

TEACHING VILLAGE

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Classroom Management: stuff they didn't mention in teacher training

by Marc Helgesen

We don't just teach English.



The way to become a teacher is to be a teacher.

It is a truism in education that the way we become good teachers is through experience. The things we learn in certificate programs and grad school help, of course, but it is the act of teaching that gives us the skills we need.

In the teacher development course in my university department, we train students to become junior and senior high school teachers. In the process, they do a lot of "micro-teaching" – lesson simulations where they practice teaching lessons with peers taking on the role of students. Each micro-teaching is followed by a feedback session.

As I watch these sessions, I often notice classroom management problems. In many cases, there are simple techniques that will take care of the problems. Usually, these are things I've discovered over the years in my own classroom or learned from colleagues. I wrote up a list of these techniques for my own students. That list served as the basis for the following tips:

Giving instructions

Get learners' attention. You cannot complete with 30 or more students talking. Don't try. Get their attention before you start giving instructions. I do this by standing at the front of the room in a place I only use to get the class quiet. I say, in a fairly soft voice, "I need you to listen now." I'll repeat it a few times. Basically, the students get the others to be quiet.

When it is time to stop an activity such as a pairwork or groupwork where many people are talking at the same time, I raise both my hands. When students see me do that, they raise their hands. In 10 or 15 seconds, everyone knows it is time to stop – and I haven't had to interrupt anyone.

KISS (Keep Instructions Short & Simple). Use the imperative form. ("Open your books to page 32", not "OK, I'd like you to open your books...".) Aim for very short sentences: 7 words or less is a good target. Why 7? That's the number of items most people can hold in working memory. At the beginning, each word is a separate item. Once an instruction is understood, it becomes a single item of meaning, not a series of separate words.

Demonstrate Instructions. Students learn through activities (tasks). Because activities mean there is action, it is better to demonstrate than to explain. Direct 2-3 students through the task while the others watch. This is much more effective than just explaining.

English First. If you really think you need to give instructions in the students' first language, be sure to give the instructions in English first. Then pause (think time). Then give them in the L1.

Modeling You always need to model (demonstrate) *two* things:

- what students should do
- how they can say what they want to say

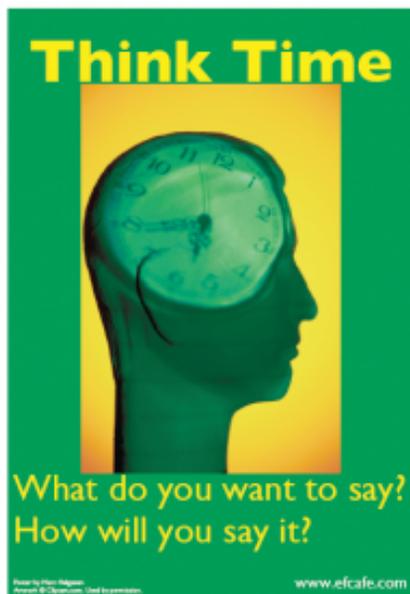
Eye contact & being heard. You need to speak in a strong voice – not shouting (that will wear your voice out). Practice speaking and "projecting" (making your voice go to the back of the room).

Think Time.

After students understand the task, give them a little time to think:

- What do I want to say?
- How will I say it?

You might want to play soft, instrumental background music during think time. It makes it easier for you to be quiet.



Pronunciation, repeating and drilling

Silent Listen & Repeat – silently. Instead of repeating instantly, students listen, then repeat silently “in their minds”. They match the teacher’s stress and intonation. Then they say it aloud.

This helps them actually notice pronunciation.

Listen & Repeat with feeling. Have students try to match your emotion when they repeat. It helps them pay attention to meaning.

Backward Buildup. If you want students to repeat a long or difficult sentence (for example, when working with a dialog), have them start at the end, like this:

at the end.

start at the end.

if you start at the end.

repeat a sentence if you start at the end.

It is easier to repeat a sentence if you start at the end.

Working with rhythm #1. Stress and rhythm are the keys to English pronunciation, not just individual sounds like /l/ and /r/. Get large, thick rubber bands. One for each student. They put them over their thumbs. They read the language models with rhythm, pulling the band tight on the stress. If you can’t find thick rubber bands, have them use 2-3 regular ones. (Note – if you are teaching junior high school boys, be careful about using this. It is sort of like giving them weapons).

Working with rhythm #2 After they’ve read a text and understand it, read it to them. Students mark the stress. Then they read it aloud, stressing the marked syllables. Variation: Mark the stress in 2 or 4 paragraphs of a copy of the text. Make copies. Do a pairwork. Each learner has half the stress-marked paragraphs. They practice reading them aloud, then they read them to their partner. Partners mark the stress, then read it back to check. Variation: mark the phrasing/pauses.

Reading aloud. Remember that reading aloud is a speaking/pronunciation activity, not a reading/comprehension activity. (If you don’t believe that, pick up any book. Read a paragraph aloud. Close the book. What was it about? Hard to remember, isn’t it? And when you are reading a foreign language, it is much, much harder. So any reading aloud activity should be done only after they read the text silently.) For something to do with reading aloud, see “Working with rhythm #2, above)

And a few more tips...

Give context before vocabulary. Most junior high and high school textbook stories only have a few new words. If you present those words before the story, there is no context. That makes them harder to remember. Try reading the story first. That creates the need for the words. Then either tell the students what they mean or have them guess.

Don’t talk to the white/chalkboard. When you are talking, face the students. They can’t hear you if you are facing the board. You’ll have to repeat what you are saying anyway. Write on the board while they are doing something else.

Prepare language model visuals in advance. When possible, write out words and key sentences in advance. You can usually do them on a computer in a large font, then photocopy (and enlarge) them. In class, stick them to the board with magnets. This will save you writing time in class. Also, in most JHS and HS’s, you will teach the same lesson several times. So this saves you a lot of time.

Grouping/re-grouping. To get enough practice, students need to do a lot of work in pairs and groups. It is a good idea to change groups regularly. It helps build a “shared class culture” rather than separate cliques. Also, it avoids having those students who don’t like English always working (or not working) together. Here are some ways to do random grouping:

- Number off
- Playing cards. Match color and numbers (e.g., 3 of clubs matches 3 of spades, etc.).
- Find someone with the same number of letters in their name
- Find someone you have not talked to today

Names last. If you are going to call on a student to answer a question, (a) ask the question, (b.) pause for “think time” then, (c) say the name. That way, everyone has to think of the answer:

What is the answer to number five? (pause) Yuki?

Use the senses. In every class, try to have visual, auditory and haptic (kinesthetic/movement) activities. (For handouts on different ways to do this [click here](#).)

Task recycling. When students have done a task where they personalize the answers, have them change partners (at least once) and repeat it. It will be a new partner so it doesn’t get old. And their English will be better each time they do it.

The baseball rule: 3 strikes and you’re out. Always try a new idea or activity at least 3 times before giving up on it. Strike one: It is new. You aren’t sure exactly how it will work. Strike two: You’ve done it once. It will probably go a little better this time. Strike three: If by the third try the activity doesn’t work, either give up on it or try it again in a completely different way.

Final thoughts

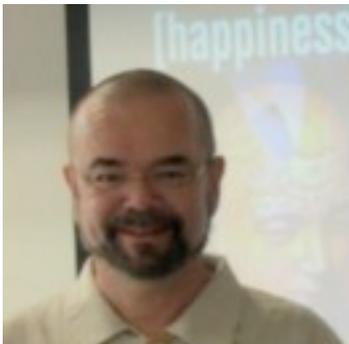
Students always know more than they think they know.
Students always know much more than the teacher thinks they know.

~ *Caleb Gattegno*

Technique alone is never enough.

You have to have passion.

~*Raymond Chandler*



Marc Helgesen is professor at Miyagi Gakuin Women’s University, Sendai, Japan. He’s an author of more than 150 books, textbooks and articles including the [English Firsthand](#) series. He is especially interesting in using positive psychology in the English classroom and has a [ELT and the Science of Happiness](#) website to give away related lessons. He also has a website with [various ELT articles and handouts](#).