

Teaching Students Responsibility in the English classroom

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Don't we always listen to our students?? Not really. We are so busy trying to complete all the required material that we forget that we are first and foremost teaching children. My teaching experience has taught me that actually listening to my students improves classroom management. To do so, I realized that I needed to teach them how to assess themselves by use of feedback, reflection and setting goals and to teach them how to work jointly in our venture of learning.

Traditionally learning in school is controlled by teachers. Although we claim we want our students to be responsible citizens participating in a democratic society and in control of their lives, but we don't teach them how to do this. By working with our students and teaching them how and why they need to be part of the learning process by taking some responsibility for their learning we can achieve such a goal. Research shows that students who are pro-active and learn to direct their own learning are more successful in life later on. This is why we teachers need to learn to be less controlling and teach our students to become responsible for their learning.

Providing our students with many opportunities to exercise control of their learning will eventually aid them in becoming adults who can make wise decisions, solve problems and be responsible thinking citizens.

When I look back I shudder at some of the mistakes I made as a young teacher. My mistakes were not so much in not knowing the material, but in the way I worked with, or "against", the kids. Eventually, as I grew older and more experienced, I realized that I had to change if I wanted to stay sane and stay a teacher. I discovered that everything starts and ends with our attitude. There is so much I **can't** change. I can change neither my pupils' parents nor their home life, but I can change how **I** relate to them. I can let them know what I expect and I can build a positive atmosphere in the classroom. Moreover, and most importantly, I can let them know that I believe in them.

I have worked very hard on my attitude. I taught myself how to take deep breaths in class and not respond by yelling. As I began to observe and listen to my students more, I discovered many things. First, I found out that all of them wanted to learn even if their behaviour didn't always say this. Second, I discovered that all my pupils wanted to be

praised and really wanted to succeed. Third, I learned to slow down and spend time working with them. Last, I learned to smile the minute I walked in the door!!

These are simple things which have made me a teacher who, for the most part, is calm even when things don't go right and who is glad to arrive at my school in the morning.

So the first step all teachers need to take is to stop and think about their attitude. We need to believe in ALL of our students and let them know this. Letting our students know that we expect them to learn and that we believe they can is very important. Never assume they know. Tell them!! We need to let them know that we expect them to work but also that they have to let us know what they expect of both us and themselves. Often when I ask my students why they are not happy with their grades, they say they are disappointed in themselves. They explain that they didn't work hard enough, or didn't do their homework. We discuss what can help them but, most importantly, they know that they need to be active and proactive in the learning process.

The beginning of the school year is always a good time to discuss with the class what you expect and what your goals are. Specific goals are very important. "I want you all to improve in English" is too abstract. Give goals like: "I will try to teach you all to be able to speak in English in front of the class, or at least in front of me or a small group, for a few minutes." Or "I plan to teach you to know how to write better by teaching you to write a topic sentence with supporting sentences." Then teach them how to set their own goals. Work with them on setting **performance goals** ("I want to improve my vocabulary by learning 20 new words in a month") not outcome goals ("I want a hundred on my report card").

Have them write down their goals step by step including exactly what they need to do to reach these goals. For example, if their goal is to improve their vocabulary they will have to decide what they will do. This may be practicing certain words every evening or working with a friend twice a week. Teach them to set goals which are important to them, NOT necessarily to **you**. Ownership of the goals will help them try harder. Teach them to set positive do-able goals. A goal can be as simple as to remember to bring a dictionary to class every time it's needed, or to succeed in reading an entire book in English and doing a book task.

By teaching our pupils how to set goals we give the students skills that they need for life.

"A growing body of research indicates that when students are working on goals they themselves have set, they are more motivated and efficient, and they achieve more than

they do when working on goals that have been set by the teacher." (Hom and Murphy, 1983)

By setting a goal we give our students a purpose. We in turn need to be role models. I set my short term goals, which lead to the achievement of long term goals, for each class and tell them what they are. Every lesson I write a short agenda for the lesson on the board.

This could look like:

- Read part one of story , *Summer's Reading*
- Teach literary terms : conflict, foreshadowing , theme etc.
- Group discussion
- Homework: _____

This shows the students what my goal for the lesson is. The students see that the lesson has been planned and that I am serious, prepared and responsible. I tick off what has been done during the lesson and I try to leave the last 5 minutes for a bit of class or individual reflection. Class reflection might be a simple show of hands to the question: "Who enjoyed this story?" or it could be an individual request to write down in their notebooks two things they liked or learned in this lesson. If they write in their reflection notebooks, I read them a few times a month and sometimes comment. I comment not judge and give positive feedback. If a kid didn't like the lesson, I may ask him to explain why. Later I tell the class what I found out from their feedback. This is extremely important as it shows the students you relate to what they say and listen to them. You might make changes in your teaching, or not, depending on what most of the kids said. It is imperative to express your feelings and thoughts about their feedback to them. Always explain your reasons for your feelings. This facilitates understanding, making it easier to accept ideas. Teachers don't have to agree with everything the kids say but when kids know you have heard them it helps build a relationship of trust and improves the atmosphere.

Many teachers claim that this is fine for the better more advanced students but not for the weaker ones. I disagree. All kids want their teachers to expect them to learn. They may moan and groan, misbehave and yell but in the end, the teacher who assists them in accomplishing their goal is the one they value. Talking about goals and using feedback with weaker students can be done in their mother tongue, Hebrew or Arabic.

Other teachers claim is that this approach takes up precious teaching time. I disagree. Building a positive classroom atmosphere and teaching the kids to take some responsibility for their learning is time well spent. Once the kids realize that you really do listen and you really want them to succeed they will begin to try. This will take time. It is a

process and it isn't easy. You may not reach 100% of your students but you will reach many more. Your most difficult, most troubled students can be the students who benefit the most from your positive attention.

Regarding the most troubled and challenging pupils. "CATCH them when they are good" and give them positive feedback! We are constantly dealing with bad behaviour. We accept good behaviour without comment. Even the most troublesome, noisy, problematic kid will have a good moment. SEE it, and say something. By reinforcing good behaviour, we make it happen more often.

By teaching our pupils that their thoughts control their actions and thus they are able to positively affect their own academic performance, we prepare them for life. We point them toward success when they know that they can make a difference. Recently a very challenging pupil of mine who was unable to sit still for more than 15 minutes completed module D. I worked with him on setting goals. He decided his goal was to complete module C and D. I worked with him to help him map out what he needed to do to achieve this goal. One day in class and shouted after getting back his module D with a grade of 87 he stood up and shouted, "If I want to , I can do it !!" He was so proud of himself for achieving his goal and so was I. He had learned that in order to accomplish something, he had to do something about it. And this has made all the difference.

When a child is given positive reinforcement, taught to be responsible for his behaviour and learning and is given skills for life, s/he becomes a happy, successful person. And what is success?? One might ask ?? Well in my opinion we need to teach the pupils that success is in the eye of the beholder and basically success is achieving the goals you set for yourself, whatever they may be.

In conclusion, work with your students. Not only to better manage your class and make your life easier but also to empower your students. In the long run everyone wins. Your students will not only become better, more responsible people but they will also advance and progress in English. All of them, from the weakest to the more advanced, want to know English. In that we are lucky. So don't give up. Take time to reflect on your teaching style and how you work with your students. Use feedback in different ways, work on setting goals **with** the kids and remember to try to have a positive attitude even when the going gets rough. A smile will take you much farther than a shout!!

Examples of feedback pages and methods of using feedback and goals can be found on the REED site under in-service training sessions creative classroom management,

Aviva's handouts.

<http://www.mchp.gov.il/Site/Supervision/REED/Inservice+training+sessions/Avivas+Handouts.htm>

Keep in mind that these are samples and should always be adapted to suit your needs and your students. Good luck!

References

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