



In this column **Rose Senior** explains why certain teaching techniques and class management strategies are effective, and identifies specific issues that can assist all language teachers in improving the quality of their teaching.

Class-centred teaching is successful teaching

Why are some teachers more successful than others, with a higher proportion of classes that are receptive, responsive and rewarding to teach? The more I study language classrooms, the more convinced I become that highly successful teachers are **class-centred** in their approach.

Class-centred language teaching means not only teaching effectively, but also encouraging each class to function as cohesively as possible. When students learn a new language in a classroom situation, they do so as a group – and the quality of the class group is related to the quality of the learning that occurs within it. If there's a friendly and enthusiastic atmosphere within the class, quieter individuals are drawn along by the positive energy exuded by the group and participate more fully in learning tasks. Conversely, if there's a feeling of negativity within the class, students may withdraw into their shells or behave in antagonistic ways. When this happens, the teacher must spend valuable time behaving in mundane ways: repeating instructions, explaining things a second time, pulling students into line and so on. As a result, they have less time and energy to teach in dynamic ways – and everyone's learning suffers.

Many experienced language teachers are automatically class-centred in their approach. How do these class-centred teachers (CCTs) behave in their classrooms?

CCTs notice what's happening in every part of the room. They monitor how everyone is going with their learning tasks: who's finished and looking bored, who's struggling, and so on. CCTs are able to make on-the-spot decisions about when precisely to stop an activity – based on their judgement of what's best for the class as a whole. If they sense that they're 'losing' the class because of the difficulty of a task, they may allow the students to complete

the task collectively rather than individually. CCTs seldom plough on regardless.

CCTs are alert to behavioural clues that indicate that all is not well with individuals or groups of students. They notice, for example, when a normally outgoing student looks glum, or when a group of students is whispering together. The restorative action that they take aims to draw the individual or group of students

back into the classroom 'fold'. They might make a mental note to have a quiet chat with the glum student, or give them a high-profile task (such as 'chairing' a debate) in an attempt to boost their ego. The decisions that they make are based on their current knowledge of the interpersonal relationships and personalities of the students in their classes.

CCTs are constantly balancing the demands of individuals against the overall wellbeing of the class. Sometimes they judge it important to spend time answering a tricky question posed by a particular student – sensing that they may get that person 'on-side' if they pay them special attention. At other times they may ignore the attention-seeking behaviour of individuals, sensing that the needs of the class as a whole are greater. Sometimes, of course, they use a question asked by a particular student as an opportunity to teach the whole class.

CCTs find themselves selecting learning tasks that are effective both pedagogically and socially. Such tasks not only give everyone the opportunity to engage in worthwhile learning, but also maintain a feeling of togetherness within the room. 'Brainstorming', for example, provides students with the opportunity to pool prior knowledge, which can then be used as a stimulus or basis for a subsequent learning task. This activity also reinforces the notion that learning is a

collaborative exercise in which more can be achieved collectively than individually.

CCTs are able to move smoothly between two quite different roles. While understanding the importance of retaining their authority as teachers and maintaining acceptable norms of behaviour, they also know the importance of relaxing and going with the flow when they sense it's appropriate to do so (laughing alongside everyone else when something unexpected happens, for instance). By playing these two quite different roles, CCTs function both as conventional teachers and integral members of their class groups.

CCTs have at their fingertips a range of strategies for encouraging their classes to behave collectively in ways that are beneficial to learning. For example, knowing that shared understandings develop over time – and that reference to a shared experience can reinforce a spirit of intimacy and camaraderie within the class – they may refer on a regular basis to a collective class experience such as a party or special outing that was enjoyed by all. At the same time, CCTs are aware of the fact that in-class jokes can wear thin, and that they must remain alert to signs of student boredom or discomfort.

Class-centred language teaching is a useful term to describe how successful teachers behave in their classrooms. When teaching, I find it helpful to examine my own behaviour in terms of how class-centred I'm being. This serves as a constant reminder that every class is a dynamic collection of individuals who need to be encouraged at all times to work as a unified group. **ETP**

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