

HUMAN RELATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Some hints for better relations with your students

Jorge Lopez Medel
Research and Development Unit
Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas
Extranjeras
Universidad Nacional Autónoma
de México

English teachers, eventually develop different ways of coping with problems in the classroom. We also learn how to take advantage of situations which come up in the classroom environment. Our conduct is mainly ruled by what we are supposed to teach and how we are expected to teach it. However, it is also possible to focus our teaching from a different point of view, that is, relating to our students as human beings.

1. GET TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Teacher, with a capital letter, is an old fashioned item. We must learn to be a little more familiar with our students, in order for them to feel comfortable. In our first class we should introduce ourselves by our full names. After that, we should accept any name by which students choose to address us: Teacher, John or Mr. Smith. Do not try to impose the name you want to be called. That would restrict students' freedom and this should be a multiple choice item.

Learning our students' names during the first classes is another must. It might seem difficult at first but there are ways of approaching this task which can make it easier. For example, you might relate the most difficult names to people you already know with the same or similar names. Students will feel more important as individuals when teachers call them by name.

It is also important to ask students from time to time certain questions to demonstrate your interest in them as persons, such as, what they are studying, what their job is or

astrological sign, or what their feelings about something are. Once you ask one of these questions you must make a conscious effort to remember the answer. If you fail to do this, students will begin to doubt your sincerity and communication will be further impeded.

2. BE SELF-CONFIDENT

We cannot become self-confident people simply by deciding to be so. However, we can do certain things which can help us gain confidence in the classroom such as planning our classes. A teacher who has prepared his class is certainly more confident than one who has not. Wear clothes you feel comfortable in. If you are used to wearing ties, long skirts, jeans or hats, wear them. Wearing clothes you are not used to might make you feel uncomfortable and less self-confident. In the classroom be yourself and act naturally. Teachers who act naturally feel more comfortable and confident than those who strive to create a particular impression. A self-confident teacher will gain his students' respect.

3. BE ADAPTABLE

Every school, every level and every group of students is different. However, teachers often tend to behave with all their groups in much the same way. We try to impose our attitudes on our students instead of trying to accommodate theirs. You will teach more proficiently if you adapt your teaching and personality to different groups.

4. BE HUMOROUS

This does not mean you have to be a classroom clown, but a happy face is always welcome. A teacher who knows how to laugh with his students will be more liked than one who does not. When teaching in the classroom many humorous situations may arise which provoke laughter. Take advantage of them. Happy students are more attentive and learn more.

There is often a joker among the students and teachers should consider such individuals as invaluable motivating aids.

If at times one of them gets too bold and expresses something he considers funny and which you consider to be in bad taste, ignore the comment and carry on with the class as rapidly as you can. Do not give other students time to appreciate the joke. Nevertheless, it is best not to show disgust.

Teachers must have a sense of humor. We should smile often and try to develop our wit to take advantage of humorous situations. However, if you want to play a joke on somebody, that somebody should be yourself!

5. BE PATIENT

We all know how important and yet how difficult it is to be patient. If we tend to be perfectionists when trying to get an acceptable utterance from a specific student, we must be patient. We have to avoid an impatient attitude because it would only cause nervousness or frustration in the student. If it is too difficult for him, we can have somebody else speak out that utterance in order for him to listen to it again. If it is proving extremely difficult for him to repeat well, we can try other students with the same exercise and go back to him at the end. By that time he may have recovered from the moment of nervousness. However, if we sense we are pushing too hard, we'd better forget the issue in order not to further frustrate or discourage him.

6. BE SENSITIVE

Being patient is related to being sensitive, but we also should be sensitive to our students' conditions or situations. When asking individual questions try to include all students. If the class is large and you cannot do this with a single exercise, try to remember those you have not asked and make sure to include them in the following exercise. Students are sensitive, they resent being ignored.

When teaching in a public school where most of our students are not wealthy, our examples should not show discrimination towards the poor. When using our students for comparatives, adjectives such as fat, skinny, pretty or ugly should be avoided. Personal questions in front of the entire class are also forbidden. There are some very timid students who are easily upset by

an intrusion of their privacy. Once an embarrassed student in my classroom started to cry; I felt helpless to remedy the situation. If you are ever in an equally unfortunate situation, I would recommend that you carry on with the class as soon as possible. Trying to mend the damage immediately can often upset the student more. Later, when the class is over, you should talk to the student alone. Apologize and try to make him feel that being so sensitive will not help him in life. The occasions I have had such problems have helped me discover some of my best student friends.

7. BE HONEST

Sincerity is always appreciated. When asked a question to which you do not know the answer, say so. If you think you can provide the answer later, tell students you will bring the answer to the following class. Never pretend you are a know-it-all; that will only provoke antipathy in your students. A teacher who cannot be honest will not be able to exhibit the self-confidence that is needed in the classroom.

There are some times when teachers are tired or upset and do not feel like teaching a regular class. On these occasions it may be wise to propose something different like a dictation or a game. It is much better to play an amusing learning game than to teach a boring class.

8. LEARN TO BE SPONTANEOUS

In a regular class there are times when somebody asks a question that catches everybody's attention. Suddenly your lesson plan seems to be no longer appropriate to your class. Instead of being frustrated by this situation, take advantage of it; change your class plan immediately. Learning is more effective when the students are motivated. You will have further classes to replace whatever you intended to teach that day, but the opportunity to teach something your students want to learn should never be discarded. If possible, try to adapt the spontaneous issue to the structures or grammatical points planned to be taught in that class. The same idea can be applied to any unusual event which might come up in your class, such as an unexpected visitor, a broken window, or a sudden strong wind.

9. USE YOUR STUDENTS

Realia is never more meaningful than when you use your students. You can use your students to help visualize one thousand and one situations and grammatical points or structures. Comparatives, possessives, clothing, occupations, dates of birth, features. Have students come up to the front and exhibit their knowledge or possessions. Let them share their fantasies with classmates. Students enjoy participating in the learning process. It is also a very motivating experience for them which will make them profit more from the teaching situation.

Simulations are often underestimated and even forgotten, although they are of great help in teaching new vocabulary and practice rituals. Place students at a party, the airport, a cafeteria or a restaurant, the supermarket, the barber shop or any store and give them roles. Forget about correct structures and the proper usage of tenses. Discipline will be, in this case, secondary. Let students relax and have fun. They will then feel English can also be fun. Experience with direct communication in the new language always has a great deal of motivational value.

10. MAKE SELF-CONFIDENT PEOPLE OUT OF YOUR STUDENTS

Foreign language learning is much easier for people who are self-confident. People who are not afraid of committing errors, who are not preoccupied with being grammatically correct every time they open their mouths, can more easily develop confidence with the new language. It is very important that we help our students develop self-confidence.

Every one of your students can occasionally provide a correct answer. Develop a certain discipline in your class to impede people from answering when they are not asked. If you ask the group a question and feel one of the least competent students can provide a good answer, ask him first. Whenever a student in that situation provides a good utterance, have the others repeat after him, to build up his ego and security in himself.

A perfectly homogeneous class does not exist. It is of great help for any teacher to count on some good students who can be used as resources, but teachers should not abuse them.

Excessive attention to the superior student can make the less advanced student think we do not care about him. Therefore teachers should discipline themselves to avoid calling excessively on the good students. Furthermore, teachers should try to discourage good students from monopolizing the practice.

When using our students as realia, we should first call the more relaxed students to the front. Once the more timid students have observed others, they should be encouraged to participate.

When you are trying to elicit from your students as a group, even the students with learning problems can provide the word or structure which is needed. Whenever that happens, make sure to give them some feedback by having them repeat aloud, independently of the group, and then ask all the others to repeat after them. You will be rewarded by discovering that little by little, your more timid students will become more motivated and gain greater confidence in themselves.

MANUSCRIPTS

Articles should be sent to the Editors, MEXTESOL JOURNAL, Apdo. Postal 6-808, México, D.F. Reviews should be submitted to Review Editor, MEXTESOL JOURNAL, Apdo. Postal 6-808, México 6, D.F.

Articles should not exceed twenty double-spaced typewritten pages. References should be cited in parentheses within the text, giving author, date and page numbers, with complete citation at the end of the article. Footnotes should be placed at the bottom of the page. Articles may be submitted in Spanish.