



## AN INQUIRY INTO EFL TEACHERS' AND LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE

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### Abstract

Classroom discipline is undoubtedly the key to effective teaching and learning in any class. EFL (English as a foreign language) classes are no exception. Although literature abounds with prescriptive rules as to how to provide and maintain discipline in EFL classes, little is known as to EFL teachers' and learners' views about classroom discipline. Prompted by this, the study attempted to investigate EFL teachers' and learners' perspectives on classroom discipline. The participants of the study were 50 high school EFL learners and 35 EFL teachers. Data for the study were largely obtained by means of learner and teacher questionnaires. Interviews were also held with the participants to gain in-depth insights into the issue under examination. The study revealed intriguing information as to EFL teachers' and learners' views as to how discipline should be maintained in language classrooms.

**Key Words:** classroom discipline, English as a foreign language, foreign language classroom, learner and teacher views

### INTRODUCTION

By dictionary meaning, discipline refers to the act of training of the mind and character, aimed at producing self-control and obedience. The expected outcome of such a training process is ordered behaviour on the part of the trained individual. A crucial question arises at this point: What does discipline imply in the classroom context? One of the broadest definitions of discipline comes from Kyriacou (1991, p.81). He depicts classroom discipline as 'the order which is necessary in the classroom for pupil learning effectively.' Harder et al. (1998, p.181) define it as the preservation of order and maintainance of control in the classroom.

Classroom discipline, as one of the crucial aspects of effective classroom management, has attracted attention in educational research (Bru, et al. 2002; Chiu and Chow, 2011; Debra, 2010; Dierenfield, 1998; Tirri and Puolimatka, 2000; Türnüklü and Galtony; 2001; Verkuyten, 2002). Although one can find a bunch of prescriptive rules in relation to classroom management and discipline in the field of ELT, it seems that little is known as to teachers' and learners' thinking processes concerning classroom discipline. Devoting a focus to the way language teachers and learners perceive various aspects of classroom discipline would be valuable in tying teachers strongly with their learners and their managerial world. In other words, the teachers could be endowed with an understanding on their learners' views about how to provide and maintain classroom discipline. Armed with that knowledge, they could consider and reconsider their practices in relation to classroom discipline and, more generally, in relation to classroom management. Furthermore, such a study might reveal areas of mismatch between EFL teachers' and learners' views. Identifying those mismatches would undoubtedly be helpful in matching the conflicting learner and teacher perspectives.

In light of all these, the present study thus aims to probe into how EFL teachers and learners view various aspects of classroom discipline in language classrooms and poses the following questions:

1. What are EFL teachers' perspectives on classroom discipline in ELT classes?
2. What are EFL learners' perspectives on classroom discipline in ELT classes?



## METHODOLOGY

35 high school EFL teachers and 50 high school EFL learners participated in the study. The teachers' ages ranged from 27 to 47. Their range of experience was between 3 and 25 years.

Data were collected by means of teacher and learner questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires were developed through a detailed review of literature and preliminary interviews held with a group of participants in order to reveal main areas of concern regarding various aspects of classroom discipline in foreign language classrooms. In the questionnaires, there was a total of 18 items concerning the various aspects of classroom discipline. (See the appendix). The questionnaires were administered in Turkish. The participants were asked to state their choices on a five-point scale Likert scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The same questionnaire with slight modifications was given to both the teachers and learners. The questionnaires were piloted with a group of teachers and learners who would not take part in the actual study.

Semi-structured interviews were also held with the teachers and learners. The learner interviews were held in the form of group discussions. The teacher interviews were carried out with three EFL teachers. The interviews which lasted 20–30 minutes were held in Turkish and recorded.

Questionnaire data were analysed descriptively. The participants' responses were described in the form of frequencies. With regard to the interview data, it was analysed on the basis of the general meaning units emerged in the interviews and were converted into categories.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study offered intriguing information as to teachers' and learners' perspectives on classroom discipline (See the appendix for frequencies).

When asked, a great majority of teachers seem to strongly believe that it is the teacher who should set the classroom rules in a foreign language classroom. However, most of the learners have reported the reverse: They did not seem to believe that the teacher should set the classroom rules. It seems that the teachers and learners go their separate ways when it comes to the question of who should set the classroom rules. Such a disparity between learners' and teachers' perspectives raises important issues to think about. The teachers' strong belief that they are the ones who should set the classroom rules provides us with a crucial clue as to how they construe the role of the learner and teacher in a foreign language classroom. If the teachers are inclined to believe that they are the one and only figures responsible for setting the classroom rules, it is probable that they believe in the ultimate power of the teacher in the classroom and that they perceive the learner as a passive recipient of knowledge.

Furthermore, such a view of teachers seems to be incompatible with the premises of learner-centred teaching in the field of ELT. One of these premises ardently recommends that teachers should create opportunities for the negotiation of learning and teaching perspectives on classroom happenings (Kumaravedivelu, 2003). A similar recommendation is valid for the establishment of classroom rules. What is strongly advocated is that teachers and learners should set the classroom rules cooperatively. It is believed that such cooperation would contribute to more learner motivation and involvement in the language classroom and in turn would aid in setting the most appropriate contexts conducive to learning.

Another finding seems to concur with the above remarks. More than half of the teachers appear to think that the only authority in the classroom is the language teacher. There is a great likelihood that the teachers view themselves as the leading actors on the classroom scene. However, the learners' responses reveal another discrepancy between teachers' and learners' views because nearly half of the learners do not seem to think that the teacher is the most powerful entity in the classroom. Given such reports of the learners, it might well be speculated that the learners wish for a language classroom ornamented with tenets of learner-centred instruction.



The findings of the study provided information with respect to a few factors that might be influential on classroom discipline. There appears to be differences between teachers' and learners' views regarding factors affecting classroom discipline. According to what most of the teachers have reported, large classes are the most crucial factor that causes disruptive behaviour in the language classroom. They also do not seem to believe that learners, learner families and unpedagogical talk in the classroom are major reasons which might distort discipline in language classrooms. The interview data provided supplementary information on the issue. What one of the teachers articulates appears to be of relevance at this point:

'I believe unmotivated learners are the major reason for disorder in language classrooms. The learners are not interested in English at all and they are not intrinsically motivated. So, this causes disruptive behaviour in language classes.'

The learners appear to hold different views on the issue. According to what they have stated, the major source of classroom problems is unpedagogical classroom talk. It seems to be interesting that they do not represent themselves as generators of classroom problems. Presumably, they make their teachers accountable for disruptive behaviour in the classroom and think that the teachers' ineffective strategies of classroom management are the primary reason for undisciplined classrooms. The interview data seems to be in support of such a remark. What the learners articulated during the interviews was that teachers were responsible for maintaining discipline in the classroom and that if teachers failed to establish order, it was due to lack of skilful teaching. Most of the learners also tend to believe that learner families might be the reason for deviant learner behaviours in the foreign language classroom. However, the learners did not seem to view large classes as sources of discipline problems, as shown in the table in the appendix.

There are a number of ways to prevent and treat discipline problems: Punishment, careful planning, positive interrelationships with learners and so on. The data offered interesting insights into teachers' and learners' perspectives on the question of how to deal with classroom problems. Most of the teachers and learners strongly disagree with the item saying, 'Punishing learners is one of the ways to deal with discipline problems'.

However, the interviews held with the teachers revealed that punishment might find its way into language classrooms. An intriguing comment comes from one of the teachers:

'Punishment...err...Yes, I sometimes punish my learners, but I have never relied on physical punishment. I first warn the student. If it does not work, I use punishment.'

Another comment comes from one of the learners. As he expresses:

'The teacher should not punish his learners. It is demoralising, discouraging and decreases my motivation.'

In addition, most of the teachers and learners think that threatening learners with grade would not work to provide and maintain discipline in the classroom. A great majority of learners and teachers do not seem to think either that scolding learners is not an appropriate method to deal with deviant learner behaviour.

A further finding seems to be in support of the above results. A great majority of teachers and learners seem to strongly believe that rapport is the magic word that would do wonders to a disciplined classroom. Undoubtedly, the fostering of interrelationships – feelings of respect and goodwill between individuals- is crucial in that it helps build trust and motivation in any classroom (Ur, 1996).

Along with rapport, another crucial action conducive to a disciplined classroom might be lesson planning. Seemingly, a carefully and clearly organised lesson contributes to the creation of purposeful, orderly and smooth classroom processes (Hedge, 2000; Kyriacou, 1991). Most of the teachers and learners in the present study appear to agree that a careful lesson planning is one of the steppingstones of a disciplined classroom. Ignoring misbehaving learners might be another strategy to deal with discipline problems. However, there is a great likelihood that ignoring such deviant learners would worsen the situation and would cause discipline problems to double. Most of the teachers and learners in the present study seem to reach a consensus by



reporting that it is not an appropriate strategy to ignore disruptive behaviour. Rather than ignoring disruptive behaviour, a great majority of learners and teachers emphasise that misbehaving learners should be dealt with individually, and they disagree with the item saying, 'dealing with misbehaving learners individually would not aid in maintaining classroom discipline.' The interview data seems to be in support of such a finding. The teachers interviewed agree that dealing with deviant learners individually might help to pre-empt and treat the deviant behaviour. Furthermore, both the teachers and learners strongly believe that anticipating discipline problems would be a great help to prevent disruptive behaviour and to establish discipline in the classroom. According to another finding, nearly more than half of the teachers and learners seem to believe that referring the students to the head of the school is not a good preventative strategy to deal with discipline problems. However, the interview data have offered different information about the teachers' views. The teachers interviewed report that it might be a good preventative strategy to refer the learners to the head of the school to pre-empt learner misbehaviours and thus to maintain classroom discipline.

What a further finding reveals is that most of the teachers and learners report that it is essential to apply the the school rules in order to maintain discipline in language classrooms. The participants probably think that the formal nature of school rules would be more influential on and deterring against disruptive behaviour arising in classrooms. It might not be denied that the formality of school rules would be important in establishing disciplined classrooms. However, each classroom has its own way and has a unique culture in itself. For this reason, along with the school regularities, there might be a need for teachers to specify rules compatible with the unique features of their classrooms.

According to a generally-held view among language teachers and school administrators, group work is a classroom activity which might distort the order and which might cause commotion in the classroom. However, both the teachers and learners participated in the study do not seem to hold the same view and strongly reject to the item, 'Group work in language classrooms should be avoided because it distorts classroom discipline.'

Both the teachers and learners also seem to think that noise is not the most serious discipline problem in language classrooms, as shown in the table (See the appendix). There is great likelihood that the teachers and learners in the present study consider some other problems as more problematic than noise. The interview data provides supportive information. The teachers mention the below as the most serious discipline problems:

Unmotivated learners

Latecomers

Classroom provocators (as exactly pronounced by one of the teachers)

Interrupting the flow of the lesson by asking unnecessary questions

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present study set out to investigate EFL teachers' and learners perspectives on various aspects of classroom discipline. The participants of the study were 50 high school learners of English and 35 high school EFL teachers. Data were obtained by means of teacher and learner questionnaires and interviews. Perhaps, the most striking piece of information flowing from the study was the teachers' and learners' strong belief in teacher authority. According to more than half of the teachers and nearly half of the learners, the teacher was the one and only mighty figure in the classroom. Such an inclination of the participants seems to reflect a conventional understanding on foreign language learning and teaching processes and provides us with insights into how teachers and learners perceive the role of the teacher and teacher authority in the foreign language classroom. Also, the present study revealed some areas of mismatch between the teachers' and learners' views in relation to the sources of discipline problems and who should set the classroom rules. Whereas the teachers tended to view large classes as one of the sources of classroom discipline problems, the learners seemed to believe that their own families might be responsible for disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Moreover, according to most of the teachers, they should set the classroom rules. Most of the learners; on the other hand, rejected that idea. Such a tendency of the teachers appears to indicate that teacher-centred approaches might be prevailing in foreign language classrooms.



The present study might be of interest to language teachers in the sense that it offers chances for them to dive into learner perceptions in relation to classroom discipline. This would undoubtedly raise their awareness on how learners construe different aspects of classroom discipline and in turn, would help them set the essential classroom scene compatible with learner perceptions. Such a classroom scene could be set by maximising opportunities to negotiate classroom rules with learners.

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**APPENDIX**

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	TEACHER RESPONSES (f)					LEARNER RESPONSES (f)				
	SA*	A*	U*	D*	SD*	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. The teacher should set the classroom rules in a foreign language classroom.	5	20	2	8	---	6	10	6	21	7
2. The teacher is the only authority in the classroom.	6	12	2	11	4	8	13	7	14	8
3. Group work should be avoided in foreign language classrooms because it distorts classroom discipline.	1	1	1	15	17	1	1	3	17	28
4. Punishing learners is a way to deal with discipline problems in foreign language classrooms.	1	4	3	15	12	3	6	4	16	21
5. The most serious discipline problem in foreign language classrooms is noise.	1	4	2	19	9	4	15	4	16	11
6. The major reason for discipline problems in foreign language classrooms is the student.	1	2	8	21	3	3	14	10	17	6
7. Lesson planning does not help provide discipline in the foreign language classroom.	2	1	2	13	17	3	1	1	17	28
8. Threatening learners with grade is a good way to provide discipline in foreign language classrooms.	1	1	1	16	16	3	3	6	11	27
9. Scolding learners might help to maintain classroom discipline.	---	3	5	18	9	4	3	5	15	23
10. Unpedagogical talk in the classroom might distort discipline in a language classroom.	2	8	3	16	6	9	17	5	13	6
11. The teacher should not pay attention to misbehaving learners.	3	---	3	13	16	8	5	3	13	21
12. Establishing positive relationships with learners does not help to maintain discipline in foreign language classrooms.	1	9	2	15	8	4	---	1	11	34
13. Learners' families are one of the reasons for disruptive behaviour in foreign language classrooms.	2	6	7	17	3	3	18	12	9	8
14. Referring the learners to the head of the school is one of the best ways to prevent discipline problems.	---	15	3	10	7	5	15	6	12	12
15. The teacher should anticipate discipline problems to maintain discipline in foreign language classrooms.	6	28	1	---	---	24	20	3	2	1
16. Dealing with misbehaving learners individually does not aid in maintaining classroom discipline.	---	1	---	1---4	20	4	6	3	19	18
17. Large classes are not one of the reasons for discipline problems in foreign language classrooms.	1	3	3	14	14	5	16	14	13	2
18. It is essential to apply school rules to maintain discipline in foreign language classrooms.	2	19	2	12	---	10	22	9	9	

\* 'SA' refers to 'strongly agree', 'A' 'agree', 'U' 'undecided', 'D' 'disagree', and 'SD' 'strongly disagree'.