

Have you taught groups that sometimes don't gel? Do you feel that the way students get on in class is important? This lesson looks at the way classroom dynamics create a good learning environment and enhance opportunities for learning. It looks at what helps create good dynamics and the reasons for that.

Task 1 – Sonya's least favourite class

Sonya: I'm teaching a class at the moment that I really am not very fond of. As a group I find them very cold – almost to the point of being hostile. At the beginning of the course, I went out of my way to be nice to them, but they just didn't react, and it's just gone from bad to worse. I can't wait for this term to end so I can be free of them.



Question: Is this just a personality problem? Why (not)? Jot down your thoughts on a note pad, then check the answer key below. 🗝️

Task 1 Feedback 🗝️

There may be a personality problem here. However, Sonya's comment about being nice to the students suggests that this is all she did. Some student groups do contain difficult personality mixes and simply being nice to students (while very important!) is not enough to ensure a good group dynamic.

Key Skill

Teachers sometimes need to work hard at creating a good classroom dynamic and in doing so they will need to employ a variety of strategies. This work needs to occur not only at the beginning of a course but also during every lesson.

Key Skill

Good classroom dynamics are connected to the maximisation of learning opportunities. Making lessons enjoyable is something that should be of benefit to the learners. While teachers may also enjoy a fun learning environment, their needs as far as this is concerned are secondary to the students.

Task 3 – Key requirements for classroom dynamics



Numbers 1 to 10 below are all key requirements of good classroom dynamics. Letters a to j are explanations of these requirements in terms of classroom practice. Match the key requirements to the explanations.

Key requirements	Explanations
1. Good group dynamics require a shared sense of purpose.	
2. Good group dynamics require clear staging of lessons and clear sign posting of activities.	
3. Good group dynamics require a sense of trust, empathy and confidence within the learner group.	
4. Good group dynamics require a variety of activities.	
5. Good group dynamics require consideration of teacher and student roles in a lesson.	
6. Good group dynamics require consideration of students' expectations.	
7. Good group dynamics require consideration of cross cultural issues.	
8. Good group dynamics require consideration of individual preferences and learning styles.	
9. Good group dynamics require consideration of physical factors in the learning environment.	
10. Good group dynamics require real communication that is meaningful and relevant to students.	

Explanations

- a. While students need to assume some responsibility for their learning, the teacher often has to take the role of leader in the classroom.
- b. Teachers need to think about how they can arrange the classroom furniture to facilitate different interactions that aim to promote good classroom dynamics.
- c. The teacher needs to indicate clearly to students when one activity finishes and another begins as well as letting students know where the lesson is heading.
- d. Individual students need to be aware of the fact that not everyone in the group will want to learn in exactly the same way that they do.
- e. This can only be achieved when students are able to personalise language and share their ideas.
- f. In multi-lingual / multi-national classes teachers need to make sure that students are tolerant of one another's differences.
- g. The teacher needs to provide activities that give students a sense of working together on a problem that can be solved by means of co-operation.
- h. This can only happen when teachers and students begin to see each other as individuals and not just part of a collective whole.
- i. Students need to understand that they are part of a group that has to work together and they are not doing a one-to-one lesson.
- j. Too much routine activity will not create a dynamic and spontaneous environment that facilitates learning.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

Task 3 shows that careful consideration of learners as individuals and how they may or may not fit together lies at the heart of establishing good group dynamics. With most groups, good dynamics will not happen spontaneously, but only as a result of careful planning on the teacher's behalf.

Task 4 – Ways of facilitating good dynamics



Numbers 1 to 10 are all ideas that can be used in the classroom to help create good dynamics. Letters a to j describe the purpose of these ideas. Match the ideas with the purposes. Different variations are possible

Classroom ideas

1. Do ice breaker activities at the beginning of a course ...
2. Do regular, daily warmer activities ...
3. Do group problem-solving tasks ...
4. Do tasks that allow students to personalise language and ideas ...
5. Do activities that integrate 'old' students with 'new' students when the composition of the class changes ...
6. Do work on learning styles and learning strategies ...
7. Let learners know about your teaching style, the course content and your reasons for doing some activities ...
8. Monitor students not only for language problems, but also for the 'climate' or mood of the class ...
9. Monitor your own decision-making during the lesson and the effect this has on pace ...
10. Allow for interpersonal exchanges between you and the learners before, during and after the lesson ...

Purposes

- a. ... so that students find out more about themselves as learners and how to learn more effectively.
- b. ... so that you can become aware of any potential threats to the dynamics of a group.
- c. ... so that newly formed classes can get to know each other as people.
- d. ... so that you get to find out about each other and what is happening in your lives.
- e. ... so that a good dynamic is constantly passed on within the group.
- f. ... so that the group's energy levels are raised at the beginning of each lesson.
- g. ... so that lessons don't drag and have a negative effect on the group dynamic.
- h. ... so that students get the chance to work as a team,
- i. ... so that they are more likely to feel confident about you when you assume the role of 'leader' in the classroom.
- j. ... so that students can express genuine opinions and feelings.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Thinking about your teaching ...

Think about some previous learning experiences that you have had. They don't need to be related to language learning. Can you remember classes that had a good dynamic? Try to analyse what it was about the teacher and the other students that helped to create this dynamic.

Note your observations in your *Teaching log*

Taking it to the classroom ...

In task 4 there is a good array of ideas. It is likely that there are some ideas in the list that you haven't tried. Make it your aim over the next term to try out as many of the ideas in task 4 as possible. Having tried each idea, evaluate its effectiveness for creating a positive learning environment with your students.

Want to find out more ... ?

Classroom Dynamics by Jill Hadfield (OUP 1992) has an invaluable resource of ideas and activities that aim to promote a good learning environment.

On pages 161 – 167 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th edition) by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007), there is further reading on the advantages and disadvantages of using different grouping options in the classroom and their effect on class dynamics.

Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to this topic:

- **Unit 1 b) Student interaction and teacher roles:** Includes discussion and analysis on a variety of different seating arrangements and appropriate teacher roles for each.

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

1. **questionable** – *The teacher's sense of enjoyment is less important than the students'.*

2. **valid**

3. **valid**

4. **questionable** – *There is likely to be more student-centred interaction. However, the teacher should monitor this interaction attentively and not relax.*

5. **valid**

6. **valid**

7. **questionable** – *While it is good that teachers are responsive to students, teachers also need to ensure they plan their lessons in such a way that students get a sense of coherence from the teaching programme.*

8. **valid**

Task 3 – Feedback

1. g

2. c

3. h

4. j

5. a

6. i

7. f

8. d

9. b

10. e

Task 4 – Feedback

1. b, c, d, k, j

2. d, e, f, k

3. e, h

4. j

5. c, e

6. a

7. i

8. b, g

9. g

10. d, i, j