

## Under the spotlight

An important point for all language teachers (and, indeed, all teachers) to remember is that whenever we are in class, we are projecting a particular image of ourselves. Do we want to be someone our students like and respect and work hard for, someone our students feel indifferent towards, or someone our students dislike and resent? To a significant extent, the choice is ours.

Like it or not, whenever we meet a new class for the first time we find ourselves under the spotlight. Even though they may not appear to be doing so, every student in the room is sizing us up. Our students can glean a great deal of information through simple observation: how we walk into the room, how we hold ourselves, how we organise our books and papers, what we wear, etc. External clues such as these provide information about our general level of professionalism: whether we look confident, whether we behave in a purposeful way, whether we are well-organised, whether we take our job seriously, and so on.

Within a short space of time our students become familiar with our individual teaching styles. They get to know the kinds of learning tasks and activities that we favour, whether we give classroom instructions clearly and unambiguously, whether we use the whiteboard effectively, and so on. They learn whether we are inventive and make our lessons exciting and engaging – or whether we are content to teach in pedestrian ways. Our students soon identify how committed we are to helping them learn. Are we prepared to spend a little extra time ensuring that the class understands a key concept before moving on to the next activity – or do we plough on regardless? Do we make time to respond to the questions and queries of individuals at the end of the lesson – or do we make a beeline for the door as soon as the bell goes? Actions such as these reveal our level of expertise and commitment.

All teachers have behavioural expectations for their classes, which we communicate and reinforce in individual ways. Every one of us has a unique range of facial expressions, gestures, hand movements and stock phrases with which to command attention, communicate directives, give reminders, issue warnings and signal approval or disapproval. The precise ways in which we communicate our wishes to our classes give a clear indication of our overall attitude towards our learners. If we give students the benefit of the doubt, regarding them as individuals who are keen to learn and do their best for us, our body language will be relaxed and our tone of voice warm, friendly and firm. If, on the other hand, we regard students as individuals who must be licked into shape, kept in their place and constantly chivvied, our body language will be severe and our tone of voice stentorian and lacking a light touch.

Students are naturally curious to see how we react in challenging circumstances. Apart from being a welcome distraction from routine learning tasks (why concentrate on completing a grammar exercise when an interpersonal confrontation is brewing?), situations that severely test our patience and resolve provide students with insights into our personalities – and allow them to identify our weak points. With a range of strategies at their disposal for challenging, irritating or distracting their teachers, classes quickly learn how far they can go with each teacher. Even though the most equable teacher may occasionally snap, students quickly learn which teachers routinely raise their voices, lose

*Material in this article is intended for personal use by individual teachers, or for workshop use by teacher trainers/developers.*

their tempers, plead, threaten and punish – and which teachers keep their cool, finding ways of diffusing tricky situations and indicating disapproval without causing individuals to lose face.

Most vital of all, students notice how teachers relate to them as people. At some point during most lessons we find ourselves moving around the room, talking to individuals: explaining something here, clarifying something there, correcting a misconception over there – or repeating instructions to the class as a whole if a significant number of students are confused. Students are acutely aware of the words that we use and our tone of voice. Do we treat them with respect or use a patronising tone? Do we value what they have to say or is our tone dismissive? Do we give students words of encouragement, giving praise where praise is due, or do our words lack generosity of spirit? We must not forget that, even though we may be speaking to a single student, others will be listening in and making a mental note of our behaviour.

In conclusion, whether we like it or not, we are under the spotlight in our classrooms. All of our routine behaviours lead students to make judgements about our merit as teachers and our merit as people – both of which are equally important to our success as language teachers.

### Questions for reflection/discussion

1. What kind of an impression do you think the students in your classes have of you? Think of five adjectives your students might use to describe you (maybe four that you're happy with and one that you'd rather they didn't use).
2. Think privately (or share with a colleague) which aspect of your classroom presence, demeanour or body language you might try to change in the future.
3. Discuss generally with colleagues (a) the things students like in teachers, and (b) the things students don't like about teachers.
4. Why do you think it's generally accepted that it's better for students to like rather than dislike their teachers?
5. How do you set behavioural expectations for your class? Do these strategies work well for you? If not, which alternative strategies might you use?
6. How do you react when individual students behave in tricky or challenging ways? Obviously this will depend on the particular situation – but do you have any general principle(s) that you try to follow?
7. If you do behave in class in a way that you later regret, what do you do in the next lesson?
8. What kind of a tone of voice do you use with your classes? Are you happy with it? If not, how could you vary it?
9. What is the most important thing you've learnt from reading this article?
10. Which way(s) of behaving in your classroom will you try to modify? Don't forget, in a few weeks' time, to reflect on whether your class(es) behaved differently towards you as a result.