# CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Teacher roles, interactions, the task cycle and the board

## Introduction

Classroom management is a broad area of teaching that is difficult to define, as it includes **everything that goes on in the classroom**. It covers the physical and affective dimensions of the class, and the strategies and procedures teachers use to create a positive environment in which learning can take place as intended.

This handout gives an overview of four areas: teacher roles and styles, interactions in the classroom, the task cycle, and the board. Most of the ideas apply equally to face-to-face, online and hybrid classes. Where online classes need a different approach, you'll find it in an **Online classes** box.

## Teacher roles and styles

Ideas about teacher roles are shaped by the culture of teaching and learning in which instruction takes place, and the importance given to each role can vary considerably. In some contexts, teachers are valued mainly for their ability to impart knowledge. In others, they are respected above all for helping learners realise their potential.

Whatever the context, a language teacher takes on many roles. These are some of the most common.

| Role | What the teacher does |
|---|---|
| **Instructor** | provides information about language and clarifies difficult aspects |
| **Facilitator** | sets up tasks and manages individual and group interactions and contributions |
| **Model** | provides language models and demonstrates how to do things |
| **Appraiser** | gives feedback on performance and achievements |
| **Supporter** | monitors learners' challenges and is available as a resource |
| **Coach** | motivates learners and encourages self-confidence and independence |
| **Human being** | is sensitive to learners' needs and wants, and listens to what they have to say |
| **Learner** | learns more about teaching through the experience of teaching |

Developing professional expertise involves learning to play and balance these roles according to the context of the classroom.

The affective dimension of the classroom is often influenced by the teacher's **style**, which usually reflects personality and social expectations. Teaching styles can be seen as points along a continuum between these characteristics.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Shy** | ↔ | **Gregarious** |
| **Formal** | ↔ | **Informal** |
| **Reserved** | ↔ | **Open, transparent** |
| **Understated** | ↔ | **Dramatic** |
| **Rational** | ↔ | **Emotional** |
| **Steady** | ↔ | **Moody** |
| **Serious** | ↔ | **Humorous** |
| **Restrictive** | ↔ | **Permissive** |

*Source: Brown (2001: 201)*

Effective teachers have been observed with all of these traits. Some are more reserved and serious; others are more extroverted and humorous. What matters is being genuine and comfortable with yourself, and understanding the expectations of your learners and the wider educational context. This can shape how professional and effective you are perceived to be.

Effectiveness also requires **fairness**. Teachers who apply their expectations consistently and treat all learners equally are more likely to avoid conflict and keep learners' trust.

**TEACHING TIP**

Style is easier to adapt than to change. To become more aware of your own, record yourself teaching or ask a colleague to observe you and describe how you come across. Then consider whether your style supports the atmosphere you want in the room.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Teachers take on many roles, and expertise involves balancing them according to the context.
- Cultural expectations influence which roles are valued most.
- Effective teachers have a wide range of styles. Being genuine matters more than fitting a particular model.
- Consistency and fairness help prevent conflict and build trust.

# Interactions

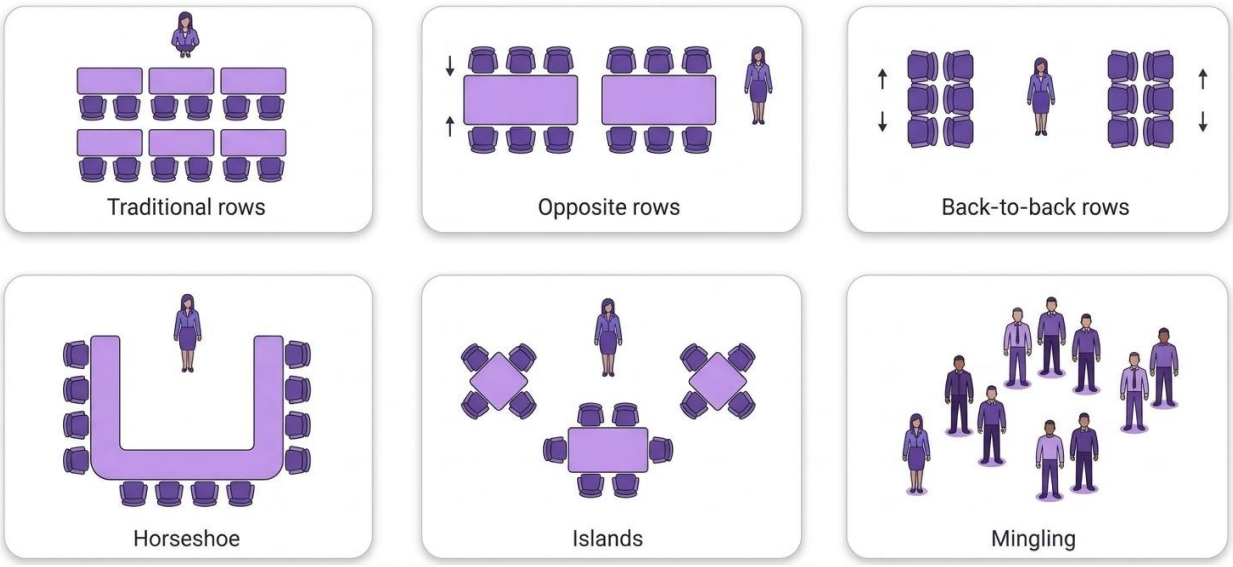
Communicative language teaching and more learner-centred approaches led to a rethink of the traditional teacher-led class, with the teacher at the front and learners seated in rows.

Autonomy, collaboration and cooperation became key principles of **learner-centredness**, and classroom interactions and layouts changed to promote more **pair and group work**.

## Layout

In classrooms where furniture can be moved, the layout can change according to the activity and the pattern of interaction it needs. This can make a real difference to the success of an activity. Ask yourself:

- Can the learners see and hear the teacher?
- Can the learners see the board?
- Can the learners see and hear each other?
- Is it easy for the teacher to move around?
- Is it easy for the learners to move around?




In classrooms with fixed seating, ask the learners to move instead of the furniture. In a traditional rows arrangement, for example, learners can work with someone next to or behind them, move and sit with someone different, or stand in any open space (e.g. the aisles, or the front or back of the room).

**ONLINE CLASSES**

The equivalent of changing the layout is changing the virtual space. The class is either together in the **main room** with the teacher or divided into **breakout rooms**, usually in pairs or small groups. Moving between the two is the online version of moving between whole-class work and pair or group work, so plan it with the same care. In a breakout room, learners can't see the teacher or the board, so make the instructions, materials and outcome of the task clear before they leave the main room.

**TEACHING TIP**

If possible, arrange the seating so that learners can see and talk to each other. You don't always need to be at the front of the class. Encourage learners to ask questions and give explanations to each other, not only to you.

## Whole-class work (teacher → learners)

The teacher works with the class in a **teacher-fronted** way, interacting with the whole group or with individual learners. This pattern is useful whenever you need everyone's attention: to give instructions, demonstrate, introduce and model new language, elicit, clarify and check understanding, check answers, or give feedback on a task or discussion.

Whole-class work is necessary, but it needs to be **balanced** with other patterns. Used too much, it can lead to the teacher dominating the class and talking more than necessary. It can also make learners anxious, as they have to speak in front of everyone or work at a pace that doesn't suit them.

> **ONLINE CLASSES**
> These effects can be stronger online: only one person can speak at a time, and some learners feel more exposed when everyone's attention is on a single screen.

## Pair and group work (learners → learners)

Learners work in pairs or small groups. This pattern **maximises** opportunities for interaction, collaboration and autonomy, and reflects the social nature of language use. It suits brainstorming, interviews, dialogues, discussions, simulations, role-plays, games, problem-solving, information gaps and any activity that involves exchanging facts or opinions. It also works for activities usually done alone: learners can work together on grammar or vocabulary exercises, gap-fills, multiple-choice tasks and anything else that benefits from peer support.

Pair or group work is also a **regular feature after a task or exercise**. Letting learners compare answers before whole-class feedback lets them help each other, gives them more thinking time and involves less risk than speaking in front of the class. It also lets you **monitor** and collect information on how well learners did, what they got wrong and what they were unsure about, which you can then address in feedback.

Pairs suit short activities and more controlled language, perhaps in preparation for group work. They are also easier to set up, as learners can simply work with someone next to or behind them.

Despite the **benefits**, pair and group work can present **challenges**, and these vary from context to context. Some learners value the teacher's input more than their peers'. Others prefer to work alone and feel that a partner slows them down or puts them under pressure. Some learners dominate and leave little space for quieter ones. To address these challenges:

- explain the benefits of pair and group work to learners
- monitor closely and respond to changing dynamics between learners
- pair or group learners strategically, considering level, personality, culture, etc.
- vary pairings, groupings and seating, so no one is stuck with the same partner for a whole lesson

> **ONLINE CLASSES**
> Pairs and groups are formed in breakout rooms, which can be assigned by the teacher, created randomly or, on some platforms, chosen by learners. You can't walk around the room, so monitor by moving between breakout rooms, asking learners to work in a shared document you can view, or setting a clear task and outcome and checking in when learners return to the main room.

> **TEACHING TIP**
> Use pairs and small groups to maximise speaking time, even in the middle of a longer whole-class stage, for example after every task and before feedback.

## Individual work (learner)

Learners work on their own. This is useful when learners need **private space**, for example to read or listen, complete an exercise or write a text. It lets learners work at their own pace and level, and lets you monitor individual performance and give more personalised feedback and support.

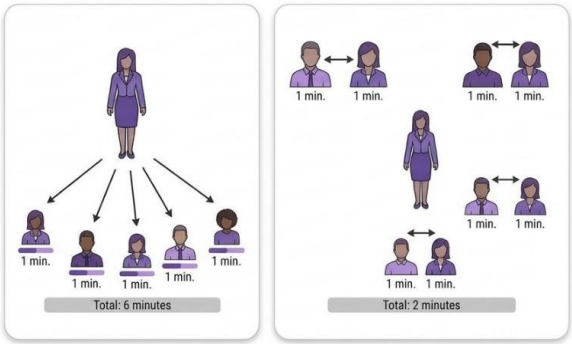
## Maximising learner talking time

As with many other aspects of a lesson, variety is key. When planning, consider which patterns of interaction suit each activity, and look for ways to maximise learner interaction and talking time. Often, simply letting learners work in pairs or small groups is enough.

Imagine a class of six learners. In **whole-class (teacher–learner) mode**, if each learner talks for one minute, it takes six minutes for everyone to speak. Each learner speaks for one minute and waits for five. These numbers grow with the size of the class.

In **pair work**, it takes only two minutes for every learner to speak for one minute, because pairs work at the same time. Each learner waits for just one minute while their partner speaks, whether the class has 6 or 60 learners.

The same applies online: breakout rooms let many learners speak at once, while the main room allows only one.




**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The layout, physical or virtual, should support the pattern of interaction an activity needs.
- Whole-class work is necessary for instructions, modelling and feedback, but should be balanced with other patterns.
- Pair and group work maximise interaction, talking time and peer support, but may need to be explained, monitored and varied.
- Individual work gives learners private space and gives you a chance to monitor and support.
- Online, the choice is between the main room and breakout rooms, so plan the moves between them.

# The task cycle

Most activities in a lesson, whether a quick discussion, a written exercise or a role-play, involve three steps: **instructions and task set-up**, **task execution and monitoring**, and **feedback**.

## Instructions and task set-up

The first step is to tell learners what to do and how to do it. Teachers often follow this sequence.

| | Step | In the classroom | Online |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Grab attention** | Use your voice, clap your hands, or tap a marker on the board or desk. | Wait for silence and use a visual cue, such as a slide or a raised hand. |
| 2 | **Organise the class** | Pair or group learners (e.g. by level, age, alphabetical order or numbers). Draw the new layout on the board and ask learners to help move the furniture. | Assign breakout rooms and show the allocations on screen. |
| 3 | **Show the worksheet** | Hold it up, display it on the interactive whiteboard or put it on a slide. | Share your screen. |
| 4 | **Describe the task** | Use simple, concise, well-paced language. Use the worksheet to show an example and the board to record key information. | |
| 5 | **Demonstrate** | Do an example with the class, show the task with the help of a learner, or answer the first question together. | |
| 6 | **Check understanding** | Ask one or two learners to explain what they are going to do. | |
| 7 | **Set a time limit** | Say how long the task will take, and give time warnings. | Show a visible timer. |
| 8 | **Hand out worksheets** | Hand them out yourself, or ask learners to distribute or collect them. | Share a file or link in the chat before learners go to breakout rooms. |
| 9 | **Check everyone is on task** | Walk around and make sure everyone is doing the task correctly. Help as needed. | Visit the breakout rooms. |

**TEACHING TIP**

Plan essential instructions in advance. Include only the essential information, in short sentences (one for each key point), in a sensible order. Don't say things that are visible or obvious (e.g. I'm giving you a piece of paper), and don't give instructions learners don't need yet (e.g. what they will do after this activity).

## Teacher language

The language the teacher uses has a big influence on how well a task is set up. These are common types of problematic instructions, each with an example.

| Problem | Example |
|---|---|
| **Too advanced** | *As pictures are being drawn, team members standing in front of the wall should prepare to say the word whereas those sitting at the table should sprint to the board to record it.* |
| **Too chaotic** | *Alright, in pairs, hmm, where's my worksheet? Oh, here... can you see? Take a look at Ex. 1. Yes, it's below the, hmm, this thing here. Hold on, let me put it on the screen, better? So, match these and these. How many are there? 1, 2, 3, 4 here and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 here... hmm... I think one is extra... Got it? OK.* |
| **Too colloquial** | *You two, get together and have a chat about the stuff we read.* |
| **Too courteous** | *If you wouldn't mind, I'd be grateful if you could compare and contrast your answers please.* |
| **Too crammed** | *First, take a look at the ideas on the worksheet and write things that are true for you. Then stand up and mingle with your classmates. As you mingle, collect ideas from your classmates by asking questions. As soon as you finish, return to your seats and exchange your data with the person sitting on your right.* |
| **Too simplified** | *One and two, talking. Yes, no alone, with friend.* |
| **Too technical** | *Fill the gaps with one of the de-lexicalised verbs in the box.* |
| **Too vague** | *Individually, write a reasonable number of sentences that are true in your country then see if your partner has the same. Talk for a bit.* |

*Adapted from Thaine (2010)*

Good instructions use **simple language**, break the task into **single steps**, and wait for learners to complete each step before moving on. Whenever possible, **demonstrate** rather than explain: show how to do the activity, answer the first question with the class, or record key information on the board. This means learners don't have to ask each other what to do (a clear sign the instructions were unclear) and don't start the activity the wrong way, wasting valuable time.

**Checking understanding** comes after the demonstration and should give you concrete evidence that learners know what to do. Asking "Is that clear?" rarely does this, as learners tend to say yes whether or not they understood. Instead, ask one or two learners to say what they are going to do, or ask short **instruction-checking questions** (ICQs), e.g. *Are you working alone or in pairs? How many sentences do you write?*

> **TEACHING TIP**
>
> Separate instructions clearly from other classroom talk. Wait for silence, make eye contact with as many learners as possible, and check they are listening before you start. Speak with natural rhythm and intonation, avoid broken English, and pause after each chunk. Use gestures, pictures and silence to pace your instructions and clarify meaning. Show the handout during the demonstration and hand it out only when everyone knows what to do.

> **TEACHING TIP**
>
> Grade your language to the learners' level: with lower levels, avoid idiomatic expressions and complex grammar and vocabulary. To become more aware of how you give instructions, listen to a recording of yourself or ask a colleague to observe you and give feedback.

## Task execution and monitoring

Once learners start the activity, **start monitoring straight away** to check they are doing it as intended. Move around quietly and unobtrusively, and step in only if someone needs the instructions again.

Once learners are on task, give them some space. Constant presence can be counterproductive: learners may feel pressure from being watched (e.g. being afraid of making mistakes), become dependent on you (e.g. asking for help instead of solving a problem themselves), or be drawn to you (e.g. talking to you instead of a peer). Many teachers stop making eye contact and look busy (e.g. reading a worksheet or taking notes) to lower their profile and give learners some privacy.

This doesn't mean ignoring the learners. In fact, teachers do a lot of **hidden work** while learners are on task:

- **Observe and support.** Watch from a distance or listen in, so you can offer support if someone is struggling. Make casual eye contact and acknowledge good work (e.g. a smile or a thumbs-up) to motivate learners.
- **Collect information for feedback.** This can be about content (e.g. ideas discussed, the number of correct and wrong answers, the easiest and hardest parts of a task) or about language (e.g. correct and incorrect examples, and the range and complexity of the language used).

**Keep a record** of what you notice, so you can give effective, efficient feedback when the activity finishes.

> ONLINE CLASSES
> Monitoring means visiting breakout rooms, watching a shared document or collecting answers in the chat. The same principle applies: step in only when needed, and keep notes for feedback. Visiting a breakout room can feel more intrusive than walking past a group in a classroom, so announce visits in advance or keep them brief.

## Feedback

Feedback is information about **performance**: how someone did an activity. Useful feedback starts with useful monitoring. If you know how learners completed an activity and where they succeeded or struggled, your feedback will be relevant and respond to their needs.

Feedback can be **immediate** (during an activity) or **delayed** (after it).

| | Immediate feedback | Delayed feedback |
|---|---|---|
| **Purpose** | offers support, scaffolding and encouragement | acknowledges and validates learners' work |
| **When** | during the activity, when learners lose focus, keep getting answers wrong or reach the wrong conclusions | after every activity |
| **Examples** | *Review questions 2 and 4. / Check the order of these steps: one is wrong. / Think of two more topics, like traffic and healthcare.* | eliciting ideas after a discussion, confirming answers to an exercise, evaluating the outcome of a task |

Delayed feedback usually starts with learners comparing and reviewing their answers in pairs or small groups, supporting each other before whole-class feedback. You can then confirm answers by eliciting them and writing them on the board, asking learners to write them on the board, or showing an answer key.

Effective whole-class feedback depends on good monitoring. If you know which answers were easier or harder, you can go through them more quickly or in more depth, as needed. Helping learners with errors is also part of feedback; see the **Error Correction** handout for more.

**ONLINE CLASSES**

Share answers on a slide or in the chat, or ask learners to type them into a shared document.

**TEACHING TIP**

Always let learners compare answers in pairs or groups before whole-class feedback. It gives them thinking time, lets them support each other and reduces the risk of speaking in front of the class. It also gives you time to decide what to focus on.

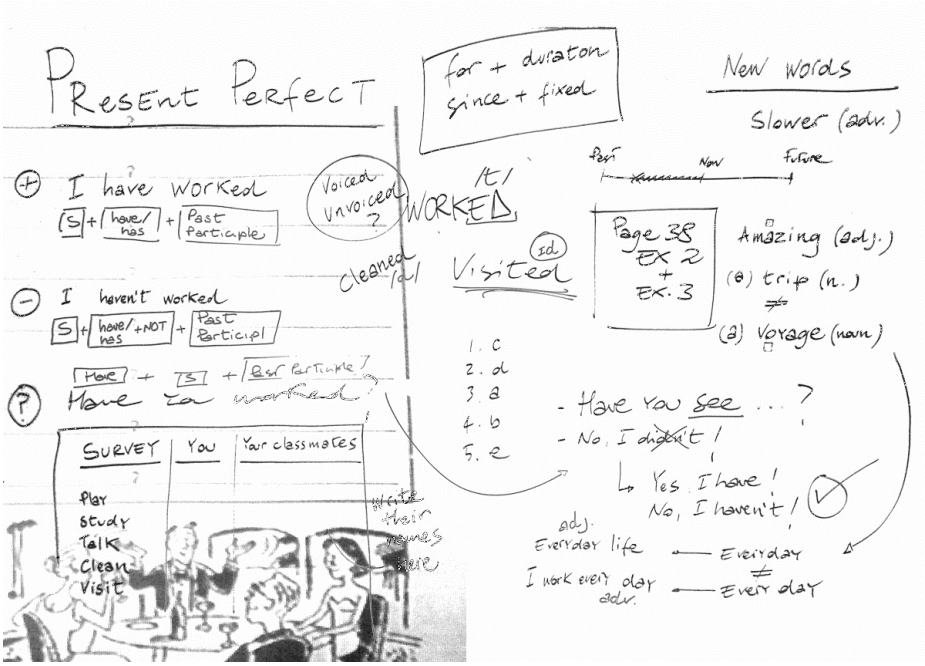
**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Most activities follow three steps: instructions and set-up, execution and monitoring, and feedback.
- Good instructions are simple, sequenced, demonstrated and checked. Asking learners to explain the task is more reliable than asking if they understood.
- Start monitoring straight away to check learners are on task, then give them space, observe and collect information.
- Immediate feedback supports learners during the activity. Delayed feedback acknowledges and validates their work afterwards.
- Feedback is only as good as the monitoring before it.

## The board

The board is found in almost every classroom and is an important teaching tool. Often, you can understand the aims and takeaways of a lesson just by looking at the board. Experienced teachers organise their boards neatly, write clearly and record information accurately.

Here is an example of a **problematic** board.



Recommendations for this teacher:

- divide the board into sections and group information by focus (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, error correction, answers)
- be consistent in the style and size of your writing, and in your use of upper and lower case
- avoid joined-up writing and capital letters (except for headings), as they are harder to read
- check spelling and provide accurate models
- be consistent in the pronunciation symbols you use and where you put them
- don't put images over writing, as neither can be seen clearly
- use different colours to make important information stand out
- keep one section of the board for things that don't need to stay and can be erased

Learners tend to copy into their notebooks what you write on the board. If the board is messy or inaccurate, their notes will be too.

**Planning** the board in advance and marking out areas for different purposes helps avoid clutter, and means you don't have to erase information that would be useful to keep. Stepping back regularly and looking at the board from a distance also helps you notice errors, inconsistencies and the overall look of your board work.

**ONLINE CLASSES**

The board may be an interactive whiteboard tool, a shared document or a slide. The same principles apply: organise the space into sections, keep text clear and consistent, and don't overload a single screen. Learners see only what is on their screens, so check that text is large enough to read on a small device. If the tool allows it, ask learners to add their own answers or ideas, so the board becomes a shared space.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The board is a record of the lesson, and learners copy what they see on it.
- Organise it into clear sections, and be consistent in style, size and symbols.
- Write clearly, check spelling and provide accurate models.
- Plan the board in advance and step back regularly to check it.
- Online, the same principles apply to digital whiteboards, shared documents and slides.

## Further reading

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