

## Classroom Management in Large and Mixed Ability Classes

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**Abstract:** Teaching large and mixed ability classes is a real problem in most of the educational systems in the world and numberless attempts to address this issue have been made in time. It is a fact that achieving an atmosphere of interest, confidence, enthusiasm and mutual support in class is not easy. It involves failures and successes. The teacher must be willing and eager to make learning an exciting and creative experience. The article deals with some important aspects that the teacher should take into consideration in order to have a successful lesson.



Classroom management refers to an abundance of factors ranging from how the teacher physically arranges the classroom to teaching styles and teacher mobility. The main aspects of classroom management are: the preparation of the classroom itself; the teacher's voice and body language; the roles of the teacher; classroom interaction; supportive materials; teacher talking time; eye-contact; rhythm of activities; motivating students; dealing with adverse circumstances; choosing the type of learning that best fits the class; creating a positive classroom climate. Good classroom management implies the appropriate dealing with each of its aspects. Each aspect should be considered in close relation to the members of the class taught. A more detailed approach to each of these items will be attempted in relation to large and mixed ability classes.

To be successful in managing large and mixed ability classes requires some extra effort from the part of the teacher, as well as a lot of attention given to each aspect of the lesson in particular. Here are some aspects of the lesson which need to be adapted to

the conditions of a large and mixed ability class and to which the teacher should pay attention.

One of the simplest principles in managing large and mixed-ability classes centers on the physical environment for learning: the classroom itself. Organizing a room to suit the activity can influence the interaction and the success of the activity enormously.

### ***Sight, sound and comfort***

Students are indeed profoundly affected by what they see, hear and feel when they enter the classroom. If possible, the teacher should make sure that the classroom is neat, clean and orderly in appearance, the blackboards are erased, the chairs are appropriately arranged, the classroom should be at least tolerable.

As a pupil, I remember that I always loved going to the Biology laboratory because it always fascinated me. Those long desks, the large glass cabinets and filled with all kinds of things always attracted me. Or I remember that it was always much better when our French teacher arranged us in two big circles; it felt we were all friends for an hour. So, children have to remember their classroom pleasantly.

Of course, controlling these aspects of arranging the classroom does not mean that the teacher is the one who must perform the necessary activities in order to ensure their good functioning. On the contrary, this is a perfect opportunity for the teacher to get all the students involved in the well going of the class. Students or groups of students can be assigned with different tasks at different periods of time, in this way ensuring their active participation in the class and at the same time improving their self-esteem through responsibility.

### ***Seating arrangements***

Students are members of a team and should be able to see one another, to talk to one another and not made to feel like they have just walked into a military formation. According to the type of desks and chairs, the teacher should come up with the configurations of the classroom that make interaction among students most feasible. Generally, the teacher should not interfere in students' selection of partners, desk mates or places to sit; but in a large and mixed-ability class this measure is demanded. The

teacher might need to force a different “mix” of students according to a series of criteria of variable natures, all in accordance with the type of activity performed. Such criteria could be: the level of English, the ability to communicate, problems of behaviour etc.

Before moving furniture, the following instructions, given to the students, will help minimize any problems: “Do not move until I tell you” (the instruction must be given first, to ensure students will pay attention to everything he/she has to say); “Lift your chair (and desk) quietly” (this helps minimize the noise from the scraping furniture).

If the classroom is shared with other groups of students, the teacher should leave enough time for the students to move the furniture back before the bell rings for the end of the class.

### ***Blackboard use***

The blackboard, one of the teacher’s most important instruments, gives students added visual information along with auditory ones. It allows the teacher to illustrate with words, pictures and cards. A. Doff considers that the blackboard “is one of the most useful of all visual aids – it is always available and can be used for various purposes without special preparation” (Doff, 1991: p. 43). The general uses of the board can be summarized as follows: to present information for students to copy and learn; to give instructions for tasks, homework; to build up a lesson summary.

The teacher should try to be neat and orderly in blackboard use in order to avoid a messy and confusing conveying of information. Student use of the blackboard is also of major importance. Asking a member of a large and mixed ability class to use the blackboard is a two-faced demand. It is very useful for practicing the students’ writing skills, but it can become risky because of the high degree of exposure. A student who is not very sure of their knowledge of spelling or grammar might become even less confident than he/she already is when being “evaluated” not only by the teacher, but also by “ruthless” classmates.

One interesting activity that can be done by using the blackboard is preparing the students for a role play, for example setting up a new hospital for their town. On the blackboard the teacher could write some ideas to help students decide how many doctors, nurses, etc. they need. The blackboard could look like this:

*How many: - doctors*

*children area*

- *nurses*

*waiting area*

- *patients*

*cafeteria*

- *beds*

- *rooms*

- *blankets*

- *tables, etc.*

In this way, the blackboard helps not only the students, but the teacher as well, to keep the activity under control.

### ***Equipment***

Before using electrical equipment, for example, the teacher should make sure that: the room has outlets; the equipment fits comfortably in the room; everyone can see it (and/or hear it); the machine actually works; he/she knows how to operate it.

It is very unpleasant if the teacher comes, for example, with a CD player/laptop and he/she does not use it. The students get disappointed in this way.

As a conclusion to the classroom organization, we should remind that with a 30 to 45 student class, the teacher cannot do everything, so the solution is to delegate students to do different kinds of tasks.

Rob Nolasco and Lois Arthur consider that the way a teacher develops responsibility is in fact a reflection of the way a teacher views teaching. (Nolasco&Arthur, 1998: p. 25) Involving students in every aspect of classroom management is a way of increasing student involvement, which is important for the maintenance of discipline and helps to make learning successful. In order to ensure increased student involvement, the authors suggest making students responsible for routines, such as writing the date on the board or encourage students not only to clean the blackboard but also to decorate the classroom.

A positive classroom atmosphere can be created in a different way at the beginning of each and every class. However, there is a three-item solution for creating such an atmosphere in general.

### ***Establishing rapport***

The rapport is the relationship or connection the teacher establishes with his/her students, a relationship that is built on trust and respect and that leads to students' feeling capable, competent and creative. This very important connection can be accomplished by treating each student as an individual, as a person and not as a manipulated object, by giving feedback on each person's progress, by openly showing interest in each student's opinions, ideas and feelings, by laughing with the students and never at the students, by working with students as a team and not against them, as their enemy.

### ***Praise and criticism***

The positive classroom climate may depend, to a large extent, on the balance that the teacher sets between praise and criticism. Sincere praise, appropriately delivered, enables students to welcome criticism and to put it to use. Effective praise show genuine pleasure and concern and it is not impersonal, mechanical and robotic. It fosters intrinsic motivation to continue to pursue goals and not extrinsic motivation to perform only to receive more praise.

### ***Energy***

Energy could be defined as teacher's reaction when walking out of the class and feeling pleased with himself. It is the electricity of many minds belonging to a circuit of thinking, talking and writing. Energy is an aura of creativity sparked by the interaction of students. Students and teachers take energy with them when they leave the classroom and bring it back the next day. This energy can be obtained through both quietness and intensely talked tasks, that, depending on the teacher and on the type of activity. Therefore, by writing out endless pages, shouting or humiliating, there will hardly ever be created a pleasant atmosphere in the class. Respect for the child is uppermost.

### ***The voice and body language***

One of the first requirements of good teaching is good voice projection. The teacher needs to be heard clearly by all the students. Therefore, of even higher importance is good voice projection in a large class. In this case, the teacher must project his/her voice at such intensity that the student sitting farthest away from him/her can hear him/her clearly. Particularly in whole class work, all students need to be able to hear the teacher's comments. The teacher should also articulate clearly not only for the students to understand but also for them to get every advantage possible in order to improve their own pronunciation and he/she should keep as natural a flow to his/her language as possible.

Here another problem may appear. In a large and mixed ability class there are cases when a teacher has to shout to make himself/herself heard, but he/she has to pay attention when and why the voice is raised, so that the students would not see the teacher as a threat. It is advisable to use a calm voice even in these unpleasant situations. Besides, "kind words can be short and easy, but their echoes are endless" (Mother Teresa).

The conveying of messages through nonverbal communication is very powerful. Especially in mixed ability classes, where students have different levels of understanding, the teacher may turn to nonverbal communication in order to draw their attention. Here are some possible ways of doing it: let your body posture exhibit an air of confidence; your face should reflect optimism, brightness and warmth; use facial and hand gestures to enhance meaning of words and sentences that might otherwise be unclear; make frequent eye-contact with all students; do not plant your feet firmly in one place for the whole hour; move around the classroom, but not as a distraction; follow the conventional rules of proxemics and kinesthetics that apply for the culture of the students; dress appropriately considering the expectations of your students and the culture in which you are teaching.

### ***Learning names***

It is very important for the teacher to find out as much as possible about his/her students. The first step in this process is learning their names. This may be quite difficult in a large class but there are techniques to help the teacher in doing it even from the first day. Studies have shown that a teacher's misuse of or failure to use students' names have a direct result in inattention and discipline problems. Rob Nolasco and Lois Arthur think that "knowing the students' names allows you to nominate students with confidence as well as to identify troublemakers. It also indicates that you care about what the students are doing, and this helps to contribute to a positive learning environment" (Nolasco&Arthur, 1988: p. 10). In order to easily learn students' names, the two authors suggest that the teacher should copy lists of the members of a class in his/her own record and that he/she should keep such lists at hand during the class. The teacher should also insist that students do not change places for him/her to be able to easily identify them.

Another solution to the problem of learning names could be that of asking students to write down their names on some cards visible to the teacher. A game could also be useful, particularly if the students themselves meet each other for the first time. For example, each student can be asked to think of an adjective which starts with the same letter as his/her name, and which is a characteristic of his/her personality. Each student must remember all the names and adjectives uttered before his/her turn. The teacher should join the students and participate to the game, as well.

### ***Giving clear instructions and helping students stay in English***

Instructions represent a particular kind of explanation that is very important in teaching. Penny Ur defines instructions as "the directions that are given to introduce a learning task which entails some measure of independent student activity" (Ur, 1996: p. 16). In the same work the author also offers some guidelines for giving effective explanations and instructions:

- The teacher should prepare in order to know exactly what need clarifying.
- The teacher must make sure he/she has the class's full attention. It is also advisable that the instructions be provided before handing in the materials to the students or dividing them into groups.

- The information should be presented more than once and in more than one way.
- The teacher should be brief or else he/she might lose students' attention.
- The instructions should be illustrated with examples or with demonstrations performed either by the teacher or by a volunteer student.
- The teacher must get feedback by asking the students whether they understood or by asking them to paraphrase the instruction.

Thus, giving instructions right becomes almost an art. In long and complicated tasks, it is worth breaking the task up into stages so that students get instructions they need for each stage only when they need them.

The way students are provided with instructions is of such great importance because poor instructions represent a major source of problems in any teaching situation by that they leave students confused and uncertain. With large and mixed ability classes, the problem is even greater because once the students have started performing an activity it is very difficult to interrupt them and correct the misunderstandings. The aspect that has to lose most when interrupting an already started activity is the teacher's ability to organize a class as he/she thus loses the students' confidence in him/her.

Rob Nolasco and Lois Arthur (Nolasco&Arthur, 1988: p. 27) provide teachers with a checklist meant to help in creating a productive environment. The questions that a teacher should ask himself are:

1. Do you think your instructions through from the point of view of the students at the planning stage of the lesson?
2. Do you insist on absolute silence and attention from every student before you start giving instructions?
3. Do you stand where you can be clearly seen by all the students when giving instructions?
4. Do you stage your instructions and make sure that students are following each stage as you go along?

5. Do you support instructions with pictures, demonstrations and gestures whenever possible?
6. Do you give instructions in a clear, firm, businesslike voice?
7. If you write instructions on the board, do you insist on full attention first and get students either to read them aloud or copy them down, whichever is more appropriate?
8. Do you make it clear when students can start?
9. Do you maintain eye-contact with the whole class while you give instructions?
10. Do you check that your instructions have been understood before allowing students to start?
11. When a task is very complex or unfamiliar, do you ask some of the students to show the others what is expected of them before they start?
12. Do you present the task in a different way if it is clear that the students have not understood?
13. Do you try to repair misunderstandings of the instructions while the activity is in progress?
14. Do you monitor yourself to make sure that you are using language the students can understand?
15. Do you give lengthy instructions?

I propose some possible answers to these questions.

Regarding the first question, a teacher should not forget the level of his/her students. Each type of the instructions has to be properly presented and explained so that each student understands it.

The second question is important because it can get very boring to say the same instructions repeatedly, not only for the teacher, but also for the students who were paying attention in the first place. The teacher must have his/her methods to keep his/her class under control and to make himself heard. His/her voice is the only powerful weapon when he/she has to deal with a large group. Before a teacher starts giving instructions full attention must be solicited and also the teacher has to make sure that everyone can see and hear him/her properly. If the students are not seeing the teacher, it may lead to distraction.

Then, it would be better if lengthy instructions were divided in smaller pieces of instructions. In this way, it is much easier for the students to follow each stage of the instructions.

It is very important how a teacher explains the instructions, as well. The voice has to be clear and firm. The instructions must be said in a way that is easy to understand and whenever is possible they may be supported with pictures or demonstrations. In this way there is no doubt about what they ask or demand.

If the instructions are written on the blackboard, the teacher must pay attention so that his/her students would not lose some of their attention because the teacher does not look at them anymore. One single minute of distraction from the teacher automatically leads to whole long minutes of trying to calm down the students.

Question number 8 is also significant. The teacher has to know exactly when the students have to start accomplishing the task. For example, if there is pair or group work, all the groups have to start at the same time so that later, there will be no other misunderstandings.

When giving instructions eye contact is essential. The students know that the teacher is addressing them, focusing on them and not on something else. They feel important in this way.

After saying the instructions, it is also extremely important and necessary to make sure that they were understood before starting the activity. Otherwise, it is unpleasant to stop the activity and retell the instructions. Of course, it is also possible that some misunderstandings may appear during this activity. In this case, the teacher has to stop the activity and try to repair those misunderstandings. Thus, the task will be completed in the right way.

If a task is new and unfamiliar a good idea is to ask some of the students to show the others what is expected of them to do. In this manner, the teacher can see if the students have really understood the instructions and the students can hear the same instructions explained somehow different. A teacher must have various methods to explain the tasks. Their language must be according to the level of students. In a mixed-ability class the teacher must pay attention, so that both the smart and the weaker students understand what they have to do.

The instructions should not be too lengthy. Students get bored quickly and usually they are anxious of performing new tasks. Clear, firm and concise instructions are most of the time the best.

So, if the answers to all these questions are in concordance with what giving clear instructions implies, then the teacher is sure to have expected results as far as the activity performed is concerned. The instructions are the most important part for a successful activity. I remember that during my training period, one of my colleagues taught the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and the essential activity of her lesson was a debate about law. The students had to make three groups. One group represented the jury with the judge, while the other two groups plead for and against the case she presented to them. Unfortunately, the activity was not carried out successfully because she failed to give instructions properly and the students could not perform the task how they were supposed to.

Any teacher should be aware of the value of using English in class. If the teacher uses English most of the time, it will give students practice in listening and responding to spoken English. This will help them 'pick up' words and expressions beyond the language of textbook and will encourage them in staying in English as much as possible. Even the situations that occur in the classroom, such as a student coming in late, should give an opportunity for real, natural English to be used, thinks Adrian Doff. He also says that "if the teacher uses English to say real things to the class, it will give students the feeling that English is a real language which is used for communication, and not just a language that belongs to the textbook." (Doff, 1991: p. 222)

The most common solution to getting students to practice English in a large class is working in pairs or small groups. However, one of the main drawbacks of this arrangement is that, since most of the students at any given time are working without direct teacher supervision, the decision as to which language they use to work in is theirs, and they often go into their own language rather than struggle really communicate in English. The least successful way to get students to use as much English as possible is for the teacher to tell/ask/shout at/beg the class to use it. Large classes are the most difficult to control as far as the use of English is concerned.

J. Harmer considers that “it is important that students realise that our attitude to their language depends on the activity in question. If they don’t know this, they will not know why and when we are insisting on ‘English only’.” (Harmer, 1997: p. 247) For example, if students are using their own language instead of English during an oral communication activity, this activity is pointless. There are however three things a teacher can do about the use of students’ language:

1. the teacher can talk to the class and get students to understand that while sometimes the use of their own language is not much of a problem, during oral activities it is not helpful;

2. during an activity, the teacher should go around the classroom and encourage and help students to use English;

3. if none of the attempts is successful, the teacher should tell students that he/she is not going to use that kind of activities anymore and use only tightly controlled activities until they seem to be willing and able to take part in any pair or group work activity.

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**Biodata:**

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