

Managing classroom noise level with common sense

I remember waking up before school and telling my mother I didn't want to go.

"Give me two reasons why you don't want to go?" she asked.

"Well, the kids all hate me and the teachers hate me, too," I replied.

"Oh that's not a good reason not to go to school. Now, get up and get going!"

I resisted and begged with my mother, "Give me two good reasons why I should go to school today?"

She didn't miss a beat and said, "Well, you're 25 years old and you're getting paid to teach!"

I started teaching in a school in the Philippines last month and was very excited about it. The job in Asia was offered to me suddenly, only days before the start of school. I do have teaching experiences during an internship, but this would be my first experience with teaching as a profession. I've never had to think about managing classroom noise level, but I figured it would be easy during my first day as a teacher. I was wrong.

My first day on the job didn't start well. I was sick. Nonetheless, a teacher should always be ready – just like a boy scout. I sniffled my way into the classroom after downing ample amounts of cold medicine, [the same cold medicine parents use to get their kids to sleep](#).

The first hours I felt like my head was in a fishbowl. The kids seemed to realize immediately that there was something different about their teacher. I was not managing classroom noise level because I could hardly hear it.

"Do you have a cold?" one of them screamed. I responded that my cold didn't inhibit my ability to hear them in the classroom.

"Why is everyone screaming all the time?" I asked again, quieting the class after my ears popped and everyone seemed to be in chaos.

I must admit that I found the level of noise surprising. Of course it's all made worse because of the communication gap – they cannot understand me when I speak only in English, so I translate despite the fact they sometimes don't understand me. I'm not fluent in [Akan](#) – many students' mother tongue – so it's all quite complicated at times. But my training has taught me to focus on activities instead of speaking too much. I'm a fan of experiential learning because it allows students to explore and learn on their own as I facilitate fun and exciting activities. The problem is that with group activities, kids can really get noisy. That's where managing classroom noise level became an obsession for me, and I developed a list of rules that helped almost immediately.

Five tips for managing classroom noise level:

1. **Pull the troubled ones to the side BEFORE class begins** - A simple solution to avoiding problems with the same kids is to engage them directly before class starts. This only requires a "How is your day going?" or "I sure am glad to have you learning in my class today." Avoid any negativity and show them that you expect the best from the day.
2. **Always let them know who is boss** - If you show any sign of weakness, you're finished. It's important to stay in control of all situations, never turning your back or conceding control to the class clown or other distracting student.
3. **Provide a fun project when they arrive in class** - By jumping into a teaching lesson that they may not be emotionally prepared to accept you risk the chance of losing their respect and patience. Start with a simple word game or something to let them know that you have their enjoyment in mind, too. Then get down to brass tacks.
4. **Have a strong and commanding voice** - Obviously, you can't be demure or shy about the way you speak to children. For this reason, it's crucial to ensure that you speak loudly and with force. You'll be surprised at their response.
5. **Manage the noise with rigid rules and procedures** - When the classroom does get out of the range of acceptable noise, use a set procedure to bring the class under control. For instance, shouting out "Silent Game!" and then waiting 15 seconds to see who doesn't hush

will allow them to see the fun in being quiet, too.

Adjoining classrooms can have teachers who raise their eyebrows and frown upon hearing noise coming from next door, but I am fortunate that my co-teachers are very understanding. While some teachers accentuate the importance of fun in learning, many of these same ones don't realize this often means a responsible approach to managing classroom noise levels. Of course education is a serious matter, but we also need to find the best possible learning stimulus, motivation, and procedures to ensure maximum impact.

Last week, I held a competition among the students and divided the class into four groups to [compete](#) against one another. By the second round they were screaming at the top of their voices, so I managed the noise with the [Silent Game](#). The next day, we did the same game again and the class became nearly as loud as a volcano, but the same game produced results even more quickly as the children immediately began to compete against one another to see who could silence faster.

I let my learners laugh. I let them shout when they get excited. I let them jump for joy. It is not because I do not have class management abilities, it's because I know my limits and their limits now. I let them express themselves, but I also control where that expression starts and ends. I have their attention right where it should be and that is the perfect time for them to learn.