

Discipline problems

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In this article, we'll be looking at the causes of discipline problems, and at various ways of solving the problems. We shall try to see how the traditional four skills can be varied according to the class level and aptitude, and to work out some strategies for maintaining law and order in the classroom!

Identifying the causes

"For every person wishing to teach, there are thirty persons not wishing to be taught"
(anonymous)

This phrase may be a more real reflection on modern life than we realize. None of us teachers works in a vacuum. Students come to our classroom from their good or dysfunctional families; they also come to us right after a very difficult test in geometry, or right before a hated lesson of P.E. In other words, they come to our classroom in a certain state of mind, in a good or bad mood, and we become the unwilling recipients of the aftermath, or the pre-shock, as the case may be.

One of the most widespread reasons for bad discipline, however, is usually a student's inability to cope with the tasks. The noisiest students will demonstrate their frustration by loud outbursts, disruptive behavior, while the rest of the class may remain passive.

Identifying the ringleader(s)

Watch your class carefully each time a disruption occurs to see if indeed you are dealing with the same student(s) every time. Start your lesson as usual, follow your general plan. At the same time, be ready with an extra task or two for your ringleader.

Example: a girl in one of my senior class who had trouble with Conditionals erupted with, "You talk of those silly conditionals, I only want to talk of sex!" I said at once, "Good. Please come out to the board and write five sentences about your interest in Conditional 3". She capitulated at once and began to do the class exercise. Keep your troublemaker occupied!

Varying the traditional tasks

Your students' disruptive behavior may stem from their inability to cope with any one of the traditional skills. For example, one class may be quite good at speaking, but have trouble listening; or they may like to write, but dislike pair or group work. Try to identify the real source of trouble, and introduce some variety into your work. You may tell your class A, "Hmmm, your Listening Comprehension test is rather weaker than class B's... but you're quite good at grammar. Why don't we listen to similar recordings again and work out some new approaches?" A lesson in a computer lab, where students can use Spell Check and various Web dictionaries while writing, can do wonders for their writing.

Increasing motivation

What does a teacher do when students tell them they do not need this subject, and so they don't want to work at it? The answer depends on their grade level.

- If they still have a few years of school ahead of them, tell them this is a compulsory subject, period.
- If it is their last year of school, remind them they need it for their GCSE (School Certificate). Be matter-of-fact about it.
- Do insert phrases about the role of English, or any other foreign language you may be teaching, in the modern world.
- Extend their horizons by offering some creative tasks
- Find a Web project they may take part in at the European Schoolnet (www.eun.org)
- look for e-mail correspondence partners
- Be sure to praise them for any and every little success they have.

Establishing the priorities

This is your classroom. You are responsible for everything that goes on. Before facing your problem class, do a little auto-training: "I am a good teacher. I know what I am doing. I'll cope".

If your students do not pay attention to the bell, begin the lesson by either writing something on the board, or turning on the recorder at normal volume. Distribute some cards, open your book. Two minutes does it, usually. Define the priorities.

With younger students, you may tell them what it is they are going to master this time. With seniors, you may tell them that a certain aspect is a must because it is part of the final exam, while the other two tasks may be done as optional or group activities. Remember, it is normal for children to laugh at a lesson, sometimes!

Conclusion

"Headmasters have powers at their disposal with which Prime Ministers have never yet been invested." Winston Churchill.

Though not a headmaster, you have the power in your classroom. Even if you are dealing with children from dysfunctional families, or children who "do not want anything", you are the boss. Be sure of yourself, and your students will always feel it.