

Setting the Tone for Any New Class

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Starting off a new class at the beginning of a year can often be full of intricate and often perplexing tasks: how to learn students' names in classes of up to eighty students or more, how to juggle grading and taking attendance in a systematic way, how to explain the objectives of the class, how to get students to do homework, and how to maintain interest even during the waning moments of the class. Does any of this sound familiar?

Yet, while our main objective as teachers is to guide our students to the promised land of language mastery, we often perish because we don't start our quest with a clear agenda or management strategy on how to reach our destination. This failure to set up some kind of routine or plan is akin to the blind leading the blind. In the end, everyone is left holding an empty bag. In order to avoid such pitfalls, this article will suggest ways on how to cut through some of the routine tasks in a more systematic way while allowing teachers to concentrate on their primary responsibility of teaching. The following seven points are ways to manage your classes more smoothly from the very first day.

Connecting a Face with a Name

Nothing is more daunting than to enter a classroom of more than fifty students or more...in an English-conversation class. As part of the first few classes, getting to know students is one of high priority. And while folding name cards often works well for smaller classes, they are impractical in bigger classes for the simple reason that they are difficult to see from the front of the room. Therefore, one way to learn names quickly is to assign seats either by allowing students to choose their own seats or by alphabetical order. In addition to seating charts, teachers can hand out a small index card and have the students answer a few question about their interests.

In my own classes, I ask the students to fill out the card, attach a current picture to it, and return it to me the following class. As the class progresses, I find myself constantly referring to these cards to remember students' interests and hobbies when the appropriate topic comes up in class. In addition, students are always astonished to know that I actually review the cards when their birthdays roll around. In other words, it is one way I am able to show students that I am interested in them and in touch with what is going on in their lives.

If you are dealing with a smaller class, getting to know students individually can be accomplished in part by arranging the seats in a horseshoe. In the traditional classroom, tables and chairs are set up in rows facing the front, creating a barrier between the teacher and the students. While this works well for lectures, it isn't ideal

for a language class. No one carries on a conversation from fifteen feet away, so we shouldn't try to do the same thing in an English conversation class either. This horseshoe arrangement allows teachers to come right up to a student and engage in a conversation. In addition, since students are all facing each other, the problem of students not catching what others are saying is minimized. Furthermore, each student can see the face of every one else in the group, see the other students' name cards, and call the other students by name.

List of Key Expressions

It is often said that Japanese students are shy and don't participate in class because they are not used to teacher-directed questions, but it would be premature to say that this is due to some inherent cultural package that is part of being Japanese. Rather, whether we are learning Spanish, French, or Swahili, everyone feels a little hesitant to jump into the language arena and start talking. Therefore, teachers can facilitate the language process from day one by providing students with a list of key expressions or phrases they can use when they are at a loss.

<p>When you understand...</p> <p>I see. All right. I know what you mean. Uh huh. I got it. I understand.</p>	<p>When you're at a loss...</p> <p>I'm not sure what you mean. What does <u>dead-end</u> mean? In other words, uh... Huh? (rising intonation) I don't understand.</p>
<p>Checking understanding...</p> <p>Do you mean that....? Do you mean....? Do you know what I mean?</p>	<p>When you are thinking...</p> <p>Hmm... (voice trails off) Uhhh.... Let me think...</p>

Figure 1

Once students are acquainted with these expressions, teachers should provide focused activities throughout the year where students can make use of this lingo in the class. Since I have made this an integral part of my classroom routine, I have

noticed that students depend upon each other less and are more willing to ask me a question when they are at a loss.

Keeping Track of Student Records

One of the things that often cuts into classroom activities is taking attendance at the beginning of class. Instead of methodically reading students' names one by one, teachers can quickly look around the room, and jot down the date the students were absent on their corresponding index cards while the other students are engaged in some classroom activity. Later, this information can be transferred to the official role sheet at the end of the class. If there is no designated attendance policy, teachers should consider devising their own to encourage regular attendance. One such method would be to designate a certain percentage of the grade to attendance and hold students to it by calculating this percentage according to the number of times they miss: An "A" for fewer than three absences; a "B" for less than six absences and so on. Arriving late to class two times could be counted as one absence.

In addition to attendance, if participation is taken into account in the final grade, teachers can make small checks or vertical slashes directly on the seating chart quickly and easily without losing a step in the classroom routine. Furthermore, students' grades can also be written down on the seating chart if there is enough space allotted for them. If not, students' grades can be written on the backside of their index cards or in a separate grading book.

Explaining Classroom Procedures and Grading

After you have written up your class syllabus, the next step is to present it to the class. What is often the case is that teachers hand out a class syllabus and go over it point by point during the first class. However, it is sometimes questionable if the students really digest what they are hearing or what they are reading on paper, especially in low-level classes. It is often not until students come to you weeks later asking about the information on the syllabus that you realize they didn't catch it the first time. Bresnihan (1993) suggests presenting this kind of information in a dictation or cloze exercise. On the first day of class, he suggests dividing the class up into groups and having each student dictate a small part of the syllabus to the rest of the group. Instead of giving each student a copy of the dictation, tape pieces of the dictation up on the podium, so the students will have to memorize their parts and return to the group and recite it. Afterwards, have the groups compare what each has written.

Teachers should let students know what will be covered during the school term and what academic yardstick will be used to measure their progress. Providing

students with a general course syllabus outlining the tasks they are required to complete is one effective way to show students the teacher has a well-defined plan for the year. As part of this outline, a list of testing instruments including papers, tests, quizzes, and attendance should be included. In addition to these items, a list of classroom procedures relating to make-up work, asking questions, and tips on taking notes would also be useful. These things that would seem like common sense to the foreign instructor are not so evident to the student.

Getting Students to Do Homework

Teachers always hope that students will be motivated to do homework because they are internally driven to learn. Of course, teachers can go a long way in encouraging this kind of behavior by providing meaningful and interesting assignments students will enjoy doing. However, most students must somehow be manipulated into doing the work by other means like tying a certain percentage of the grade to classroom assignments. Then, as you make homework assignments, make sure they are relevant to the material being covered in class. If students see that the work is satisfying a current need, they will be more willing to do it too. Sometimes, the teacher can collect the homework to see if it is done correctly; other times, the teacher can walk around the room and visually check and note who has done it and who hasn't. I often carry around the attendance sheet and put a check by the names of the students who haven't done the assignment. Whether it is the teacher's intention to record this check or not is sometimes irrelevant. It shows the students that you are making note of their work, and they will just assume that it goes against them if they haven't completed the assignment.

One Point Lessons

One dilemma teachers find themselves in is what to do during the closing minutes of the class. One sure sign students are losing interest is when you see students shuffling their books or when the topic of conversation turns to the day's lunch menu. Instead of finishing class early, teachers can have a one-point lesson at the end of every class. The purpose of the one point lesson is to share with the students one facet of foreign culture or language during the last few minutes of class. I try to select topics that are sometimes unusual, thought-provoking, or of high-interest value. One such topic that students find both amusing and informative is the idea of bathroom facilities. In Japan, students always ask to use the "toilet" instead of the "bathroom" as commonly referred to in North America. While any North American would understand the Japanese speaker's intentions, there are alternative words that would be more appropriate in this situation. Japanese students erroneously assume that when they say "toilet" they are speaking of the place, not

the bathroom fixture. Then, I ask students how they would react if a foreigner visiting their house in Japan used the equivalent word of toilet in Japanese. They quickly catch on. Finally, I try to personalize this lesson by sharing any related experiences to tie these ideas together. In a short time, teachers should be able to come up with twenty-five short five-minute mini-lessons for their classes.

Coming up with a clear teaching agenda or management plan is just as important as the material you are teaching. By creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding, friendship, and trust, students can spend more time on learning, and teachers can devote more time to teaching. Everyone comes out ahead in the end.

Bibliography

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