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Classroom Discipline: What Do Learners Think?

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Learners sometimes do things in the classroom that may be construed as misbehavior by the teacher. However, learners may not always agree with the teacher as to what is or is not misbehavior. Furthermore there may be a gap between learners and the teacher as to what is the appropriate measure that should be taken to curtail such behavior. This gap can and often does lead to disruption of the learning process. We agree with the idea that teachers who know what their students expect are in a better

position to take sound pedagogical decisions than those who do not (Richards, 1990). For this reason we asked our learners to tell us how they think the teacher should react to five different kinds of learner behavior in the classroom. These are a learner; coming late to class, sleeping in class, sending or receiving mail in class, doing homework for another class, and being slow to respond to questions in class by the teacher.

習得者は時により、教師に不品行だと解釈されるような行動をとります。しかし、習得者と教師がそれぞれ解釈する不品行な行動とそうでない行動はかみ合わない場合が多々あります。そして、その様な行動にどう対処すればいいのかという意見も、習得者と教師の間にはギャップがあります。このギャップは習得者の学習環境に障害をもたらす場合があります。私達は、習得者の考えを知っている教師の方が、それを知らない教師よりも適当な教授法をとる事ができると信じています。よって、私達は習得者に、五つの状況に教師がどう反応するべきか、意見をききました。この五つの状況とは、授業への遅刻、授業中の居眠り、メール交換、他の科目の宿題をする行為、そして質問への返答が遅い場合です。

Introduction

Teachers have found that they are often at a loss as to how to react to certain learner behavior they feel is disturbing and or disrupting to classroom procedures. If a learner is sleeping in class, for example, the teacher may feel not only is that learner missing out on that day's activities, but also sending a negative signal about the class to the teacher and the other learners. The teacher may even feel that the learner is saying by her actions something to the effect that the class is boring or that the teacher

is a bore. But is this really what the learner is saying or thinking or could it be that she is simply in dire need of sleep because of circumstances unknown to the teacher?

Many teachers teaching English in Japan are native speakers of English originally from countries other than Japan. Even if teachers have taught in Japan for many years, they may still not be sure what their learners construe as misbehavior. Is sleeping in class really a form of deviant behavior? If so, how should it be dealt with? Should the teacher yell at the learner, gently give her a nudge, give her a firm shake, or ignore her? Increasingly, these issues may also arise for Japanese teachers, as changes within Japanese society mean that they find themselves dealing with young learners whose expectations, values and behavior are at odds with what they, the teachers, have considered normal.

Believing both that an informed teacher is a good teacher and that the people who know our learners best are the learners themselves, we decided to ask the learners directly about their expectations for classroom behavior and discipline.

Procedure

We asked 51 first and second year learners at an elite women's university in west Japan to answer five questions. The questions were:

1. How should the teacher react when a student comes to class after the chime has rung?
2. How should the teacher react when a student sleeps in class?
3. How should the teacher react when during class a student does homework for another class?

4. How should the teacher react when a student is sending or receiving mail in class?
5. How should the teacher react when a student is slow to answer a question?

Clearly question five is different in nature from the first four, but we feel it is a situation which is problematic for many teachers. Since we felt there is a qualitative difference between single and repeated occurrences of the behavior described in the questions, we asked the learners to respond twice to each question: first if the behavior happened "once" and then if it happened "repeatedly." No attempt was made to further define these terms.

We explained that the purpose of the questions was to "help us have more enjoyable classes" and asked students to work in pairs or groups of three to write answers to the questions in English. We asked them to consider their responses carefully, taking as much time as they needed and using a dictionary if necessary. In total there were 20 pairs or groups that supplied us with our data. Some groups took longer (up to 35 minutes) and prepared detailed responses while other groups did not take as long (10 minutes) and consequently had shorter ones. The learners seemed to enjoy answering the questions and in some cases long, earnest discussions took place before the questions were answered.

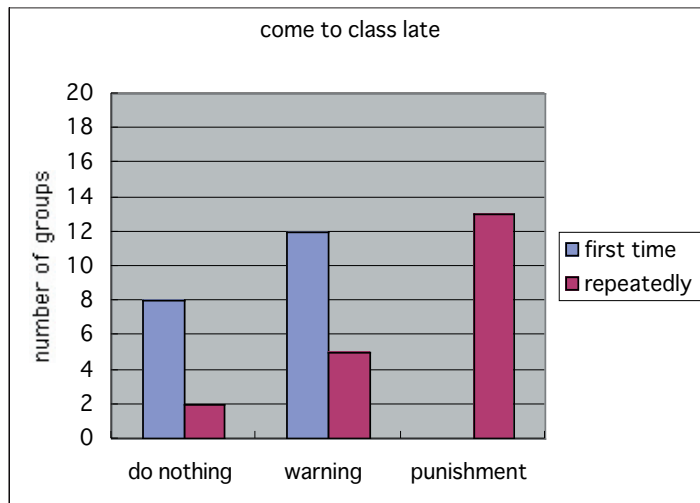
Responses

To help us distinguish patterns in the responses, we first divided them into three categories and represented the frequency of each category of response in a graph. For the first four questions, the responses fell into three broad categories: "do nothing",

“warning” and “punishment”. Categories for question 5 will be described later. For each question, we present the graph, example responses and a brief discussion of our reactions, as teachers, to the data.

Q1. How should the teacher react when a student comes to class after the chime has rung?

Figure 1. Categorized responses to Q1



The “do nothing” category” includes the three groups of respondents who said that the teacher should ask why the student was late. None of the groups recommending a warning specified whether it should be given publicly or privately. The suggested punishments included: reducing the learner’s grade, giving her a failing grade, refusing to let her into the classroom, marking her

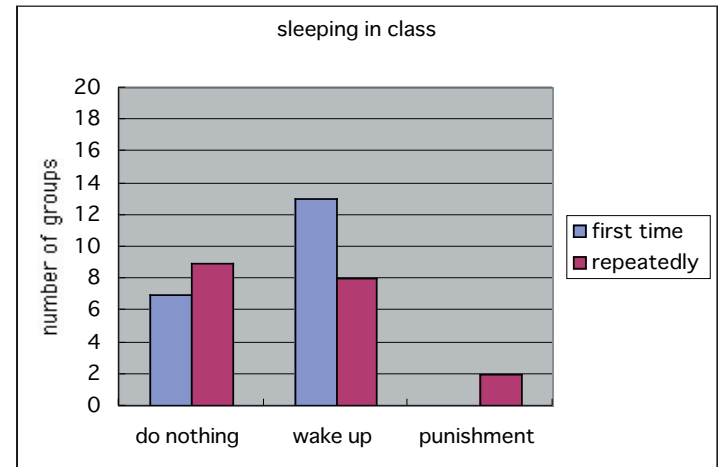
absent for that day, marking her absent once for every three tardies, and making her say several sentences in English in front of the class.

We know of colleagues who use all of the above sanctions except the last one. As English teachers, it would not have occurred to us to use English as a punishment. We had expected that more groups would suggest asking why the student was late, as this is what we usually do ourselves, although we are aware that if we ask publicly, this inquiry itself seems to constitute a punishment in many students’ eyes.

Not surprisingly, the graph shows the learners were less likely to suggest doing nothing and more likely to suggest a punishment for a repeated, rather than a single, offense.

Q2. How should the teacher react when a student sleeps in class?

Figure 2. Categorized responses to Q2



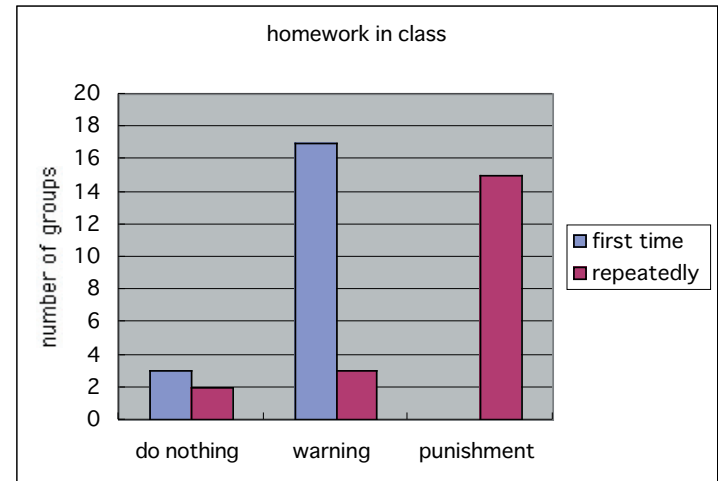
Here the “warning” category is replaced by “wake up” as 1) one cannot warn a sleeping student and 2) the act of waking her seems to us to be a warning. The two suggested punishments were for the teacher to count three occasions of sleeping as one absence or to conduct a “localized raid.”

What is most striking about this graph is that more groups said the teacher should do nothing for a repeated offence than for a one-off occurrence. This may seem counter-intuitive, but we suspect that the learners are aware, as we are, that repeatedly sleeping in class can be indicative of deeper problems in a student’s life than a single cat-nap.

On reflection, it is even more surprising to us that not one of the groups wrote anything which suggested the problem may lie with the teacher. “Boring lessons” and “monotonous delivery” were not mentioned at all. Neither was an over-charged university schedule. As teachers, though, we often see a sleeping student as a reflection on ourselves—whether we take it as a signal that we need to vary lesson content and structure, or as a virtual attack on our personalities and teaching style. It is, of course, possible that learners also see it this way but did not feel comfortable saying so to their English teacher.

Q3. How should the teacher react when during class a student does homework for another class?

Figure 3. Categorized responses to Q3

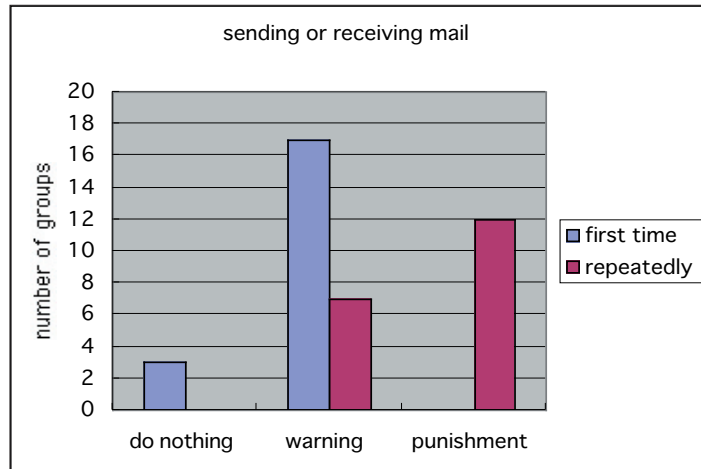


Suggested punishments here included confiscating the homework until the end of the lesson, sending the student out of the room, reducing her grade and sending her out of the room.

Clearly the learners consider this to be a serious offence. Few of them are content to have the teacher do nothing, even for a one-off occurrence. Whilst we also dislike to see this happening in one of our lessons, it is no more irksome to us than a sleeping student, so we wonder why the respondents have such a strong reaction to it. Though they consider it to be serious, there seems to be little understanding for a teacher who would punish a first offense.

Q4. How should the teacher react when a student is sending or receiving mail in class?

Figure 4. Categorized responses to Q4



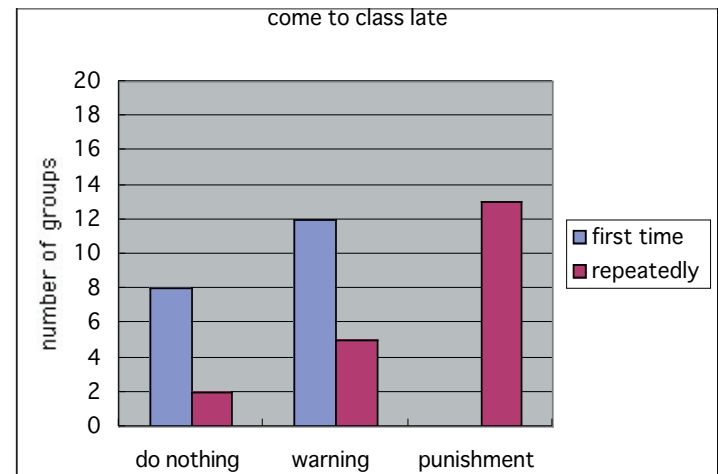
The “warning” category here includes switching off the telephone or having the student switch it off, since this seems to us to be more of a prevention of future occurrences than a punishment. Suggested punishments were confiscating the telephone for the duration of the lesson and reducing the student’s grade.

This kind of behavior is an increasing problem in some of the classes we teach, and we are pleased to see that the learners view it as seriously as we do. The repeated suggestion that reducing a learner’s grade would be a suitable punishment for a variety of infractions is intriguing. It suggests that learners at this elite university are mainly focused on, and perhaps motivated by,

the grade they will receive at the end of the semester. Also they appear to accept as fair that their grade should be based not only on their performance on tests and assignments but also on their general conduct in class.

Q5. How should the teacher react when a student is slow to answer a question?

Figure 5. Categorized responses to Q5



It is by no means certain that learners consider this to be a breach of discipline. Reinelt’s (1987) research suggests that waiting times between a teacher’s question and a learner’s first response are, on average, longer in Japanese classrooms than they are in Western classrooms for which he had data. Learners often take time to consult with classmates before answering

a directly-addressed question from the teacher. Nevertheless, this is a situation which often occurs in our classrooms and we wanted to know what our learners think we should do about it.

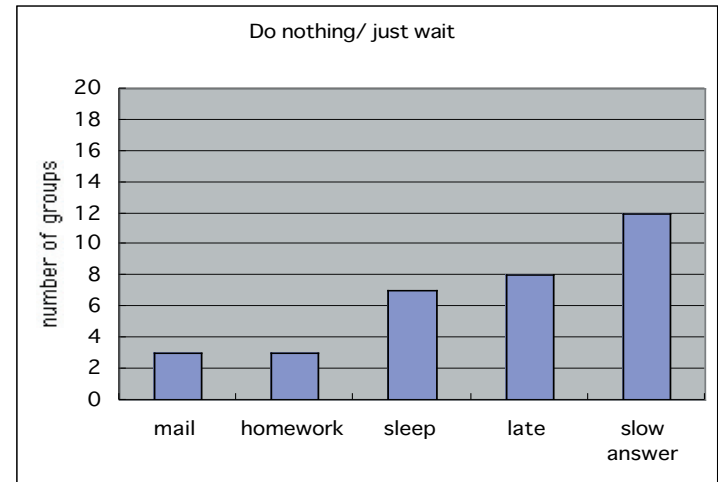
The classifications we have used for other graphs are not relevant here, but the data can be meaningfully arranged into the three categories shown in Figure 5. None of them constitutes a punishment. This is best seen as “what to do” advice to the teacher. The situation is something of a classic dilemma for a teacher: “I just asked a question. The student I asked is not responding/is showing signs of panic. Do I try to help the learner, or do I move on to another learner for the sake of the pacing of the lesson?” Here the respondents are clearly in favor of staying with the original learner.

We were interested to see that none of the respondents suggested that the teacher rephrase the question, or even repeat it. This seems to be further evidence of their reluctance to place responsibility for the situation on the teacher, although we are often inclined to blame ourselves for making a poor teaching judgment about the way we asked the original question. Neither do they suggest any punishment, although there have been times when we have both thought that a learner’s silence indicated lack of cooperation with the teaching/learning endeavor and merited some kind of sanction.

Relative seriousness of the situations

In Figure 6, we have attempted to measure the relative seriousness of the situations in the learners’ eyes, by graphing the number of groups who suggested doing nothing in each case. The shorter the column in Figure 6, the more serious the respondents considered the situation to be.

Figure 6. Number of groups answering “Do nothing” or “Wait” to each question



Sending mail or doing homework in class were considered most serious, being slow to answer a question least.

We were surprised here by the lack of importance given to coming to class late. In our experience, students arriving in class late can be the most disruptive of these situations, both in terms of their own learning and of the distraction to others. Once again, our learners have shown us that their expectations and priorities are slightly different from ours.

Conclusions

The data we gathered from our learners is of greatest interest and utility to ourselves. These are our learners talking about their preferences. Since conducting the survey, we have found ourselves reacting with more confidence to situations involving the behavior of students in class.

However, it is really not possible to generalize about their responses and assume that they apply to other teaching situations. So, why are we sharing them with a larger audience? What we really wanted to share is the understanding that there can be important differences in learners' and teachers' perceptions of different classroom situations. We encourage other teachers to explore these differences with their own students.

Teaching involves taking hundreds of decisions per lesson, in real time. Decisions involving classroom discipline can be the most problematic, especially when the learners' background and expectations differ from those of the teacher. We are not suggesting that teachers should always react as their learners' expect. We are suggesting that collecting information about their expectations can help teachers make better, more informed decisions and, ultimately, to be more effective teachers.

References

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