

Classroom Management Issues

Often teachers strive to create a classroom environment based on mutual respect, order, creativity, productivity, and discipline. It is assumed that students know what appropriate classroom behavior is and that they must follow routines and rules. However, these assumptions can be very misguided when it comes to English learners, especially Newcomers. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration various factors that may influence the behavior of English learners.

Factors That May Influence EL Behavior

1. Newcomers may be going through a stage of culture shock and feel threatened, traumatized, alienated, or depressed.
2. They may be political refugees, immigrants, or U.S.-born with a variety of adjustments to make.
3. They may be living with relatives or friends rather than parents, who may have stayed behind.
4. They may not have had interactions with people from different cultures or religions before.
5. They may have lived in a rural environment and are now living in an urban one.
6. They may have experienced war and the loss of loved ones.

Cultural Misunderstanding

Even if students have no experiences like the ones above, they may still be operating under their own cultural assumptions regarding appropriate classroom behavior. Their ideas may be very different from the expected behaviors in American classrooms.

The following chart lists behaviors that may be influenced by cultural assumptions.

Respect

- Students may refuse to address the teacher by name after repeated requests and may continue to say “Teacher” instead. This is because this was a way of showing respect to a teacher in their home country.
- They may also refuse direct eye contact with the teacher, or they may bow or stand up when addressed by the teacher for the same reason.

Authority

- Students may resist pair or group work because they have no experience with this in their home country and because the teacher is supposed to be the only authority and repository of wisdom.
- Students may never ask questions or disagree with a teacher because they don't want to question a teacher's authority and knowledge.
- Students may support their reasoning with reference to religious sources as proof rather than accepted scientific proof because authority from religious sources surpasses all others in their home country.

Gender

- Students may assume men are the only ones in a position to be obeyed. They may assume women who wear pants, show bare arms, or do not cover their hair are not to be respected.
- Students may refuse to work with members of the opposite sex, as this is not the approved custom in their countries.

Many of the situations described above can be avoided if teachers can provide students with descriptions of expected behaviors.

Disruptive Behavior

Some English learners may have behavioral problems that do not result from misunderstandings. Their behaviors may be a defense mechanism of some kind or may be unacceptable in both the first and second cultures. Teachers may have to consider that, like all students, English learners may have unidentified learning disabilities, attention-deficit disorders, or other issues that cause their behaviors to be misinterpreted.

If it is evident that a student's misbehavior is deliberate, it is important to bring in a translator.

How to Handle Deliberate Disruption

1. The teacher should make sure that the student knows that every time an expectation is not met, there will be a reaction—every time.
2. The reaction may be a reminder, a warning, or a consequence, such as handing in work before the close of school that day, staying after school to do work, or developing a behavior plan with the student and parents.
3. Whatever the consequence is, it should be logically related to the behavior rather than simply punitive. Punishment creates resentment, while a consequence related to the misbehavior is more like fair retribution for the unmet expectation.

Creating a Multicultural Classroom

Current research confirms that programs in which students' native languages are valued and promoted as resources for learning are the most effective approach for supporting English learners' social, cognitive, and academic growth in English. It is important to remind English learners that their native language is valuable and can be an advantage to learning a new language. A student's native language can also be integrated into the curriculum to support standards and learning objectives. Depending on students' current proficiency in each language, their knowledge about their own language and culture, and the teachers' and students' creativity, there are many ways to do this.

The following chart offers suggestions for getting started.

Suggestions for Creating a Multicultural Classroom
1. Invite all students to compare and contrast their native language to English.
2. Ask English learners to share native language literature, myths, poetry, proverbs, and idioms, in order to engage students in a discussion about the versions in English.
3. Discuss differences in social practices between the two languages.
4. Encourage and allow English learners to discuss meaning with peers in their first language.
5. Pair more advanced English learners with English learners at earlier stages.
6. Encourage family members to converse with their children and read to them in their native language to provide rich language input that children need to develop cognitively.
7. Encourage and allow English learners to keep bilingual journals and to create bilingual dictionaries.
8. Assign students at higher proficiency levels to gather information in their native language and explain it in English.
9. Assign students to interview a caregiver or relative in their native language and share the results with the class in English.

It is also extremely important that teachers create a supportive environment wherein students will feel comfortable experimenting and practicing a new language. Various techniques that facilitate students' acquisition of English and help to make content comprehensible are important to creating this kind of environment.

The following chart contains a list of specific techniques that are greatly effective for English learners.

Techniques for Creating a Supportive Environment
1. Varying instructional grouping—by moving from whole group to small group, whole group to partners, small group to individual assignments—provides students different opportunities to learn new information and facilitates interaction.
2. Allow English learners to give nonverbal responses to show comprehension (e.g., thumbs-up/ thumbs-down, pantomiming, or drawing diagrams).
3. Allow students to speak in their native languages.
4. Use manipulatives or realia when presenting information, and use hands-on activities.
5. Give supportive feedback and use discretion when correcting or clearing up misconceptions.
6. Create a positive and supportive classroom environment by showing appreciation and respect toward all students.
7. Use adapted texts or create audiotapes with adapted content in modified language.
8. Provide explicit instruction accompanied by visuals, models, and examples of expected outcomes.