Increasing Time on Task in the LOTE Classroom

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A classroom that is well managed and engages all learners is an exciting place to be. The more adept we are at filling every moment of our class period with meaningful, active learning, the more successful our students will be as second language learners. Our discipline is not to be learned passively, but experienced and performed.

Engage All Learners – But Keep Up the Pace

Having an index card per student will provide a teacher with a fair and efficient account of a multitude of tasks. Avoid picking students from raised hands and waiting for "new" students to volunteer answers by shuffling the cards and calling on students randomly. Mark informal speaking responses with rubric scores. The marks on the cards ensure all students respond a relatively equal number of times. By using simple codes, the cards can quickly show which students have written on the board, led a game, or performed some other popular classroom task. Cards can be shuffled to randomly select the order of oral testing. This will raise the level of concern in a classroom and motivate students to prepare more earnestly as you test.

Dice are another quick tool for selecting items to be tested or roles to be played. Eliminate claims that you gave other students easier questions or roles in situational tasks by having students roll dice for numbered items or parts. Prepare question sheets to correspond to the roll of the dice. Start with 2, or double ones, and end with 12, the maximum possible. You may wish to add a category for "doubles."

I use my seat configurations to quickly partner students. My students sit in six rows of five desks each. The pairs of rows turn and face each other for instant partners. Once a week, students acquire new partners by moving forward one seat (the front

student moves to the rear of the row) and over one row to the left. I gain a new perspective on students as they move closer to and farther from me.

My students have also been trained to move these six rows of desks into "stations," or groups, creating the same pattern each time. We can go from rows to groups and back in less than 12 seconds. We make a contest of timing the move.

Having set locations for group or partnered work throughout the year is another time saver. When students wander the room for their location, argue over the use of specific chairs or tables, and so on, much class time is wasted.

When playing games, I sometimes rely on tokens to select teams. I have two sets of card-stock circles numbered 1 through 15. Each set is a different color (mine are red and blue) and the circles are laminated. Before a game, while students are at their desks completing a task, I grab the circles and randomly give one to each child. When everyone has a token, I ask all blue circles to move to one side of the room and sit in numbered order (1 – 5 in first row, 6 – 10 in the second, etc.) and the red circles to do the same on the other side of the room. I now have students divided into two teams as well as sitting in the order in which they will have their turns in the game.

Often, especially when there is little class time, I simply split the room into two sets of three rows to create teams. Since the rows rotate each week, there will be some variations in team configurations.

A timer is an excellent way to keep the class flowing smoothly. It often helps students to stay on task, particularly if they are doing something they find enjoyable. The timer often helps me, as the teacher, to move along and not get sidetracked. Remember not to use the timer for assessments. This may make students anxious and may contradict some IEP or 504 requirements.

I have become increasingly more frustrated with students who are not completing assignments at home. Their performance not only suffers, but they affect progress in the classroom when they are not able to interact effectively with others. I have therefore begun to incorporate vocabulary practice more directly into my classroom routines. I use sets of card-stock paper flashcards and introduce the vocabulary formally to my students in class. The next step is for my students turn to face each other in partner formation. I orchestrate which rows begin (those facing the windows or those whose backs are to the

windows) and dictate how they are to practice. I generally begin by having students show the Spanish and their partners say the English translation. This helps with vocabulary recognition. I set my timer for two to three minutes, depending on the difficulty of the words. When the timer goes off, one row of students will be instructed to stand and shift forward with the student in front taking the seat in the rear of his or her row. Cards are exchanged and the "new" student shows the Spanish cards to the student who had just shown the cards.

With each beep of the timer, students rotate to a new partner and get a new set of instructions. The second round usually involves one student reading the Spanish to his or her partner. Reading the card forces the student to pay attention to spelling and it helps with pronunciation. The student who is listening develops listening comprehension skills. Finally, English is shown and the target language spoken.

By having students rotate in this fashion, called the "dyadic belt," students are exposed to many partners. They will have some serious partners and some not so serious. They will have some that are very good students and some that struggle. By the time the rotations have occurred a number of times, each student will have practiced the vocabulary in a number of ways and with a variety of speakers, resulting in effective vocabulary acquisition and stronger skills in listening and pronunciation.

Classroom Management Life Savers

These all sound like marvelous ideas, you may say, but difficult to put into practice. The truth is no activity or game will be successful in your classroom if it is not managed effectively.

Any classroom benefits from efficient and positive classroom management techniques. We teachers multitask to fulfill the needs of our diverse students and perform our administrative duties. Incorporating rehearsed routines saves classroom time and eliminates teacher frustration. A well-run classroom has fewer disciplinary disruptions.

Use a daily classroom warm-up that is repetitive but dignified. Using the same questions in the target language each day will ensure that all students can complete the warm-up without your assistance. Answering "What is the day and date?" "What is the weather like today?" and "How do you feel today?" will provide basic heading

information for the day's notes. Add questions or translations that will provide practice in the current unit or grammatical structure being studied. By the time students open their notebooks and answer the questions, you've had time to take attendance, speak to students who have been absent, and chat with those who are leaving for music lessons. Take a few minutes before class to have warm-ups prepared on overhead transparencies.

What if students don't get started because they don't have class materials? This can be a frustrating interruption to beginning a class smoothly. I choose to have scrap paper, extra worksheets or packets, and pencils ready for students to use. I follow up with the students, and ultimately the parents of students,0 who seem never to be prepared for class. I invest a little for the gift of having students get what they need and be on task without delaying classroom learning.

Posting an agenda avoids the temptation for students to ask what "we're" going to do in class, if "we" can play a game, and so on. It provides a visual reminder of class progress as agenda items are completed. It also provides structure for students with learning disabilities. The agenda is also a good tool for the teacher to adjust activities in progress to either complete the agenda or revise it.

A class signal is another efficient tool to have students stop and listen to new directions, added information, or end the activity at hand. A class signal in the target language reinforces vocabulary. A signal that requires a student response in the target language will capture class attention quickly. A student may claim not to have heard the teacher's signal, but it's difficult to deny hearing 12 voices responding to that signal.

Upon Reflection

As you teach your classes, examine the moments that are most frustrating to you and the moments when you feel class time is being wasted. These are the moments for which you must create a routine. For example, I now give the homework assignment in the middle of class, during a transition, or at the beginning of class when notebooks are open. I avoid that last minute rush of attempting to give assignments that often don't get recorded. Modifying your lesson plan structure can increase time on task for your students and save you a lot of frustration!