

Surviving in Difficult EFL Classroom: Teachers' Perspectives and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

English language teachers often encounter with the situations in which they are faced with defiance, aggression and multiple verbal and physical abuses in their classroom. Moreover, they have pressures of unrealistic expectations and blamed for complex failures of students and the whole system, which makes their survival in difficult classroom even more difficult. So, this is a small-scale research study that investigates EFL teachers' experiences and the perspectives on the difficult classroom situations. The study reveals that teachers are not the only responsible persons for students' unexpected behaviours; but there are several other reasons to contribute to it.

Keywords: Difficult classroom, survive, disruption, reward

Surviving in Difficult EFL Classroom: Teachers' Perspectives and Coping Strategies Scene Setting

To retrospect my teaching career as an EFL teacher for about a decade, I did not always have crystal stairs to walk through. I had so many pleasant and unpleasant times during those days. It was in 2008, when I shifted to a new private school, one of the higher secondary schools in Lalitpur, as a secondary level English teacher. In my first class, I had a difficulty even to spend forty-five minutes in the classroom, when I went to grade X to teach English. I had a problem even to survive in the classroom, although I was not teaching them the subject matter but simply trying to warm them up with activities and language games. Students often shouted at friends and ignored the

activities that I conducted in the class, which abominated me a lot. I repeatedly asked them to follow my instructions; however, they deafened towards it. Many students were shouting in their mother tongue i.e. Nepali. At the same time, I asked them, "Could you please be quiet and respond me in English when you are asked to do so?" "*We have always been using Nepali language to communicate in our classroom since grade one, then, why start in English now?*" one of the students said. I was much frustrated. Nevertheless, I tried my best to control the class but all my attempts went in vein in the initial days.

Next day, I decided not to take the job, but the school director requested me not to give up. Then, I went to the class the next day, yet, the same situation repeated. Unexpectedly, the situation changed after

long and tiresome efforts that I made to improve the classroom environment. The students who disappointed and kept me boiling all the time became very co-operative and supportive with great enthusiasm for classroom participation. After all, I succeeded to survive well and worked about five years in the same institution with high dignity. The miraculous change in students' behaviour and the classroom environment made the life of all other teachers and the school administration comfortable. Finally, I was in the vital position in the same school when I resigned.

Many teachers might often encounter similar problems to properly survive in their classrooms, as they find their students not ready for learning or they try to disturb the class intentionally. Such disruptive students do not let the teachers survive easily and efficiently fulfilling their targeted objectives, which is a big problem. These circumstances keep the position of the teachers in jeopardy. So, it is good to develop skills enough to tackle with the problems without any sense of loss and bring our classroom into a right track.

In this exploratory small-scale research study, I mainly focus on the situations of the classroom disruptions and the strategies that the teachers adopt to make their learners ready for learning and also contribute and participate in the learning process, so that it helps for better survival and eases the life of teachers to promote learning. When we are supposed to teach the students of different levels, then, at first, we are expected to have a proper planning of the lesson. Not only that, we need to act as we plan. For this reason, this study tries to investigate how EFL teachers perceive the phenomenon of difficult classroom and what strategies they adopt to make their classroom conducive to learning.

Difficult Classroom: An Introduction

Teachers' job is not always easy. Sometimes, we might be able to drive the cart easily, whereas the other times we may have bumpy roads, which might even jeopardize our whole career. Teachers are often demotivated with the classroom situations when they find their position vulnerable as it is difficult for them to survive easily because of the problems like misbehaviours of the students, poor attention towards study, poor motivation and so on. Highlighting the multiple cases of difficult situations inside the classroom, Rachel and Daniel (2012) state that student misbehaviours such as disruptive talking, chronic avoidance of work, clowning, interfering with teaching activities, harassing classmates, verbal insults, rudeness to teacher, defiance and hostility, ranging from infrequent to frequent, mild to severe, is a thorny issue in everyday classroom and they are intolerable.

Every teacher knows that it only takes one bad egg to ruin the dozen. The reality is that most teachers have dozens of students to contend with and more than one misbehaved student per dozen. For novice teachers, an early experience with disruptive students can get them out of the profession. So, the strategies to tackle with such problems will assist them to build up confidence and continue their passion in teaching. Hence, in the situations mentioned above, "the priority here is to act quickly in order to get the class to revert to smooth routine as fast as possible. Often it is preferable to take a decision, even if not a very good one, fast, than to hesitate or do nothing" (Ur, 2008, p. 266). So, there are several ways to handle those problems.

Strategies to Cope with Difficult Situations

When we have students with behavioural problems, at first, it is advisable to determine the actual cause of their behaviour. It is said that no student acts up just to act up. There are always some factors behind it. There may be some problems at home; the student may also have poor self-concept, a different learning style, or the student may be nervous or may be avoiding an intimidating task. In the same way, the student may be seeking attention, the student may simply be fighting to control the class, or the student may be bored. So, diagnosing the problem can be the very first step. It is better to think 'cause' rather than 'symptom'. Then, after we diagnose the real causes of students' behaviour, then it is advisable to start treating the problem. The steps we take to address vary from student to student and from situation to situation. In those situations, a more humanistic approach can be adopted, by understanding and appreciating their feelings and emotions. As Head and Taylor (1997) say, "Humanistic education is fun" (p. 45).

However, there are habitually disruptive students who disrupt the class constantly, repeatedly and intentionally. Generally, these students disturb the class and the teacher, regardless of the measures that teachers implement. Many of these students create problems in the classroom several times during the class period and tend to have problematic lives outside the school too. In most cases, parents and the school administration may also be unable to discipline these students, as they do not respect the limitations or restrictions that they have to set. So, in such circumstances, it is difficult for teachers to handle the situation properly and survive himself/herself in happy and prosperous manner.

According to Blum (1998), "To create an effective learning experience in any classroom (whatever the school) the teacher has to be able to create a purposeful and calm atmosphere in which the 'momentum' for learning can be built" (p. 11). So, the teacher, whatever the behaviour of the students and the classroom situation is, might always develop strong degree of internal self-motivation to make the classroom teaching purposeful with the ingredients needed. If they encounter with the problems with students' behaviour, then first, it is better to determine the actual cause of it. Moreover, "you will survive and succeed in difficult school if you are steadfastly enthusiastic, plan carefully and communicate colourfully when you get the chance. You must try to stay calm in the face of constant provocation and confrontation." (Blum, 1998, p. 16) So, in every lesson, teachers can pursue positive behaviour management strategies energetically to create an environment for student motivation. It helps a lot when the teachers make their classroom teaching effective through practice. In this regard, Ur (2008) says, "...most of our effort should be invested in practice; in making the task in hand as attractive as possible, and encouraging our students to engage in it, invest effort and succeed" (p. 276).

When the teacher finds his/her students having no profound interest in learning and this kind of behaviour often leads to classroom distraction, then the teacher has to adopt certain measures. First, it is helpful if the teacher fights for control in the classroom using his/her own style and positive behavioural systems, which will dramatically impact on the behaviour and motivation of students that ultimately will form the teachers' own personal crusade to survive. When we are struggling with a difficult class, we can make liberal use of the smiley face, as it is most important to galvanize the attention of the students in

that critical time when the students are ignoring the teacher and talking among themselves. We do not need to harsh ourselves because of the problems we face. "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. Courage faces fear and thereby masters it; cowardice represses fear and is thereby mastered by it. We must constantly build dikes of courage to hold back the floor of fear". (Martin Luther King, as cited from Blankstein, 2010, p. 29)

Motivation Strategies

The letter of praise and positive reward either to a particular student or the whole class may be useful to the teacher in difficult situations. In the word of Blum (1998), "... reward will often stop the most malignant individuals from spoiling the atmosphere by talking or mucking around" (p. 21). But some teachers have the habit of punishing the students for the terrible acts of verbal abuse, bullying, fighting and lesson interruptions that occur every day. Punishment does not work and is not the solution to improve those students. Instead, "to survive and to succeed in difficult school you must change the way you think. Reward, reward and reward. The most difficult class, the more rewards" (Blum, 1998, p. 32), We should always remember that prevention is more effective than cure in tough situations. So, reward is an effective prevention but punishment is not an effective cure.

Emphasizing the importance of positive remarks to the students, Baker and Westrup (2000) state, "A comment is more helpful than just a grade. Be positive, but truthful and encouraging- Good, but.....better than last week" (p. 130). Hence, being positive even in difficult circumstances and providing encouragement and reward to

the students might be helpful for the teachers to overcome the possible disruptions in the classroom.

Teaching Strategies and Professional Growth

In a very difficult class, there are some other strategies to best help the teachers for their survival. Sometimes, teaching strategies might help the teachers to survive easily. So, we need to change the strategy so as to get the learners' attention and as per need, being up-to-date with the recent teaching techniques and also continuously developing ourselves professionally. Moreover, teachers can learn themselves from their own practices year after year. In the same line, Geert (2004) states that teachers continue to develop in their job. They keep on 'learning from practice' and become 'more experienced' with every passing year in the career. Similarly, we can also entertain the learners relating their learning to their experiences or life stories. At the same time, teachers may try to encourage good practice by rewarding them rather than by constantly punishing bad or incompetent practice, which will ultimately de-motivate the learners.

Additionally, teachers are benefitted a lot if they keep themselves up-to-date with the recent trends of language teaching and enhance their professional skills and practice in the same in the classroom situations, which will sometimes help to confront the situation well. Similarly, teacher training and teacher development also contribute to a teachers' improved performance. At the same time, we might transform ourselves changing our classroom roles as well. As Karn (2007) says, "Language teachers have to play the role of facilitators in the classroom, not the authorities." (p. 63) Sometimes classroom

activities and interaction might help the teachers to get success in classroom teaching by getting the students' attention and their active involvement. When teachers make their classroom more participatory by involving students in the learning process, it helps to distract them from being disruptive. To make the class livelier, student-centred and more of participatory, "there should be lots of activities, where students get chance to involve themselves." (Dhakal, 2012, p. 11)

Creating Awareness in Stakeholders

In difficult moments, school management may also help the teachers to survive. They can help teachers treating troublemakers and support as the teachers try to settle a class. Sometimes, parents of those students might help them to avoid the problems. In this context, Blankstein (2010) says, "It is clear that the proper support and the involvement of students' families and community at large is fundamental to students' achievement in schools" (p. 192). So, progress up the ladder is possible if the teachers not only try to avoid the situations on their own but also get enormous assistance from all the stakeholders like other teachers, school management, parents, community and so on, as Knezevic and Scholl (2002) say, "Collaboration is a powerful vehicle for exposing and developing knowledge of teaching" (p. 79). In this way, in most difficult situations, teachers can collaboratively work with other stakeholders to resolve the problems.

Additionally, when there is a problem, it is required to develop our zeal, dedication and commitment towards avoiding the problem rather than being an incompetent, lazy and malicious teacher. It is better to be consistent on our effort and keep working hard until we get success, disregarding the fact that we may have to spend a long time.

Objectives of the Study

The principal aim of this study was to examine the situations of classroom disruptions to identify whether the EFL teachers face any behavioural problems inside the classroom. In addition to this, this study also aimed at investigating EFL teachers' strategies for maintaining good classroom atmosphere. It also examined the role of stakeholders to improve the classroom environment.

Research Methodology

This investigation adopts an interview-based descriptive and exploratory qualitative research. I used informal conversational interview, as Rossman and Rall (1998, as cited in Richards, 2003) state: "Interviewing is the hallmark of qualitative research" (p. 47). "A popular approach in educational research, the one-to-one interview, is a data collection process in which the researcher asks the questions to the participants and records answers from only one in the study at a time" (Creswell, 2011, p. 218). In this regard, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) opine that interview is a powerful instrument for qualitative researchers. So, for the authenticity and confidentiality of the study, I have collected data through interviews, by interviewing three in-service teachers about the difficult moments they faced in their classroom during their teaching career. I also asked them about the measures they adopted when they had hard times to survive in their classroom. Moreover, they were asked who they think are responsible for such issues and would help the teachers for better survival. In this study, the interview was semi-structured, where "the interviewer is free to follow up a question with additional questions that probe further" (Perry, 2005, p. 119). There was no predetermination of questions, rather the researcher prepared some guidelines or interview themes before interview.

Data Analysis Procedure

For this small scale investigation, I interviewed three in-service EFL teachers from Kathmandu valley teaching at secondary and higher secondary level and analyzed the information subjectively. To mask their real identity, I have identified to the teachers as T1, T2 and T3. The data gathered from the interviews were coded and categorized under different themes. These codes were organized around research objectives, and there appeared three main themes: (1) Students' behavioural problems that teachers encounter inside the classroom; (2) Teacher strategies for maintaining good classroom atmosphere; and (3) Role of stakeholders to improve the classroom environment.

Finding and Discussion

After interview, a clear image evolved with regard to their experience on the topic. So, for discussion and interpretation, I schematized the information related to the objectives of my topic, and presented the findings under the themes as given below.

Students' behavioural problems inside the classroom

I interviewed the teachers teaching English from school level to college level, and having experience of more than a decade. When I asked them about the problems regarding students' behaviour they encountered inside the classroom, I found the responses of all the participants almost similar, even though they, at first, hesitated to share their personal experiences or the happenings. When I asked them to recall the day when they were misbehaved by the students in the class (if any), they said that the most unexpected behaviour was disrespecting teachers in terms of disobedience and rudeness and verbal

aggression. In the same vein, T2 shared an interesting story. He said,

"I don't easily get angry. Considering my profession, I think I am pretty patient compared to my friends. I don't scream or yell in my classroom although I frequently hear it in other classrooms. As a matter of fact, I rarely have to raise my voice. But, there is one thing that boils my blood, it is disrespect by students. One day, while I was correcting the papers of the students, one boy sprinkled ink in my jacket. I was infuriated in such a way that I slapped him several times....."

In addition, teachers reported that most common and disruptive problem behaviour was talking out of turn followed by non-attentiveness. So, from the discussion, it was revealed that students create problems when they talk out of their turn. According to them, 'talking out of turn' mainly refers to students chatting among themselves on irrelevant topics that disrupts the lesson, calling out and making remarks on somebody or something without teachers' permission. Apart from them, some students even ridicule teachers showing disrespectful behaviour, rudeness, talking back and also confronting with teachers. Recalling similar experience, T1 said,

"Students sometimes dispute against the teacher. Once, a student gave an irrelevant answer to my serious question and gave a casual answer. When I commented, the student became enraged and hostile, and then disputed against me."

After the discussion with the participants, I came to know that they faced several behavioural problems from their students, mainly in the beginning of their teaching career and in the institutions where they were new to the students. The problems they faced are like classroom bullying, making

unnecessary noises as the size of the classroom was big, reluctance to participate in the classroom activities and various behavioural problems like creating disturbances, ignorance to the teachers, not being attentive in the class, being negligent towards the activities that teachers conduct, and so on. They said that sometimes they found no eagerness and enthusiasm in students for classroom participation. Interestingly, T3 said, "Especially in class 11 and 12 it takes about 15 minutes to manage classroom environment before teaching".

Strangely enough, another participant said that when his students created the problems in the classroom, he felt like changing his job to something else, other than teaching. Additionally, the teachers revealed that students' disruptive behaviours retard the smoothness and effectiveness of teaching and also impede the learning of the students. As they reported, students' misbehaviour not only escalated with time, but also lowered academic achievement and increased delinquent behaviour. So, from the experiences of the participants, I came to realize that many teachers confront with the situations when they have difficult time even to survive in their classroom teaching. They face various problems created by the students in the classroom, which really make their journey of teaching troublesome.

Teacher strategies for maintaining good classroom atmosphere

While interviewing the participants, I asked them about the strategies they adopted when they found the students disturbing the class and not being ready to learn. They responded that, whatever their effort, all

went in vein in the beginning. But, gradually they started succeeding in the classroom getting the attention of the students by asking them what the problem was and trying to solve them, if possible. They responded that there might be some reasons behind the disruptive nature of the students. T2 said,

"There may be several causes of misbehaviour. Consider that we might have done something to incite a student to act inappropriately. Perhaps a student is bored and is causing a disruption because of our poor lesson planning, or maybe the student is angry and causing a disturbance because of a sarcastic remark we made".

Similarly, answering my question about the strategies they adopt, T1 and T3 responded that they plan more than usual, when they have a problem in a particular class. T1 said,

"My number one classroom management strategy is solid and tight lesson planning. I found that the students who are engaged in a lesson and have specific goals are working towards having a lot less time to be distracted and get-off task".

In the same way, they said that they made the students play games and do the activities of their interest under their control for several days to divert the attention of the students towards learning. They tried a lot to convince and motivate them and to involve them in the learning process with recreational activities, language games and even punished them giving additional assignments and asking questions to especially the troublemakers frequently. Regarding the strategy to control disruptive students in his class, T3 said,

"We should make our students positive towards school environment, teachers and their friends. What I experienced is that when they are bored and are negative towards their teachers and school, then they often disturb the class in different ways. Once, when I asked the students to prepare the examples after I taught them simile and metaphor, one student shared an unexpected example to the class- 'School is a jail, classes are the cells, teachers are the security guards and we are the prisoners.'"

In this way, making students positive plays a crucial role to avoid their disruptive nature. They further added that they told stories and shared their real life experiences to the students for controlling their misbehaviours. They focused on activities involving the learners in the learning process directly rather than only focusing on lectures.

In addition, the participants reported that sometimes a student misbehaves simply because he/she may need special support in learning or express feelings or may be trying to fulfil the needs that he/she does not know how to handle otherwise: The need for attention, power, revenge or an avoidance of failure. Inevitably, teachers need to respond to minor disruptions that prevent the misbehaving student, and perhaps his/her classmates from learning. We might respond to these often unintentional interruptions by using one or more of the following techniques: proximity, individual signals, physical cues, touch, ignoring and silence. T2 said that when we have a problem, we must do something consistently and respectfully, providing the student with some control over the outcome and an opportunity to achieve a fresh start. He further added that we should also communicate to the student that his/her choice to violate the rules represents, perhaps, an unwitting choice to

accept the consequences for breaking those rules, and that the ultimate consequence of misbehaviour is interrupted learning. So, we should also consider our own plans for any major incidents that might arise in our classroom, whether due to student behaviour or other outside factors.

From the entire discussion with the participants, it can be concluded that motivation, various classroom activities, language games, stories and anecdotes, sharing real experiences and knowing the students well, understanding their feeling, interest and emotions best help the teachers to manage the classroom environment and make their survival comfortable rather than punishing them physically.

Role of stakeholders to improve the classroom environment

When I asked my participants who they think was responsible for the classroom problems created by students and who they think would help the teachers to better survive in the problems, then the responses were very close to each other. They responded that, not only the teachers, but also the society, parents, school administration, friends and students themselves are responsible for the problems. In this regard, T2 said that, they all play the pivotal role in improving the situation. Accentuating this, he added,

"When problems become severe, then the teachers cannot solve them alone. In such situations, we have to work in partnership with the school administration, family and the community to form the school rules and counsel the students because, in most of the cases, students' behaviours are highly influenced by their parent's role at home or their home conditions and the community, as they learn their behaviours from them".

Similarly, a study conducted by Domina (2005) also showed that when parents volunteered at school and supervised students' homework, students' behaviours improved. Correspondingly, T3 reported,

"In our context, the role of parents and the community is basically ignored; but, I think, when we engage families and the community partners, this helps to make a difference in helping students develop good behaviour and make them well cultured".

Moreover, they said that teachers themselves are also responsible as they sometimes fail to understand the feelings and emotions of the students. "Teachers have to act as per the wish and desire of the students", T1 said. In the same way, bad behaviours of the students are associated with their family environment and the influence of television, movies and the other cultures they adopt. At the same time, students act in an undisciplined manner simply to show themselves different from others, according to them.

In this way, based on the perspectives of the teachers I interviewed, it can be concluded that there is not a single factor to the disruptive behaviour of the students in the classroom. There are many factors contributing to make the life of teachers difficult in classroom teaching. More importantly, the students' behaviour in school also affects other students' attitudes about school and overall learning. A well-behaved and well-managed classroom is a productive place for learning. So, if students' behavioural problems are solved in time, it helps to create conducive environment for learning; and for this, the students, teachers, parents, school administration and the community should work together to improve the situation; as Sheldon (2009) states that family and the community are to be seen as the partners

of the school in children's education and development.

Conclusion and Implications

There are many EFL teachers who face multiple behavioural problems in the classroom. Difficult classroom situations mainly refer to the problems like disruptive students, poor motivation, lack of enthusiasm, readiness of the learners in the learning process, and various disciplinary acts inside the classroom. These problems affect the teachers quite a lot and make their classroom survival difficult, which might create demotivation in the teachers. Of course, these problems may not be created in every teacher's classroom. Nevertheless, when the problems arise, it is better to be ready to tackle and overcome the problems rather than running away from them.

The findings of this study suggested that in the situations when teachers find their classroom survival diabolical, they need to widen their role by not only being a classroom teacher, but also being a changing agent by motivating the students, change the pattern of classroom instruction, making an effective plan and classroom strategies and creating awareness in the stakeholders as teachers themselves are not only responsible for the problematic situations. Apart from them, the study revealed that teachers have to learn to tolerate and have to do their best for their pupils by being more efficient and effective trying to make 'impossible things possible'. In this context, Blum (1998) says, "surviving in difficult school is similar to surviving life as a foot-soldier in the first

world war trenches, where the strategists, ten miles far from the front, have an unrealistic grand plan for winning the war" (p. 140). So, in order to survive in the classroom instruction effectively, the baseline goal as a teacher is to establish good relationship with all the stakeholders and build constructive relationships with them.

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