How Do Classroom Procedures and Notebook Organization Help Students and Their Teacher Stay on Track?

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Submitted June 2003

Abstract
In my second year of teaching B1, or intermediate ESOL students, I became increasingly frustrated by the amount of time wasted in my class each day. I was also concerned by the degree to which students of this level were relying on me to supply them with answers I thought they should have been able to find themselves. Through this project I take a closer look at these issues in my classroom and attempt to identify my role in their occurrences. As well, I observe and reflect on the effects of three strategies: establishing routines, notebook organization, and teaching resources.

Introduction
I’ve always thought of myself as a fairly laid-back, non-structured person. Prior to entering the classroom I felt my teaching style would reflect these attitudes. I envisioned my classroom as a sort of organized chaos where learning would take place as students chatted and felt free to walk about the classroom as they worked. After a year as an intern, four months as a long-term substitute and a year of full time teaching I realized that this vision would never be a reality. My teacher self turned out to be much different than my personal self. Little things I never thought would bother me started to drive me crazy.

I began to grow tired of waiting for students to settle down and get organized at the beginning of class. I no longer wanted to spend 10 minutes doing nothing while students shuffled through their notebooks to find a piece of paper or yelled across the room for a pencil. I didn’t want to repeat directions or the date to each student individually because they weren’t paying attention the first time. I lectured them daily but both my students and myself soon grew weary of hearing the same thing day after day. And, it didn’t seem to be doing any good.

Another issue was what I viewed as an over-reliance on me to provide them with information they could have easily found themselves. Upon reflection, I discovered I was enabling this behavior by giving them the answers. Quickly spelling a word for them that we had studied in the last class seemed easier than making them find it and avoided what always led to whining or an argument.

Although some learning appeared to be taking place, it often felt disjointed, disorganized and like I was doing all of the work. My students weren’t happy, I wasn’t happy, and a good example was not being set. What could I do to change this? I needed a new vision.
Data Collection Methods

For the purposes of this project I chose to concentrate on my B1 or intermediate ESOL students. I chose this group primarily because students at the B1 level are taking ESOL classes and mainstream classes, such as Biology and World History, concurrently. These mainstream classes require students to process large amounts of information in English. To be successful in these classes, students needed to be able to work independently. I hoped that the procedures I established in my classroom would carry over in some manner into these classes.

I currently teach two sections of B1 Content (language through US History) with approximately 15 students in each section. About half of these students are from South or Central America and the remaining half are a mixture of Korean, Chinese, African and Middle Eastern students.

My primary source of data collection was student observations. I recorded these observations, anecdotes, student quotes and my reflections on them in a journal. In addition, I asked my students to complete several surveys to gage their reactions to some of the strategies I tried in class. I also included my students in informal discussions. My final source of data came from formal and informal discussions with other high school ESOL teachers.

Establishing Procedures in the Classroom

My new vision began with the implementation of a variety of classroom procedures. Almost every book and article I have read on the subject of classroom management has stressed the importance of establishing and teaching classroom procedures.

Every class needs to have a set of procedures. Procedures allow the class to operate smoothly. A smooth-running, effective class is free of confusion and is a pleasure to teach and learn in (Wong & Wong, 1998, pp 20).

According to Wong and Wong, students want and need procedures for all aspects of daily classroom life, from what they should do when they enter the classroom, to how to alert the teacher when they have a question (1998, pp 20). Without these procedures time is wasted and the teacher is left tired and frustrated. By not having clearly defined procedures in place in my classroom, I witnessed these results first hand.

Although I had studied the use of procedures and had witnessed them used in other classes, I wasn’t really sure if procedures were for me, if they fit with my style of teaching. After further research, I finally broke down and began to establish some everyday procedures to use in my classroom. I regret not implementing these procedures at the start of the year but despite this, feel they were somewhat successful. By the end of the year, I saw a good number of students following the procedures without being reminded or catching themselves when they didn’t.
Some of the procedures in my classroom were things that I did every day, and some of them were procedures for the students to follow. The procedures that I found worked for me are:

- Always writing the date, agenda and homework in the same place on the front board where all the students could see them. I reviewed these items at the beginning of class each day. Because they were written, I could easily point to them when a student asked a question like, “What’s the date today?” two minutes after we read the date as a class.

- Writing the materials students would need for the period on the board in the front of the room. Clifford H. Edwards also mentions this tactic in his book Classroom Discipline and Management (1997, pp 385 & 386). Students were taught to read the board and follow the directions immediately upon walking into the room. I could check off their homework as they took it out of their notebook. This saved a tremendous amount of time previously spent searching for supplies before each activity. Even though at the end of the year many students still needed to be reminded to read the board, I feel this procedure helped establish a consistency to the class. I knew the procedure had somewhat clicked the day I forgot to write the materials on the board and a student called out, “Yeah! We don’t even need a pencil today!”

- Posting written directions for procedures in the room where I could point to them and students could read them.

- Establishing a procedure for what to do when students finished an assignment. Students always wanted me to check their work for them before they turned it in. I was happy to help students who were having trouble understanding the assignment but found that the mistakes the majority of the students were making were simple ones that with some careful checking, they could have caught themselves. The procedure I established was that before turning in an assignment, students were to first check it themselves by rereading the questions and their answers, then by using resources in their notebook such as an irregular verb list. Finally, they needed to have another student look at the assignment and discuss any inconsistencies. I found that by the end of the year, many students were checking their work and trading papers without being reminded and that through this, careless errors were reduced.

**Notebook Organization**

“Nothing is really lost. It’s just where it doesn’t belong.”

—Suzanne Mueller

The next part of my plan was to get organized. Spizman and Garber (1995), in their teacher resource book Helping Kids Get Organized, point out many of the positive effects of teaching students effective organizational skills. These benefits include better time management, more organized writing and improved test and study skills (p.5).
I found the disorganization of both the students and myself aggravating and wasteful of class time. I could never remember what papers I had passed out the class before and was often unable to find my extra handouts to give absent students. It was difficult for me to direct students to previous papers to help with a current assignment because neither they nor myself knew where to find these papers. Students often claimed that they hadn’t received particular handouts when in fact they were just lost in the mess of papers in their notebook. My plan of attack to solve this problem was a period spent as a class organizing our notebooks.

Prior to organizing the notebooks I discussed with my students the idea of adding a resource section to their notebooks for easier access to important information. Ideas for these resources included content related materials such as an irregular verb list and clear map of the United States. Other ideas related to school information such as a calendar labeled with Annandale events and any schedule changes. I was quite surprised by the level of my students’ enthusiasm for this project. When I asked their opinions about what resources they would like to see included, I heard such responses as, “Oh, yeah, a political map of the world.” And, “Cool, a list of all the Presidents.”

To begin, I gave students a list of the papers they should have in their notebook listed in the order they should go into the notebook. I also provided samples and extra copies of the handouts. After each student had organized his or her notebook, both the students and myself could be sure we all had the same papers. I encouraged my students to write the date at the top of each paper and to keep them in chronological order to facilitate finding them later. I kept a sample notebook filled with extra copies of handouts (I dated them as well) to make sure I remembered what I passed out and when.

The students seemed to appreciate this activity. When asked if they felt it was worthwhile to spend class time organizing their notebooks 26 out of the 32 students who completed the follow up survey answered “yes”.

- “Yes, it’s better to find what I need.”
- “It was a good thing to do because I found some papers I thought I lost.”
- “…yes, because if the teacher says get out that paper I get it out fast so I don’t waste time.”
- “Yes, because we could get organized more quickly and for can be sure that you have everything so far.”
- “I think it was useful because I organized my notebook for the first time.”

As far as the resource section of the notebook, students seemed to respond positively to this as well. When I asked which resources they felt were the most useful, students responded:
• “I use the verb list and the transition words.”

• “The map and the verb list”

• “The testing, bell and FLEX schedule”

• “Grammar I use in many classes almost all of them, and history help me in history class.”

• “I often use the grammar”

• “Yes, I always use the verb list in my other English class.”

• “My calendar every morning.”

All in all, organizing our notebooks as a class forced both me and my students to be more organized. This activity also saved a tremendous amount of time previously spent waiting for students to find papers in their notebooks. Having better access to the resources in their notebooks lessened the students’ reliance on me to provide them with answers that they could now easily find themselves. Knowing that all students had the same papers made it easier for me to point students in the right direction instead of directly giving them the answer. For instance, if a student asked me a question I knew had been answered in a paper we had done in a previous class, I could simply direct them to that particular paper in their notebook.

Next year I will be sure to teach my students how to organize their notebooks at the beginning of the year. I also plan to require students to keep an up to date table of contents that I will post in the room, and I’ll give periodic notebook checks to ensure students are keeping up with their organization.

Teaching the Obvious

The third part of my plan, clearly explaining, modeling and providing opportunities to practice using the resources I included in the notebook, came about further into the year as until this point, I didn’t realize using them was an issue.

As part of the B1 Content curriculum at Annandale, we teach our students the irregular English verbs and give periodic quizzes on groups of these verbs. The verb list is a standard one, with three columns of verbs in alphabetical order. Throughout the year I would refer students to this list to check their work or if they had difficulties remembering any of the forms. We talked about how it was okay not to always know the right answer off the top of your head as long as you knew where to find it. Despite this prompting, students continued to use the wrong form or spell it incorrectly. I couldn’t understand why students were claiming they had checked their paper when their answers were still wrong.

It wasn’t until I sat down with one of my students and asked her to show me where she found her answer that I realized she really didn’t know how to
accurately use the verb list. Luckily my classes are small enough that I was able to sit down with each student individually and model the process I went through when using the list. If my classes were larger and I was unable to give this personal attention to all of my students, I would have taught a specific lesson using power point or an overhead.

I had reminded the students to use the list, even held it up and kind of pointed to it, but I never took the time to clearly explain how it use it. As an ESOL teacher, I often find myself taking it for granted that my students know how to do and use things that seem so obvious to me. Without taking the time to explain, model and let students practice these things accurately, they were losing unnecessary points and never truly understanding what they were doing.

**Tips from Other Teachers**

This action research project has not only forced me to look critically at my actions and those of my students, but it has given me the opportunity to discuss problems and exchange ideas with my fellow teachers.

As I was told time and time again in my teacher education classes, “It’s not necessary to reinvent the wheel.” I feel extremely fortunate to work in a department with a talented and diverse group of teachers who are always willing to share ideas and listen to problems. Wong and Wong also encourage both new and experienced teachers to observe and learn new strategies used by “effective” teachers.

The teachers I spoke with shared some of their strategies for reducing problems such as the ones I was experiencing in my classroom.

- Use cues such as, “this is very important,” before explaining a set of directions.
- Make the directions as simple and clear as possible and speak slowly when delivering them.
- Have a student repeat directions if they or another student weren’t listening.
- Use a weekly syllabus. It helps both the teacher and students stay on track and it “eliminates arguments like, “You didn’t SAY we had to turn it in today! Or “I didn’t know we were having a quiz today!”
- For beginning ESOL students a chart with stars was a good visual way to make sure students were prepared when the bell rang. Each day, those students who were in their seat with their notebook, pencil and other materials out on their desk when the bell rang would receive a star next to his or her name on the chart. The teacher found the students really loved this procedure and that it motivated them to follow the routine.
• Teach a lesson on using a binder and how to organize it. Do a clean up and notebook check each quarter.

• Give each student three chips. If they talk without raising their hand, they lose a chip. If students have no chips at the end of class they receive detention.

• Have the students complete a self-evaluation of their behavior each day. Students should rank themselves as to whether or not they came to class prepared and followed the appropriate procedures.

Final Reflections

“The man who removes a mountain begins by carrying away small stones.”

- Chinese Proverb

Fairfax County’s High School ESOL Program Alignment with the High School English Program of Studies states that, “The mission of the ESOL program is to help them [ESOL students] acquire knowledge and skills for their personal, academic, and professional lives.” I have taken this to mean that it is my responsibility not only to assist my students in improving their English reading, writing, speaking and listening skills but also to ensure that they are armed with the skills and strategies such as organization that will enable them to work independently and function in an academic setting outside of ESOL. I hope that by establishing procedures, teaching organizational skills and exposing students to new resources I can help my ESOL students meet these goals.

Although I continue to encounter problems similar to the ones discussed in this paper and still struggle to stay organized and consistent, I realize that I cannot expect either my students or myself to change in a matter of months. It will be an ongoing process. Through continued research and collaboration with other teachers I will continue to try out new strategies in my classroom. I will rejoice in the strategies that work and reflect on and learn from those that don’t.

References