

## Why Don't They Listen to You? Teaching Sports Students and Challenges in Classroom Management

どうして学生は聞かないのか？スポーツ学生と授業経営



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In participating in the *Creating Community Learning Together 3* (CCLT3) event hosted by Learner Development Special Interest Group (LD SIG) in December 2016, I was very curious to see how my audience would react to my teaching experiences with 25 students in the baseball team. The presentation itself went relatively well. Some people were interested in the teaching practices and what the results of my action research offered to overcoming the challenges that I had faced in teaching the course. However, in closing the presentation, I was feeling a slight contradiction about what I had just presented.

Let me begin my story by explaining what I had felt before taking part in CCLT3. Before the 2016-2017 academic year started, I strongly believed in (and still do) the importance of remedial education offering level-appropriate learning for those students in sports teams. Sports students' low academic profiles shape their feelings of incompetence and turmoil while they are in class; hence, they tend not to attend classes, sleep during the lectures, and use mobile phones, for example. I hoped that I would be able to get agreements from other university teachers to do something about this at my university.

For a number of teachers, instructing a mixed level class is a big challenge. Often, athlete-students are mixed up in a class with students who meet the academic standard of the university; hence, the sports students are supposed to be "equally" taught and graded. Luckily, the students in my course were all in the baseball club, and I did not have such particular teaching or grading issues. Plus, I had a great deal of teacher autonomy in designing this course, so it was possible for me to set up the course level appropriately.

Over the 2016 academic year, I had to invest quite a lot of time in designing this course. The course development process was not as easy as I had expected because I had to make the curriculum motivating for the students with low academic profiles. As a former soccer player myself, I had failed entrance exams because of my devotion to three years of intensive high school soccer practice. Based on my own experiences of academic failure, I wanted my students to at least find the meaning of being in the class and experience the joy of using English at most. So, I decided that the themes for the course would be *motivating* and *interesting*, and these are the two keywords that I kept in my mind in developing the course.

### Course Structure

I had two main concerns in creating the course. The first was improving students' English proficiency to allow them to talk about baseball in English. Based on the pre-course questionnaire, many students wanted to learn baseball-related content which would improve their motivation to learn English. Second, given that they would have a chance to use English outside of the baseball field in an English-speaking country, general English (still related with baseball) had to be taught.

Speaking of their English proficiency, I need to take into serious consideration the wide range among the students. In broad terms, they were at junior high school graduate level.

Misuse of basic grammar expressions could often be found in their answers. They had many spelling errors that emerged from discrepancies between written and spoken language. There were a couple of students who couldn't spell their name using the alphabet. However, as far as I observed, their willingness to communicate was very high compared to "normal students" at the same level of English proficiency. The only-baseball-students situation worked to reduce their anxiety and stress about speaking in front of the class and making mistakes. This emotional advantage allowed me to include more communicative aspects in the course in the end.

### Addressing Challenges in Classroom Management

The biggest problem for me in teaching this course has always been classroom management. This was the very reason why I joined my department's Action Research (AR) group although this project started when almost half of the final semester had finished. (And this is how I came to present on my struggles and practices to solve the issues at CCLT3.) There were four members in the group which was formed after Anne Burns—a specialist in action research—conducted a Professional Development (PD) session at my university in early November. In the PD session, Anne talked about the underlying principles and logistics of conducting AR and shared concrete examples of AR conducted in different contexts. At the end, she encouraged the PD participants to form an AR group and test it out by exploring the challenges that they were facing in their different courses. Following her suggestion, we formed a group to grapple with the unique classroom issues that we each had. AR is usually conducted with the sequence of "*planning*," "*action*," "*observation*," and "*reflection*" (Burns, 2010). For this project, I videotaped four lessons and had two project members observe two lessons in the course to go through the action research process. This became the major turning point for me to reflect on my way of teaching the course.

Before participating in this project in November in 2016, I was sure that something was not going well in managing the class. Students' energy level, attention span, and lesson tempo were far below what they used to be, but I wasn't able to detect the causes of the uneasy feeling growing in me.

Moving the clock a little further back to May 2016, my biggest classroom management issue through the year had been students' constant chat during lessons. I do not agree with the idea that the typical teacher-oriented learning environment in Japan—the teacher serving as a purveyor of knowledge, with students merely listening to what the teacher says—is effective in language education. As a researcher of learner autonomy, I believe that students can learn from each other once they work in a group where students share their strengths to cover each other's weaknesses (Murphey, 1989).

According to this principle, I created groups of four and had the students work on activities for a couple of lessons. The result was a big failure because they were too comfortable with being in the groups made up of familiar faces and couldn't stop chatting. Eventually, I lost control, ended up breaking up the groups, and made the traditional "*everyone-looking-at-the-teacher*" setting. This surely worked in controlling the class, and I felt that I had overcome the chatting issue, but I was feeling guilty about using this method for the peace of the class because this was not a teaching principle that I believe in. After a few lessons, I started looking at the bright side. I realized that I had succeeded in making an environment in which actually language learning could finally take place rather than a chaotic uncontrolled classroom. I also remembered that autonomy is a continuum, meaning that I can start from a teacher-centered classroom and transform it over time to a more learner-centered classroom where students can exercise their autonomy.

## Participating in the Action Research Group

Participating in the AR group, I watched the videotaped lessons to analyze my teaching practices and students' attitudes during the lessons. I became aware of the causes of my worries that I had constantly felt while instructing the course in November. Probably I had paid too much attention toward getting things done during the lessons and taking care of those "good" students who finished the given tasks or activities. In other words, some of the students had been left behind in the classroom and had gradually lost their motivation to learn proactively. What I had witnessed in the recorded lessons was that students with lower proficiency were chatting, fooling around with each other, and falling asleep while I was giving instructions. Not only that, but the partners sitting next to them also got affected. Seeing this, I realized that this was the source of my unpleasant inner feeling during each lesson.

I started analyzing the causes that led them to behave in that way by using *Classroom Observation Tasks* (Wajnryb, 1992), which offers different points of view to examine lessons. I also began searching for solutions by asking AR group members to observe my lessons and look at the videos. The main reason for my students falling asleep during the classes was their devotion to baseball practice. The students were physically tired because of their everyday baseball practice. They nearly always came to my lessons after finishing full baseball practice and some classes for other registered courses. To solve this issue, I confirmed with them a policy that they could move their bodies during lessons or even go outside to get fresh air. During the class, I talked to those sleepy students to make sure that the series of options were available for them to take.

Second, I realized that the baseball-related English dealt in the course was beyond their ability to work on. This might have resulted in reinforcing their sense of failure and taken away some of the students' willingness to participating in the lessons. Because baseball-related English was context specific, it required them to remember and utilize unfamiliar baseball specific vocabulary and phrases on top of basic English structures and vocabulary items that they should have learned in the first place.

Specifically, the biggest demotivating factor for some students probably was the conversation tests taking place at the end of each lesson. I set up this 1-minute test to assess their performance in producing conversation structures they had learned in the previous lesson. I often shifted lessons to the speaking test three-quarters of the way through a 90-minute lesson. This was part of the autonomy-enhancing elements that I wanted my students to develop while taking my course. It leads to a learning cycle where students leave the class, check their strengths and weaknesses in producing the target conversation structures, and spend their own time practicing the structures. In this way, I thought that students could prepare themselves for the test based on their needs.

The pitfall that I didn't expect (or should have expected based on my experience) was that the lower students' proficiency level was, the less often they prepared for the speaking tests. Well-prepared students came to me to take the test and left the class early. As far as I had observed the behaviours of the lower proficiency students, they did not prepare for the test while they were waiting for their turn to come. Thus, they stayed the whole 90 minutes in the class but left the classroom without taking the test.

Acting on advice from my colleagues, I made two new changes to the baseball related English section although the changes took place right before the end of the semester. First, I took longer for scaffolding each activity. Second, I made baseball-related conversations way easier and simpler. Both more proficient and less proficient students benefited from this revision to the course. After the change had been implemented, the number of proactive lower proficiency students increased. In the meantime, the number of "non-test

*takers*” decreased in the last few weeks of the Fall semester. Higher-level students had previously kept their heads just above the water. Now with the change in the content, they had some room to help less proficient learners.

The third cause of the classroom management issues was my failure in getting their attention before and while I was giving instructions. Some of the lower proficiency students were not able to keep up with the pace of the lessons due to the difficulty of the activities. On the other hand, higher proficiency students started chatting or fooling around with other group members because they had finished their tasks already. Thus, the classroom was very noisy as the end of each activity was approaching. Observing the videotaped lessons with my AR group, I could realize how soft my attention grabbers were. Before watching the videos, I thought that I was making good transitions from one activity to another. However, the reality was that half of the students were not following me.

As for the solutions to this issue, I started using a microphone to make sure my voice reached all the students. With the videotaped observation, I was bewildered that my voice was not loud enough to be heard by the students sitting at the back of the class. Another solution I tried was to make a long pause to give a sign that the lesson was transitioning to the next phase. This solution was proposed by a project member because she noticed that I often gave a weak attention grabber and started instructions without stopping students’ conversations.

### **After the Educational Interventions**

After applying all of the educational implementations discussed above, I started feeling that my emotional burden was gradually fading away. The rhythm of the lesson became much smoother as the number of proactive and disciplined students was growing in each lesson. After a while the number of the “*non-test takers*” dropped over the weeks, and surprisingly some of them came to me to finish the speaking tests that they hadn’t finished at that point.

The educational interventions were successful in two ways. First, students were able to boost their confidence in working on activities. I witnessed this through the level of students’ attitude toward working on activities and willingness to share their answers with classmates. As each student built up their successful experience by completing the activities that were slightly higher than their levels, every successful moment led to pushing up the group confidence level. Second, I contributed to nurturing their attitudes toward taking English lessons. Compared to mid-November, I felt in December that they are more focused, responsible, and hence prepared for taking English lessons. With the different classroom management issues that I have experienced in teaching this course, I can pass the record on to the teachers who teach those baseball students in the next school year.

### **CCLT3 and the Future of Remedial Education**

Now, I would like to address the reasons for that sense of contradiction that I felt as I finished my presentation at CCLT3. First, I was happy because my struggles in classroom management and proposed solutions had gained participants’ attention. In the reflection circle that followed the presentations in my room, the classroom issues in my baseball class sparked heated discussions regarding struggles when we teach students with lower proficiency.

The greatest challenge shared in discussion was keeping the balance of “*disciplining*” students’ behaviours in the classroom. We all agreed that university is not a place like Japanese junior/high school where teachers control the class with absolute power, and students follow the given rules. More likely, university is a place where students can

exercise their autonomy to learn because we expect our students to behave as adults and we treat them in that way. But the truth of the matter is (and my next claim might sound a little biased) is that a majority of the discussion participants reported the connection between lower proficiency and reduced accountability for students' behaviours. What I learned from this sharing was that teachers need to clarify their expectations and consequences for misbehaviours in the beginning of the semester and gradually loosen up rules as time goes. Such a statement might sound a bit naive for autonomy-promoting educators who try to push the idea of students taking responsibility forward. But again, learner autonomy is a continuum, and students who have grown up in a Confucian culture need scaffolding to take their own responsibilities in language learning.

My frustration—and this is the source of the contradiction that I felt in closing the presentation—was the limited amount of educational support offered to sports students in Japanese universities. The discussion group members agreed that Japanese universities should reach out more to sports students who are struggling from falling behind in class. Universities need to put more human capital and resources into academically supporting sports students in the same way that US universities, for example, have been doing for baseball, basketball, and American football students.

In closing this short reflective paper, taking part in CCLT3 gave me so many opportunities to look back on my teaching practices and philosophies. As I mentioned, I experienced the use of teacher power to bring peace to a vulnerable class situation in exchange for giving up the promotion of learner autonomy. I still don't know whether my decision was right or not, but I will try to look for ways of learner autonomy-enhancing classroom management which raise students' awareness toward their progress in language learning, foster a sense of ownership toward the content, and establish learning communities where students can learn together.

## References

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## Reader Response to “Why Don’t They Listen to You? Teaching Sports Students and Challenges in Classroom Management”



Peter Joun  
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A group of student-athletes in one's classroom can potentially be the greatest gift one could hope for (well, in any case athletes can be a source of positive activity—more on this later), or one's worst nightmare. Student-athletes are often “the boss” in secondary school, and other students have often been conditioned to make way for their robust counterparts. An instructor who is outwitted, or worse, intimidated by student-athletes will invariably lose both control of and the respect of the class. Indeed, Tomita Sensei confessed that his biggest issue was classroom management, and that he did indeed lose control of his class, which led him to join an action research group at his university formed to address issues instructors were having with their classes. Videotaping and then observing the lessons with his colleagues allowed him to zero in on the core problems which led to the usual hiccups, i.e., tilting the presentation of the lessons in favor of the stronger students. Luckily, with the support of his colleagues, Tomita Sensei was able to admit that he was neglecting his student-athletes, and therefore made adjustments which brought dramatic improvements even though they were introduced after more than half the semester had elapsed.

Specifically, this included adding more scaffolding to his activities, making classroom tasks easier and simpler, and using a microphone in order to establish the authority of his voice and focus the students' attention. He thereby succeeded in addressing the student-athletes' hidden fear of being embarrassed on account of not being able to complete tasks beyond their level of understanding, while simultaneously legitimizing his leadership. For those of us who have participated in team sports, one of the unstated rules is that respect is only garnished to those who demonstrate courage and the willingness/ability to make others shine. By implementing the steps outlined above, Mr. Tomita was able to demonstrate he was an authentic leader, one who was capable of doing whatever it takes (even admitting he was wrong) in order to include all the students in the flow of the classroom activities, and making this imperative the strongest voice in the class.

His experience resonated with my own experiences in dealing with “problem” students over the years. Upon reflection I have found that invariably the root of the situation usually resided in students' anxieties at being shown up or losing face in front of others. After realizing this is generally the case, I have made it a point to structure the class in such a way as to include the lowest member in the flow of the class activities, even if this means using the student's native language when doling out activity instructions so that every student can participate on a level playing field in a timely manner. Regarding student-athletes, I have found that they can be a huge asset if their sense of competitiveness is tapped into. Creating quizzes and activities with points awarded to the winner has on more than one occasion resulted in transforming once motivation-challenged/“English class=sleeping time” third basemen and shortstops into vocabulary-devouring maniacs hell bent on stomping the

opposition, with the upshot that the so-called “good students” (often used to cruising in mixed-level classes) have on more than one occasion been moved to “up their game” to deal with these unexpected developments.

Where I once sought to minimize damage, I now look forward to working with lower-level students and affirming the great strides they are capable of if given the chance and the appropriate support, and my faith in that proposition has on more than one occasion been rewarded. Of course it needs to be balanced with a willingness on the part of the teacher to be firm if challenged by the insolence of youth, as well as with the ability to bring to heel the occasional saboteur. In Japan it is still largely the case that the instructor is the central figure in the classroom. Embracing this role and leading lower-level student-athletes to a place of security and mutual respect can be an enriching learning experience, a sentiment which perhaps Tomita Sensei would now also subscribe to.

### **Reader Response to “Why Don’t They Listen to You? Teaching Sports Students and Challenges in Classroom Management”**



Sean Toland  
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This reflective article provides readers with a realistic window from which to view your struggles to create and teach a communicative English language course to a group of disenchanted Japanese university student athletes. While your reflection is situated in a higher education context, it will nevertheless resonate with teachers working in a wide variety of learning environments. My response will focus on the following three important themes that emerged from your article for me: the role of genuine critical self-reflection for teacher development, the concept of control, and the powerful effects of a group-based Action Research (AR) approach.

Many English language instructors would agree that examining their own actions under a critical spotlight is not an easy thing to do. Carefully scrutinizing your own teaching performance takes time, and it can generate a significant amount of discomforting friction. Perhaps that is why many teachers have a tendency to downplay any thorny situations they encounter in their professional practice. In contrast, you have embraced critical self-reflection and used it to look closely at yourself as well as areas that can be enhanced in your classroom. There were a number of striking similarities between the learning environment you described and a class of university athletes that I previously taught. Like you, I also had to devise strategies to deal with the constant chatterers, slumbering students, clandestine texts and tweets, as well as competing comedians, so your experiences were most insightful.

Your reflection raises the issue of control (i.e., “Eventually, I lost control ...”; “This surely worked in controlling the class”; “a chaotic uncontrolled classroom”). Do educators put too much pressure on themselves to keep their students on a tight rein? If a teacher relinquishes control, will a classroom turn

into a chaotic circus? How can educators provide guidance without assuming control over the students' decision-making and learning? Can language learning take place in a *controlled chaotic environment*? Undoubtedly, many people would respond to these questions by focusing on an instructor's personality and teaching style. For example, "a teacher who does not mind a high-energy atmosphere with noise, kinetic movement, and group synergy will be less concerned with control than someone who appreciates a more structured classroom environment." While this explanation may sound rational, it is nevertheless simplistic as it sidesteps the most important issue, which is finding ways to enhance students' control over their own language learning.

You addressed the problematic pitfalls you encountered in your professional practice by joining an Action Research group. Are group-based AR projects common in Japanese universities? Why or why not? You did a great job of highlighting the advantages of this collaborative research approach. Did you encounter any unforeseen problems? Was trust an important element amongst the members in your research group? It is obvious that the video-supported self and peer reflective feedback helped you tackle a number of significant classroom management issues and improve the quality of your teaching. How did your learners react to a video camera tripod or cameraperson being present in their classroom? Was it difficult to provide critical feedback after watching your colleagues' videos? I thoroughly enjoyed reading your reflection and would be very interested to learn more details about your fascinating AR project.