

**Autumn Discussions on the
Portuguese Primary English Teachers' Discussion List**
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**Discussion nº 2 - Friday 3rd November to Friday 11th November
"Consequence and Reward in the Primary Classroom"**

Fielded by **Dave Tucker**

Discussion summary documents

Dave wrote: 'The following is a list of items of "received wisdom" which are sometimes put forward as Golden Rules for the Young Learner Classroom. The question is which of them do you really believe or agree with? (The list and challenge to think came from Neil Armstrong of International House Madrid, who is somewhat of a guru of the YL world, as far as I'm concerned - I once watched a video of him teaching pre-schoolers and was amazed!).'

Here are our thoughts on the golden rules!

TRUE OR FALSE?!?

1. You should never raise your voice to be heard over the class.

I raise my voice over the noise of a group of children playing games in pairs... Every time I do it I think... <Ergh, shouldn't be doing this>. I remember going to one of your talks about 6 years ago, Dave, and you stuck your hand in the air and waggled it when you wanted quiet after group / pair work. It was a good strategy, but one I've not been able to set up in primary. Does any one do this? I've got a planned pair work activity with my 8 year olds today, I'm going to give it a go and will let you know if it works, when I get home this evening!

Its the use of the word 'never' that disqualifies this one, isn't it? As people have pointed out, you need sometimes to cut through the noise to bring attention back - but it should not be our aim to consistently shout over the students - as mentioned before, it will just raise the general noise level.

It is generally ineffective to raise your voice over the class as it tends to raise the general noise level rather than reduce it. Sometimes it may be necessary to say something in a loud voice in order to get attention to lower the level `Attention please!'. We have heard how other techniques can prove more effective. Trying to talk over students doesn't work.

2. It's never acceptable to get angry with young learners.

I think we can get angry on occasions...

Carl Rogers, educational psychologist who speaks a lot of sense, has a series of tenets which underlie his approach in the classroom, and the ones I always try to remember are "Unconditional Positive Regard" and "Genuineness". First genuineness - we should always, he says, and I agree, be our genuine selves with students. They will recognise and respect that. This includes at times being genuinely angry, and it is a mistake to suppress it. It can act as a very important marker for our students of what the limits are. As Simon said, I have apologised to students before for shouting, or other abrupt behaviour, but not for the fact that they made me angry. They tend to apologise for that! Unconditional Positive Regard means that you

always LIKE your students. You may not like what they DO at times, but you are always positive in your attitude to the person.

It's desirable not to lose your temper, but we are all human!! A golden rule I have if I lose my temper with a class or individual is NEVER to apologise for losing my temper, HOWEVER I may well apologise for my behaviour - 'I'm sorry I shouted at you, that was very rude, but you made me angry because....' I think children should know that it is ok to be angry, the important thing is how to express the anger in an acceptable way. I am also very honest with classes if I feel unwell or stressed and 'warn them!' 'I think you should know that I don't feel very well today so my patience is a bit short today, be careful'. I also have a joke with my classes about 'Professor Zangado'. If they are pushing the boundaries I'll say to them 'You don't want to meet Professor Zangado do you? If you keep doing X, I think he will come and visit soon!!'. This often diffuses a situation early on and issues a warning in a light-hearted way, but gets the message across. I don't think this should be used as a smokescreen for lazy teaching, the children are the focus, not you!

3. It's wrong to punish young learners.

Depends on the punishment surely? We've seen several examples of punishments which fit the occasion on this list - Simon's extra 5 mins, Ana's returning of suns... Corporal punishment is OUT:-)

Sometimes punishments are necessary. It is important that they are administered consistently and fairly and the student is clear why they are being punished. I also think a student should be made aware that they are 'heading towards' a punishment and given the opportunity to alter their behaviour. A punishment should not come 'out of the blue' and be a surprise to a student or students.

Nope! There should be consequences for misbehaviour in the classroom. Very often the best 'punishment' is simply the absence of reward or privilege- not getting a star or a smiley face, but at times it is necessary to remove the student from the interaction if they cannot cope with it, or go further and speak to directors or parents. The students should be aware that these consequences (whatever they may be in your system) do exist, that they are consistent and that they are flagged in advance - warning before punishment.

4. Don't smile before Christmas.

I wish I could not smile, but that affective connection with English is so important and transmitted through a teacher's body actions and facial expressions... Should we smile less? Use smiles sparingly?

Strict at the start of a course is a good approach - I learnt from painful experience that the jolly fun happy clappy approach with a group of what seem to be lovely well-behaved students can change dramatically if they get the idea that everything is loud and fun. We can be clear and strict when necessary to establish the right classroom atmosphere and still smile - often and genuinely!

I think it is better to be firm with a class initially and to relax as you get to know each other. It is important to smile and relax, children respond to humour and generally have very keen senses of humour themselves which they can bring to a lesson and make it enjoyable and fun.

5. Bribery is unacceptable in the classroom.

Bribery ... Using sweets? Never :-) But we do reward good behaviour with other things. <If you behave well today we'll play a game for 5 mins> Cris described something similar. This is bribery surely, but better on the kids' teeth :-)

This is a common reaction to systems of reward - "the students will only behave because they are being rewarded, not because they want to". But isn't that how the whole societal setup works? We learn what is and isn't acceptable by the reward and consequence that follows our behaviour. I agree that the "behave well and I'll give you a lollipop" approach should not be applied, but that the "behave well, and that behaviour will be recognised and praised" establishes good codes of conduct for all.

Unfortunately most theories of behaviour modification are based on a system of reward and punishment. This is not quite the same as bribery which suggests coercion. More a system of achievable rewards that are available.

6. A quiet teacher leads to a disciplined class.

Huh? OK, we've talked about not adding to the noise by raising your voice unnecessarily, but I don't think that the opposite extreme is true either. I believe that in order to capture the attention of 10 or 20 or more energetic and easily distracted youngsters, we must be prepared to equal that energy and enthusiasm. And sometimes that means we need to be loud and energetic ourselves. It needs of course to be channelled towards a definite outcome or objective, otherwise it's just noise.

I'm not sure about this one! We all bring something of our own personalities to the class as do the students and what works for one teacher may not feel right or comfortable for another.

7. You should save your anger for special occasions.

Anger is acceptable as a 'genuine' reaction, and as such will make appearances in the classroom, but they should not be, as seems to be suggested, 'planned' appearances! But of course if you find yourself being constantly angry with your classes, then something needs to be changed.

I agree. It should be a rare event rather than the norm and only in extreme circumstances.

8. Punishment is less effective than reward for encouraging class discipline.

I absolutely agree with this one!

Again, referring back to what I said earlier about bribery and reward, sometimes the most effective punishment is the absence of or withholding of reward. As such the two go hand in hand, but, as Simon said, fair, consistent and heralded punishments that fit the misdemeanour have their place. Hopefully with time, the knowledge that they exist, and with experience that the warning of them really does lead to the punishment itself means that we need to use punishment less often than reward.

I agree, but children need to know that there is a punishment system in place.

9. It is impossible to lavish too much praise and reward on your students.

There's been something written about praising when praise is deserved, but can't find it in my files. I think sometimes we over praise, and should think a bit before praising just anything. We also need to bear in mind children's differences. We may need to praise one child for doing something fairly simple, as it's been hugely challenging for them, whereas another child needs

praise for succeeding in something more advanced. I need to remind myself that I mustn't forget to praise everyone for something they've done over a period of time... About 2 weeks. It's not always easy to find praise for every child though!

Everyone said it, and I agree entirely, over-praising your students is as pointless as not praising them at all. The students do already have an idea of what deserves lavish praise, and it's not just repeating a word or bringing the book or some other simple task. (As Sandie pointed out, however, praise need to be tailored to the individual - for some students bringing the book is a real achievement, a positive step forward that needs recognising and praising.) But there are other occasions where students may be surprised to be praised, and if they know we are not over-generous with our praise. they will take note of those occasions. We hope.

I think if it is over-used it becomes meaningless, however it is important to recognise good work, effort behaviour and let children know that it has been noticed. I also agree with Sandie, a piece of work which would be standard for a very able child needs less recognition than if it is produced by a less able child.

10. Once the DOS/Director has been called in you've lost control of the situation.

Agree it makes life more difficult for a teacher - I've had a similar experience to Vera... We must be in charge right from the start. This is especially tricky when we might be working with another teacher. I

work with pre-school teachers and their firm hand helps me enormously. They know the children so much better than I do, and can see things coming, well before I do! But I mustn't let the children think that I can't control them. It's not always easy as the affective factor is especially important with 3
- 6 year olds.

Now here's an interesting one - as a DOS I can't agree! I imagine that there are DOSes and Directors who do not work on a system of principled support for teachers, and who might take situations into their own hands without consulting fully with the teacher first. That's not good. It's happened to teachers from my school when the Director of the Primary school they are working at has come into the room and told off not just the children for making too much noise, but also the teacher for not controlling the students - and this in front of the class. Doh! I then have to grit my teeth and try to point out to the director in polite terms that (a) sometimes language classes get noisy - we WANT all 25 children to be speaking at the same time! and (b) do they really think they're helping?!?!? Jeez! But the existence of a power beyond that of the immediate classroom rules can be a good deterrent, especially when it's seen to be effective just the one time. I have very rarely had to go and talk to a whole class about behaviour, and when an individual student has needed a visit from the DOS, they generally don't need another for a while, and the class behaviour tends to improve as well. This is always initiated by the teacher, and I respect a decision not to bring in the DOS yet, but try other approaches. But discipline systems work when they are seen to work, and for us the big bad no is calling in the DOS. Scary!

I think there is an element of truth in this. I have had circumstances where the DOS/Director has been present when I have addressed a class over a serious matter. They have let me do the talking. I have explained to the students that he/she is there as I want them to be aware of the details and seriousness of the situation. The DOS/Director has generally made a brief summing up statement at the end. This has had the effect that the students know I am still in control, but am supported by the school and the situation has become very serious.

OTHER AREAS: Expectations / Contact with Class Teachers / Reacting to Misbehaviour / Use of L1

Now I do understand why I had behaviour problems, I never explained to my pupils what kind of behaviour I expected from them. I just assumed that they already knew how to behave and if they didn't was because they did not want to. I told one of my classes that if they started behaving better I would give them a lesson in the computer room where they would have the chance to play some English language games. What I forgot to tell them was what behaving better meant.

In the beginning of the year, even with 1st graders, I let them know that there is a programme, which I am expected to teach and they to learn. It does make a difference! I normally print out a large A3 copy of what I intend to teach along the year and we colour in each theme/point we study, as we study it.

It is so important to make contact with the class teacher - especially in difficult situations, but also in the nicer ones - the background knowledge that class teacher has can help turn an already pleasant situation even more pleasant, or help to rescue you from a nightmare one like Sheila's, and I hope Cubalcunha's. Often, though, it seems to be difficult to catch the teacher to speak to them. Part of the problem stems from the fact that we are outsiders going in and taking over their (the class teacher's) territory - they often don't have enough information about what we're doing or how the whole English set-up works, and so we need to try and supply them with this even though it should perhaps come from other sources. An overall programme for the year helps the teacher see (a) where we are going with the class and what they can expect them to know, and (b) that there is actually a programme!

As someone who has experience of working with youngsters with similar backgrounds in a social work setting, there will almost certainly be occasions when they react against the weight of the responsibility and need to test your trust. You may have to 'let them blow' and deal with them when they are calm. Don't panic! Respond to them as you have so far, as valued individuals and explain your expectations and what they can expect in return. As long as they know that once an incident is dealt with it is over and forgotten, they will continue to gain confidence. They will also enjoy the security of fair, safe, consistent boundaries, again something they probably have little experience of outside your class.

In answer to the question of using Portuguese, yes I use English, repeat in Portuguese, use English again and repeat in Portuguese. As time goes on and the students become familiar with the English phrases, I only use English. I will use Portuguese if there is a serious or complex issue I need to communicate quickly and effectively. As mentioned, common phrases I reinforce with Portuguese until the students are familiar with them.