At first I was very put off by my pupils whinging when I told them what we were going to do. You have to expect this! Basically, don't take anything personally. Get them on your side and you'll all have fun'. **Susan Young, Loire region, France. Assistant in a secondary and a primary school.**

**The assistant as
speech model**
p 57

**Motivating learners
to use English**
pp 25–6

**Eliciting from visuals, key
words and headlines**
p 50

Personalising tasks
p 52

Getting students used to an English-only classroom

After observation, you may note that a good deal of the mother tongue is used during the lesson or that some is used for instructions. Talk this over with teachers if it becomes an issue, but it is advisable for you to start in English and continue. For classes unused to an English-only environment you will need to teach classroom language through gesture, mime, flashcards or a chart. This will take time, especially with beginners. Simple instructions like *'listen'*, *'open your books'*, *'ask your partner'*, etc. can be gradually built up over the first few days. Make your own comments as simple and as natural as possible: *'Really?'*, *'That's a good idea Sylvie'*, *'What do you think Lorenzo?'*, *'I enjoyed your dialogues. Now let's look at ...'*, *'Who's next?'* Try to establish a limited but realistic range for all groups to cope with. They will soon start imitating you.

Ideas for the first lessons alone with the class

You can plan your first lessons (see suggestions below) before you arrive, as many activities can be adapted depending on the level of students. These are open-ended activities which generate language at all levels. They will also help you see how much language the classes can use. Your expectations in terms of question types will differ from controlled beginner level. For example, from *'Is that your brother/boyfriend?'* *'Is that your home town?'* to far more complex questioning for intermediate teenage learners. Give students headings as prompts to the topic area they are asking about, e.g. home life, family life, spare time.

Photographs

Take a collection of personal photos (your family, your friends, your home town, your university town, pets, etc.) and encourage the students to ask you about the pictures. Build questions on the board and ask students about themselves using the same questions. This is also a quick way to gauge their level of English. It can be followed up with photos or pictures of students' families and backgrounds in the next lesson.

What's in your school bag?

Take out of your bag a series of objects and explain each object one by one. Students can ask questions. You can prompt answers and involvement from them. *'Have you got a book in your bag Louis?' 'What's the title?' 'Do you like maths?' 'Is maths your favourite subject?'*

Examples:

'This is my lucky key ring. I bought it on holiday.' 'Where did you go?' 'Where is it from?'

'I've got a picture of my favourite pop star here and this is a magazine I like reading.'

'Who is your favourite pop star?' 'Do you like reading?' 'What do you like reading?'

Classroom management (groups and large classes)

Changes of pace

All of the best laid plans can go wrong. Perhaps the students find the text you chose unexpectedly difficult. You planned a listening task but the cassette recorder won't work. Students are losing interest and the amount of chattering is increasing. Students have enjoyed the game so much that they have become over-excited and need calming down. This calls for a change of pace, a slower more reflective activity or a livelier task.

You will also need to add variety to your weekly lesson routine or you and the pupils will lose interest.

'I found it really good to vary the lessons – one week text, one week a game, one week a song and text work, etc.' **Vanessa Garfield, Valence, France.**
Assistant in a collège and a lycée.

Personalising games
p 94

**Creative uses
of dictation**
p 84

Revision games
pp 99–101

Finding suitable texts
p 131

Using pictures
pp 74–8

Card games
pp 95–6

**Using newspaper
features**
pp 123–5

**Activating students
with video**
pp 89–91

Dealing with the unexpected

- Abandon something that isn't really working rather than flog a dead horse, but have a filler activity to use as back-up.
- Always have a contingency plan if you are relying on equipment that might go wrong.
- Keep some fillers in your bag which correspond to the month's work. These can be ten-minute activities which liven up a dull, uninterested room (usually speaking/listening game or contest) or calm down an unruly lot (usually reading or writing based).
- Collect a battery of multi-purpose texts for use in emergencies.
- Keep a small collection of large detailed pictures and/or photos on a theme or topic related to the term's work. You can cut a collection of photos from newspapers (even local foreign ones) and magazine supplements to use with higher levels. Update and check photos regularly. For example:
 - give out two or three photos to small groups or pairs or whole class
 - students write words associated with the person or event
 - students invent a headline or match a headline you give on the board to the photo
 - students prepare short oral description of photo – what it shows, which event it represents, etc.

Case study: 'Drilling drowned out my lesson plan'

An assistant who had a perfectly usable video recorder found that there was so much building work and drilling going on outside that students couldn't hear. Thinking on her feet, without any back-up plans, she decided to generate language anyway. She used the video as a silent movie for brainstorming vocabulary. Then in pairs students watched the video again and tried to retell the story with the vocabulary written on the board. Finally, they looked at one or two small exchanges of dialogue with no sound and imagined what the speakers were saying, then acted out their dialogues. A full lesson with no sound.

'Something which has helped me and saved my skin several times has been to have three or four varied lessons prepared in my bag at all times ... you never know when a teacher will suddenly say "Oh, can you do next lesson instead of the eight o'clock on Monday" – and you really want to be able to say "Yes" to that!' **Richard Hewitt, Eisenstadt, Austria. Assistant in a secondary school and Further Education college.**

'Be flexible. If the teacher gives you some material with one class, exploit it and use it with others.' **Alexis Hughes, Chambéry, France. Assistant in a lycée.**

Dealing with large classes of mixed ability

Mixed classes usually comprise students who have arrived at varying levels of achievement. This does not mean that the weakest at speaking are not as capable at language learning. Some may have had no English at primary school while others may have had three years. In a secondary school some may be very good at reading a poem and understanding it, but not accustomed to discussing the meaning in English and lack the vocabulary to do so.

Difficulties	Solutions
Producing tasks which all students can complete.	Use mainly open-ended tasks where learners brainstorm and contribute what they know.
Some able students finish first and get bored and disruptive.	Give tasks which have a core part that everyone has to finish and optional extra questions too.
There is a wide range of levels and you risk teaching three different lessons.	Try mainly collaborative tasks with small groups of mixed ability so they help each other and pool ideas/skills.
Some need revision and the others don't.	Make revision into a team/pair game.
Some texts and listenings are too easy for some.	Choose content/topics very interesting for the age range so the ideas hold their interest.

Student-generated revision
pp 99–100

Building resources
pp 126–37

Pooling task types
pp 31, 41, 43, 72, 78, 84, 100

Revision games
pp 99–101

Getting the listening level right
pp 81–83

Pair work for
lower levels
pp 37–41

Management
of games
p 93

Setting up a pair work system

Always follow a similar procedure so that once it is familiar, students will respond automatically and know what is expected.

- **Assign roles clearly around the class**, pointing to each student in turn. *'You are A ... you are B ... , etc.'* or use colours, animals, etc. with younger learners.
- **Double-check they know their role** with a show of hands. *'Hands up As ... hands up Bs'* or *'Who's red?' 'Who's a tiger?'*
- **Don't explain what they have to do, demonstrate.**
Take one student, he is A and you are B. Practise the dialogue/exchange. Double-check with one pair of students who play A and B and act out with you prompting the pair work. Put prompts on the board if this helps lower levels or classes unsure about pair work.
Prompts on board student A *'... from?'*
 student B *'I'm ...'*
- **Use choral repetition to reinforce roles if necessary.** All As say their lines in chorus. Pick on a student B to respond. Repeat with Bs.
- **Only let students start when you are sure they are all clear as to what they are supposed to be doing.** Use this technique for all communication games and it will get faster and more efficient as they get used to working without you. Never try to set up pair work without checking that the instructions are clear. Think how you will set it up before the lesson.
- **Quickly circulate when they start** in order to see if each of the pairs is clear and working together. Help individual pairs with prompting. Keep an eye out for waning interest and don't let it go on too long. Are they near to exchanging all the information they needed to exchange? Be ready to call a halt.
- **Change pairs with the minimum of fuss and noise** as this can be a big time-waster in large classes and annoy colleagues in nearby classrooms. Try not to say *'Find a new partner ...'* as the whole room could be set in motion. All students turn round quietly and form a pair with someone behind or in front or on the other side. Make all As stand up (no scraping chairs) and on the count of three move two desks down, up or across to find a new partner.

Finishing off

Many assistants find it difficult to judge how long activities will take and find themselves either running out of time or with fifteen more minutes to go and nothing to do. This is true for all teachers, but it improves as you get to know your classes. However, plan ahead and start winding down well before the bell rings so you can give a summary of the lesson. After a discussion or simple oral task you may need to go over main problems on the board and must allow time for this essential feedback. In some schools pupils just pack up and rush off when the bell rings. Try to avoid this. Insist on a formal conclusion and goodbye. If you are required to give homework or to ask students to prepare a task such as something for the role play in the next lesson, do not do it at the very end. Attention usually wanes by the end, so give forewarning and instructions earlier and then just a final reminder at the end.

Discipline problems and solutions

Factors leading to discipline problems

- a gap in the lesson (bad planning, an activity loses momentum, a piece of equipment fails to work)
- unclear instructions (they don't know what to do, they don't start and attention wanders)
- overexcited students arrive from another class in a rowdy mood
- lack of teacher attention (you need constantly to scan the room and keep your eyes and ears open to what is happening, especially in large groups)
- the assistant concentrates on lengthy explanations to one individual (the others get bored)
- work is too easy or too challenging (students give up or attention wanders).

Always discuss discipline procedures with members of staff in your host school before you start teaching. Each country has different rules and expectations and this can vary from school to school. One assistant commented wryly that the discipline methods used on him at school would get you the sack in his host country. In some teaching cultures a quiet classroom is considered a disciplined classroom where learning is taking

Student summaries
pp 53-4

Correcting students
pp 28-31

The school culture
p 12

place. This is evidently at odds with your role which is to maximise student talking opportunities, with reasonable noise levels! Clearly a class that is in control is not always quiet and a quiet class with a teacher doing all the talking is not necessarily a good learning environment. You will create healthy chatter in oral classes but this must not descend into anarchy! However, bear in mind that teachers on either side of your classroom might take a different view if your class noise disturbs their lessons. Try not to assume that the teacher you are working with is traditional or boring because they do not use the riotous communication games their students adore doing with you. It could be that these teachers have met with criticism or opposition from colleagues in the past due to noise generated from their language classrooms!

Typical problems and some suggested approaches

- **One student starts talking to another and keeps on doing it.** Ask one of the students a question as soon as you realise they are becoming disruptive. Move nearer to them as you move around the room and try to make eye contact. If eye contact and interruption are not sufficient then move the students to different seats.
- **Students are all talking and no one is listening.** Try to establish silence without raising your voice. Clap loudly, tap a ruler on the board, count down from ten (some students will join in chorus). When silence is reached ... hold the silence for a minute or so before resuming. If disruption is due to lack of interest in the task, go on to something else (a filler) to change pace.
- **A student deliberately refuses to do an activity you have prepared.** Assign a different role if it is an oral task, e.g. this student records the dialogue on a tape or becomes the group secretary in a discussion by writing notes on what is said. Explain that any work not completed in class must be done at home as homework. If it continues, see if the student can be removed from the group for your lessons.
- **A student starts shouting at you.** It is difficult not to shout back or lose your cool but try to remain calm and firm. Wait for the student to calm down but if this fails and the situation escalates, call for assistance or send another student for assistance. Try to resolve the situation by assigning a task to the rest of the class and taking the angry student aside for a quiet word.

Be wary of the following techniques which might not be used or allowed in classrooms and which are not always effective:

- threats
- giving lines
- public humiliation by putting them in the corner
- giving written homework
- putting them in the corridor (they could leave the premises!)
- shouting loudly
- punishing the whole class for the behaviour of a few.