

A Course in Language Teaching

Practice and Theory

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► Unit One: What is discipline?

Discussion task

Brainstorm and definition

The phrase 'classroom discipline' has for most teachers an immediate and clear meaning, but it is in fact quite a complex concept, and hard to define in words. One way into such a definition is to start by brainstorming all the ideas that seem to you to be comprised in it: 'control' for example, or 'rules'.

Try brainstorming a list of such words for yourself, or in your group, and then look at the one shown in Box 18.1. Add to the latter whatever items you think I have missed, delete any you think irrelevant; finally put a circle round the ones you think most basic and essential. Using these, you may now find it easier to formulate a satisfactory definition.

You may be interested in comparing your definition with that given in a dictionary, or with my own as suggested in the Notes, (1).

Optional follow-up study

There are, of course, more subtle and interesting distinctions to be discovered within the concept of 'discipline'. Try discussing the distinctions between the following pairs:

1. 'control' v. 'discipline';
2. 'authoritarian' v. 'authoritative';
3. 'power' v. 'authority'.

Simplified versions of the distinctions between the above pairs of concepts appear in the Notes, (2). For more detailed and careful discussion see: Wilson, 1971: 77-80; Widdowson, 1987: 83-8; Peters, 1966: 237-47.

BOX 18.1: THE CONCEPT OF DISCIPLINE

control	contract	(ground) rules
agree	accept	responsibility
rewards	routine	punishments
respect	smooth	behaviour
norms	power	authority
obey	consistent	authoritative
authoritarian	efficient	cooperation

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BOX 18.5: EPISODES: DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Episode 1

The teacher of a mixed class of thirteen-year-olds is working through a class reader in an English lesson. He asks Terry to read out a passage. 'Do we have to do this book?' says Terry. 'It's boring.' Some members of the class smile, one says 'I like it', others are silent awaiting the teacher's reaction.

(from E. C. Wragg, *Class Management and Control*, Macmillan, 1981, p. 12)

Episode 2

The teacher is explaining a story. Many of the students are inattentive, and there is a murmur of quiet talk between them. The teacher disregards the noise and speaks to those who are listening. Finally she reproaches, in a gentle and sympathetic way, one student who is talking particularly noticeably. The student stops talking for a minute or two, then carries on. This happens once or twice more, with different students. The teacher does not get angry, and continues to explain, trying (with only partial success) to draw students' attention through occasional questions.

(adapted from Sarah Reinhorn-Lurie, Unpublished research project on classroom discipline, Oranim School of Education, Haifa, 1992)

Episode 3

The teacher has prepared a worksheet and is explaining how to do it. He has extended his explanation to the point where John, having lost interest in the teacher's words, begins to tap a ruler on his desk. At first the tapping is occasional and not too noticeable, but John begins to tap more frequently and more noisily, building up to a final climax when he hits the table with a very loud bang. The class, startled by the noise, falls silent, and looks at both John and the teacher to see what will happen.

(adapted from E. C. Wragg, *Class Management and Control*, Macmillan, 1981, p. 18)

Episode 4

The teacher begins by giving out classroom books and collecting homework books.

Teacher (to one of the boys): This book's very thin.

Boy 1: Yeah, 'tis, isn't it.

Teacher: Why?

Boy 1: I've been drawing in it.

Boy 2: He's been using it for toilet paper, sir.

(Uproar)

(adapted from E. C. Wragg, (ed.) *Classroom Teaching Skills*, Croom Helm, 1984, p. 32)

Episode 5

The students have been asked to interview each other for homework and write reports. In this lesson they are asked to read aloud their reports. A few students refuse to do so. The teacher tells these students to stand up before the class and be interviewed by them. They stand up, but do not relate to the questions seriously: answer facetiously, or in their mother tongue, or not at all. The teacher eventually sends them back to their places, and goes on to the next planned activity, a textbook exercise.

(adapted from Sarah Reinhorn-Lurie, Unpublished research project on classroom discipline, Oranim School of Education, Haifa, 1992)

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- What caused the problem?
- What could the teacher have done to prevent it arising?
- Once it had arisen, what would you advise the teacher to do?

My own comments follow.

Comments

Episode 1

The causes of this were, possibly, that the book is indeed boring, coupled with Terry's wish to disrupt, challenge, or simply take a break from routine. Apart from choosing a different text, it is difficult to see how the teacher could have foreseen or prevented the incident. Now the priority is to neutralize the challenge and get the class back on task. I would say something like: 'Yes, we do have to do this book; we'll discuss whether it's boring later' - and get someone else to go on reading. I would, however, as promised, discuss the book later with the class or with Terry himself, and devote some thought to the selection of the next text.

Episode 2

This situation is a very common one, rooted in lack of firm and consistent rules in the classroom, or the teacher's failure to insist on them: the result is that a number of students are getting little or no learning value from the lesson. The teacher should have insisted on quiet and attention from the start, and stopped each murmur as it began. Possibly she is afraid of losing popularity: her reproaches when they occur, lack 'attack', are rapidly disregarded, and the result is that constant inattention and chat is tacitly accepted as the norm.

To reverse the situation when it has got as far as this is extremely difficult. It may be necessary to hold a serious discussion with the class, agree with them on explicit new ground rules and then insist strictly on their implementation from then on.

Episode 3

Here, the incident was caused by the teacher's over-lengthy explanation, the child's impatience, and the failure of the teacher to pick up and stop the disturbance when it started. Most people's intuitive reaction would be to reprimand John; but probably a more effective response would be to use the silence to instruct the class firmly to start work on the worksheet, promising to deal with any further problems in response to raised hands. Once the class is working, the teacher could go to John, make it clear that his behaviour is unacceptable, but that the incident is now over and he should be working. A further word or two with him after the lesson may make it less likely that he will repeat the behaviour.

Episode 4

The immediate cause of this incident, given the confident and cheeky character of members of the class, was the teacher's mistake in getting into an argument with one boy in the middle of an organizational routine involving all the class - an argument which escalated rapidly into a full-class disturbance. He should have finished distributing and collecting books and dealt with the notebook

problem later, privately. Now that there is uproar, he should immediately abandon the individual problem, and devote his efforts to regaining order and finishing the book collection and distribution as quickly as possible. The problem of the mutilated notebook may be taken up again after the lesson with the boy alone.

Episode 5

The cause of this was the lack of authority of the teacher (her inability to demand and get student obedience), and the mistaken tactic of allowing obviously undisciplined students, in a group, to take over centre-stage. What I usually do if students do not want to read aloud something they have written is take it and read it aloud myself: they accept this because I can make it sound much better than they can, and my main objective (displaying students' work to each other) is gained.

Given the very uncomfortable situation of students actually making fun of a teacher-directed learning task, the reaction of stopping it and going on to the next bit of the lesson was the right one, although late. Certainly, however, the teacher should talk to the students later, one at a time, in order to make it clear that this behaviour was unacceptable and to try to prevent a recurrence.

Notes

(1) Defining classroom discipline

A possible definition: Classroom discipline is a state in which both teacher and learners accept and consistently observe a set of rules about behaviour in the classroom whose function is to facilitate smooth and efficient teaching and learning in a lesson.

(2) Distinctions between pairs of concepts

'Control' is imposed from above by an authority who is invested with superior influence; 'discipline' is accepted by participants in the activity of studying as an essential and integral part of that study (compare the use of the term 'discipline' to denote an area of study such as philosophy or science).

'Authoritarian' describes a teacher whose authority derives from some exterior empowering agent, or who is 'bossy'; 'authoritative' describes one who is obeyed because he or she is trusted to know best about the subject of study and how to learn it (hence the phrase 'to be an authority on...').

'Power' is the sheer ability to impose one's will on others, through physical coercion, or other forms of pressure; whereas 'authority' is the demand for cooperation and obedience that is accepted because it is rooted in a law, social order or accepted value system.

(3) Possible characteristics of classroom discipline

My responses would be as follows. Where I have found it difficult to make a clear decision, symbols in brackets indicate possible alternative choices.

1. Learning is taking place. +(?)
2. It is quiet. +
3. The teacher is in control. ++
4. Teacher and students are cooperating smoothly. ++
5. Students are motivated. ?(+)
6. The lesson is proceeding according to plan. +(?)
7. Teacher and students are aiming for the same objective. ?(+)
8. The teacher has natural charismatic 'authority'. ?(+)

My reasons are discussed in the *Comments* section within the unit.

(4) Practical hints for classroom discipline

My chosen 'top ten' would be: 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 15, 17, 19.

Further reading

- Charles, C. M. (1992) *Building Classroom Discipline* (4th edn.), New York: Longman.
(Practical and readable, written for trainee or practising teachers; a summary of various models of classroom discipline and guidelines for practical application)
- Cohen, L. and Manion, L. (1977) *A Guide to Teaching Practice*, London: Macmillan.
(A valuable practical guide to all aspects of school teaching)
- Kounin, J. S. (1970) *Discipline and Group Management in Classrooms*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
(An analysis of various aspects of discipline, some interesting and useful perspectives)
- MacLennan, S. (1987) 'Integrating lesson planning and class management', *ELT Journal*, 41, 3, 193-7.
(On alternating lively and quiet activities in the lesson process)
- Peters, R. S. (1966) *Ethics and Education*, London: George Allen and Unwin.
(Philosophical analysis of various aspects of education; see particularly Part Three: 'Education and social control')
- Underwood, M. (1987) *Effective Classroom Management*, London: Longman.
(Not just on discipline, but on a variety of aspects of classroom management and lesson planning: practical and comprehensive)
- Widdowson, H. G. (1987) 'The roles of teacher and learner', *ELT Journal*, 41, 2, 83-8.
(An analysis of the different roles of the teacher as authority, and resulting interaction between teacher and learner)
- Wilson, P. S. (1971) *Interest and Discipline in Education*, London: Routledge.
(A philosophical discussion of the two concepts: see particularly the analysis of discipline versus control, pp. 77-80, quoted in Wragge, 1984)