

Creating the best learning environment

Once one has settled on the best approach for teaching a language, establishing an appropriate classroom atmosphere is paramount. The best methodology can be entirely undone if employed in an environment in which learning is next to impossible.

Of all the chapters in this book, this is the one most opinion-based and heavily seasoned with my own personality. Consequently, I submit it to you for your reflection and fully respect your choice to come to different conclusions, though I hope you'll glean at least something useful from these thoughts.

In the following analogy, I make my apologies to those among you who actually know something about the sport of sailing. My experience is limited to a few sunny afternoons on a relatively calm lake in northern Michigan. What little I learned about sailing, I taught myself and, therefore, know virtually nothing of correct techniques and vocabulary.

Nevertheless, I did learn one thing. If I wanted to make progress up the lake against the wind, there were two techniques that did not work and one that did. I could turn the sail to line up perfectly with the direction in which the wind was going and experience peace and quiet. However, as no wind would enter the sail, the boat would go nowhere. Equally futile, and with far more undesirable results, was the solution of turning the sail perpendicular to the wind, as that would promptly result in a blast of air catching the sail full-force and tipping me over.

The only effective approach was to turn the sail roughly at a 135-degree angle to the wind, thus catching some of it in my sail, but not so much as to flip the vessel. The boat would then begin to progress in that same direction, allowing me to zigzag my way up the lake against the wind. (I believe this is called "tacking", but don't quote me on it.) In any case, when just the right angle was established, and when there was a strong breeze, the power of the wind in the sail could cause the tension in the rope by which I directed the sail to be tremendous. If I held on tightly and maintained that angle, the acceleration of the craft became formidable. I found myself traveling "on the cutting edge", as it were, racing along in that thin zone that separated taking on too much wind from too little.

That is the best picture I can come up with to describe an effective classroom atmosphere, whatever the subject matter. The wind corresponds to the students, with all of their potential, both good and bad, depending upon whether or not that potential is properly harnessed. The sailor is the teacher, the boat is the body of knowledge and skills to be acquired, the sail is the relationship between instructors and their students and the rope is the collection of tools teacher use to guide that relationship.

The first of the two unsuccessful methods of advancing into the wind is simply turning the sail in line with the air current and, thus, getting nowhere. This approach is analogous to aligning one's appearance, habits, speech, expectations and attitudes so closely with those of the students as to make teacher and student virtually indistinguishable, except for the obvious age difference. Typically, this occurs when teachers want to be the students' "friend", reducing demands to a minimum and presenting themselves as a buddy with whom the students can relax. Frequently in such an environment, teachers are looking for the students to fill some affective need in their own life, thus making themselves, and their relationship with the students, the focal point of the course. The result may be a lot of good feelings and laughter; however the students feel no particular compulsion to apply all of their faculties to the subject matter with which the course ostensibly deals.

The antithesis of this ineffective approach corresponds to the turning of the sail 90 degrees and placing it in direct opposition to the force of the wind, resulting in capsizing. This is akin to establishing a humorless, all-business classroom routine, devoid of any meaningful communication or relationship between the teachers and the students. Such an approach reminds me of the advice, only half-jokingly given, that I received as a beginning teacher back in the 1970's. In working with students in one's first year, I was told: "Don't smile until Christmas!" The most obvious weakness in such a lifeless approach is that we are dealing with language, which exists to facilitate communication. If the students either do not know or do not appreciate the teacher as a person, their desire to hear and communicate with that teacher will be greatly muted.

The ideal classroom atmosphere is one in which the students' intellectual capabilities are fully brought to bear at all times upon the objectives defined in the course syllabus. It is attained when teachers masterfully manage the following elements - their own "persona", behavioral expectations, pace of instruction, student accountability, and the personalization of course content. (Please note that I am talking here about establishing an atmosphere for learning and not about effective learning itself. If it is true that learning can be undercut by an inappropriate classroom atmosphere, the contrary is also true. The best atmosphere will result in no gain whatsoever for the students if instructional methodology is wanting.)

Low expectations for achievement and friendship-based, instead of content-based, student-teacher relationships result in the "ship" of meaningful learning becoming becalmed. On the other hand, humorless tedium and mindless routine result in that ship's capsizing amidst a sea of antagonism and demotivation. Artfully managing the five elements critical to a productive atmosphere causes the teacher and student to ride on the cutting edge of learning, leading to rapid progress when paired with effective curriculum. The following is an explanation of those five elements.

The teacher's persona

Teachers present themselves and relate to the students in a manner that ensures that focus remains upon the subject matter at hand. To create a healthy distance between the students and themselves, teachers dress and speak in a way that shows that they see themselves as professionals and that they respect the role they have been given. Their diligence in preparation for class and in executing their lesson plan conveys to the students that they take their job seriously and consider their subject to be of the utmost value. Students can perceive that such teachers do not need their friendship, as their affective needs are met beyond the walls of the school, yet that these teachers both respect and enjoy their students and listen carefully to their remarks. Though they are careful to avoid allowing stories of their personal history from overshadowing the course objectives, they are willing to be transparent about their life when doing so will advance the goals of the course. In short, they do not blur the division between the role of teacher and student, but use their clothing, speech, work ethic and demeanor in class to facilitate learning.

Behavioral expectations

If the characteristics described under "The Teacher's Persona" are respected, behavioral problems are almost invariably minimized. Nonetheless, effective teachers will have a small number of inviolable rules to ensure the maximization of time on task. Those rules ought to be as inflexible as the taut rope holding the straining sail into the wind and, because of their inviolability, they should be few. I have but three rules aimed at maximizing instructional time in my class:

1. Students are to be in their seats when the bell finishing ringing.
2. Students are not to leave their seats without permission.
3. Students are not to distract the teachers or other students, either by word or action, during instruction.

Whatever the rules on which you settle, keep them few and brief and insist that students respect them by means of concrete and consistent consequences for any violation. One should not feel sheepish or overly controlling about having a few rules to protect the effective use of class time. I once heard it said that rules are not joy-killing impositions on one's students. Rather, they are necessary guidelines within which "good things can run wild". They also convey to your students just how important you consider the subject matter to be, that nothing can erode time on task.

Pace of instruction

The pace of instruction should be such that there is no "dead time" in class and that students are intellectually "on the edge of their seats". First, this requires that teachers have a clear lesson plan in mind or, better yet, in written form. Secondly, teachers must commit themselves to hard work in the classroom. They must push themselves, as does an athlete in competition, though pacing themselves in light of the number of classes to

be taught in a day. That means remaining actively engaged with the students, avoiding digressions, unless they be edifying ones, and making swift transitions from one activity or topic to the next.

Student accountability

The previous section refers to teachers' responsibility to maintain an intense, efficient learning environment by their own personal commitment to hard work, efficiency and a brisk pace of instruction. However, there is another tool that they must use to create that same kind of intensity within the mind of the student. Here is an analogy from the sporting realm. A coach can insist upon a high-quality effort from his players in practice if they know that their playing time in the upcoming game is contingent upon their effort in practice. Similarly, students need to be held accountable for how they are using each minute of class time. The ideal is that they never see any moment of the class period as "down time" during which they can afford to "let down their guard" and daydream.

Provided that attaining a good grade in the class is a motivation for your students, judiciously emphasizing the importance of class participation is a key means of keeping students on the edge of their seats. Another means of maintaining intensity in the classroom involves making rapid transitions from one activity to the next and not waiting for students to "catch up" in a leisurely fashion with the change in directions. A third involves holding students accountable for how they have used any class time during which they were performing a task independently. The following sequence of activities, which I regularly perform with my own students, typifies all three of these practices.

First, my website, projected on the screen by means of the mounted video projector attached to my laptop, contains my daily lesson plans for each class. As students enter the classroom, these plans are visible on the classroom screen. Attendance and tardiness are noted within the first thirty seconds of class and then instruction begins promptly. If presenting a new concept, I will typically make a 10-minute presentation, interspersed with some interaction with the students to illustrate the point I am making. Once they have a general understanding of the topic, I send them to the computers I have lining the rear of the classroom to drill the topic online at my website for the next 10 minutes, usually working in pairs. After I can see that they have had enough time, I gently ring a bell on my desk, which is a signal to them that they are to log-off of their computers and return to their seats. The lesson is still projected on the screen so, as they are just finishing logging-off of the computer, I have the first item in the lesson already displayed. I then ask the first question or give the first instruction as they are still rising from their chairs at the computers to return to the front of the classroom. Since oral participation in class represents 50% of their final grade, students move quickly (some almost run) to their chairs in the front of the room, several usually with hands already raised. I call on the first student without waiting for the rest to be seated. My goal is for students to understand that class advances at my pace, and not at a comfortable, leisurely pace dictated by them, as well as to ensure that no time is wasted in transition. Beyond the insistence upon active participation in class discussions and in rapid transitions, this example highlights the issue of accountability for the way in which

students use their time while working independently. When immediately following a time of drill on the computers, student responses must be 100% accurate in the follow-up activity for them to receive credit for their participation, since they had been given time to practice. In this way, they are held accountable for how diligently they employed their independent time.

As an aside, in case my methods appear somewhat draconian, let me provide you with a little balance in the picture I am giving you. ***I never give students homework.*** A school does not “own” its students. They need time for their families, friends, hobbies, household chores and simply to rest. I want them to live a balanced life. Therefore, this may help you understand my emphasis on efficiency and effort in class. It is my perspective that I have 170 to 180 class periods a year in which to accomplish my instruction. They will therefore be used to the hilt since, if my students fall short of expectations by year's end, I see it primarily as my fault and not theirs. Thus, insisting on student accountability and a high-intensity classroom is really a liberating force to enable students to live a balanced life outside of school.

Personalizing the curriculum

The final element in the ideal classroom atmosphere involves generating an intrinsic desire within your students to communicate. Whereas the preceding two areas, pace of instruction and student accountability, focused on imposing a certain rigor in the classroom, personalizing the curriculum has as its goal that of generating a desire on the part of the students to know and to be known. During an initial presentation of a concept, teachers may choose to use examples of events from their own life to illustrate the topic being presented. Appropriate vulnerability on the teacher's part helps the students "open up" regarding their own lives. Thus, after the teacher's sharing, and sufficient drilling of that structure, it is imperative that the new concept be applied to the student's own life. Its application needs to involve a topic of interest to the students. For example, when studying the simple past, one can ask students to relate what they did during the weekend or the previous evening at home. When presenting a verb tense which expresses the habitual past, a discussion of how the students used to entertain themselves as children is appropriate. After introducing the imperative mood, students can be asked to share commands that they typically hear from their parents or teachers, as well as those which they frequently give to their siblings. When reinforcing the position of object pronouns, students can be asked to tell about why they appreciate their friends or family members, which invariably leads to comments regarding what that person does for them. It could be argued that if there is no relatively immediate personal application for any content being taught that it either should not be taught or should not be taught at that point in a student's life.

In conclusion, as you "tack" your way through the school year, give thought to the persona you convey to the students, behavioral expectations, the pace of your instruction, holding students accountable for every minute of class time and personalizing your curriculum. In so doing, you will be maintaining a firm grasp on the tools that will give you clear sailing as you move through the ULAT!