Rose Senior has been researching the classroom behaviour of successful language teachers. In this column she explains to ET*p* readers why certain teaching techniques and class management strategies are effective, and identifies specific issues that can assist all language teachers in improving the quality of their teaching.

Authentic communication in the language classroom

Nowadays most of us give our students plenty of opportunities to practise speaking in class in order to improve their oral proficiency. We prioritise the development of speaking skills because we accept that being able to interact with others through the medium of English is of crucial importance in today's world.

Unfortunately, students aren't always as willing as they might be to practise their speaking skills in class. Language classrooms are by nature artificial places. They aren't the real world, where people communicate for genuine, real-life reasons. In language classrooms communication is generally contrived, such as information-gap activities, where each student is only given part of the information necessary to complete a task. Some students feel embarrassed at having to 'perform' in the target language in front of their peers or to pretend to be different people in roleplay activities. Most are prepared to suspend reality and to participate in the interactive tasks that we set up because they recognise that speaking the target language in contrived situations in class is the next best thing to practising it in real-life.

However, there are times during lessons when communication suddenly becomes much more real. Students find themselves driven by a strong desire to communicate something of personal significance to another person or to the class. This may be something as simple as the name of their pet or something as complex as the fact that people in their country have a different attitude to whaling to that of other members of the class. Regardless of their level of proficiency, students are able to use English creatively to make unique statements that reflect their urgent need to

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communicate. In these circumstances the information gap is real since nobody knows what an individual will say.

Authentic communication most commonly occurs when students share personal information, anecdotes, feelings, opinions, cultural information and so on. Whenever students communicate authentically, it's important that we as teachers react appropriately. We need to show our students that we're genuinely interested in what they're saying, not simply getting them to say things so that we can check the accuracy of their grammar. We need to demonstrate that we value the contribution that every student makes. Sometimes it takes a lot of courage for a shy student to speak up. Once they've done so, their self-esteem can increase enormously, provided they've received a positive response. We also need to ensure that we're fair and inclusive. If we have mixed nationalities in our classes and want to know something about the students' home countries, we must ensure that we ask about the countries of *all* the students in the class.

We also need to respect our students' rights not to reveal aspects of themselves if they don't want to. If we breeze into class and ask students to share embarrassing moments in their lives, some are likely to clam up. We can't force our students to communicate authentically: it must happen in a natural and organic way. Often, if the atmosphere is amenable and other students have set an example, more withdrawn students gradually find themselves wanting to contribute.

When students say things that are of general interest, the whole atmosphere of the class somehow 'lifts'. The body language of both speakers and listeners

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changes in subtle ways – the speakers becoming more intense and eager, and the listeners more alert and attentive, perhaps even leaning forward to hear what the speaker is saying. If in response to a question about what they did at the weekend a student says something unexpected, such as 'I crashed my car' instead of the usual 'I watched TV', the collective ears of the class immediately prick up: here's something worth listening to!

Some teachers believe that it's important to control all communication that occurs in language classrooms, because when left to their own devices, students will make significant numbers of linguistic errors. To a certain extent they're right. It's very difficult for students to focus on both content and form at the same time. Often, when authentic communication is taking place, students struggle to find the words to express what they want to say. They often use creative, non-standard ways of conveying meaning: gestures, imitation, paraphrasing, circumlocution, analogies and so on. In these circumstances, accuracy tends to fly out of the window. But this doesn't matter: we can focus on accuracy at other points in our lessons.

In sum, we all like to talk about ourselves, to express our feelings and to share what we know with others. Students in language classes are no different, even though what they can say in the target language will naturally be restricted. We mustn't forget that the purpose of language is to communicate things that are real and meaningful, and that the more regularly we allow authentic communication to take place in our classes, the more motivated our students will become. **ETp**

Dr Rose