

**CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT: SEATING ARRANGEMENTS IN  
ESL CLASSROOMS**

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by

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## **1. Introduction**

Teaching English as a second language is very challenging, especially to the young learners since, it requires the teachers to have excellent classroom management skills to ensure successful learning. No language can be taught effectively by focusing only on the methodology and ignoring the issues pertaining to classroom management. Generally, classroom management refers to the process where a teacher organizes and controls student movement, behavior and interaction pattern during a lesson. A teacher's most important job in the classroom is to create the conditions in which effective learning can take place. To make a course effective, a teacher must have the skills of managing a class successfully. It can be done through teacher's positive attitude, intentions, personality and a healthy relationship with the learners. It also requires certain organizational skills (task organization, lesson organization etc) and techniques. All these things together can be called classroom management.

There is a conventional notion about classroom management that it only means managing the student's disruptive behaviors and maintaining discipline in classroom. According to Julie Sanford, Edmund Emmer and Barbara Clements, (cited: Jones and Jones, 1981: pg-3) "The concept of classroom management is broader than the notion of student discipline. It includes all the things teachers must do to foster student involvement and cooperation in classroom activities and to establish a productive working environment". Jere Brophy and Carolyn Evertson, (1976) (cited: Jones and Jones, 1981: pg-3) stated that "Almost all surveys of teacher effectiveness report that classroom management skills are of primary importance in determining teaching success,

whether it is measured by student learning or by ratings. Thus, management skills are crucial and fundamental. A teacher who is grossly inadequate in classroom management skills is probably not going to accomplish much”.

Classroom management includes grouping and seating, setting up activities, time management, teacher’s control over students in the classroom, proper start and end of the lesson, maintaining discipline, dealing with problems, using proper tools and techniques, giving instructions, monitoring etc. It is essential for a language classroom. In a language classroom, teachers need to ensure students’ involvement and comfort. If the students are not encouraged and do not feel comfortable in the classroom, it becomes very difficult for the teacher to teach and involve the students in the classroom activities. Thus, classroom management is necessary in order to create a suitable learning environment and encourage the learners to learn the language.

My focus in this report is the seating arrangements in ESL classrooms which is one of the most important aspects of classroom management. Seating arrangement can be associated with the other aspects of classroom management such as instruction, classroom interaction, forming groups, monitoring, maintaining discipline etc. If the seating arrangement of a classroom is not set up properly, it may affect the other aspects of classroom as well. It also becomes difficult to grab learner’s attention if the seating arrangement is not proper. In my report, I will be focusing on –

- Different theoretical approaches of classroom management and seating arrangements.

- The importance of different types of seating arrangements and the affects of it on the other factors in ESL classroom.

I will also discuss the implementation of the theoretical approaches based on my internship in a school of Dhaka.



## 2. Literature review

Hue Ming-Tak and Li Wai-Shing (2008: pg- 46) have stated that conventionally classroom management was viewed only as an exertion of control of the teacher over the learners, but recently the view has changed. Now it is viewed as an “art of establishing a good climate and managing instructions effectively” (Ming-Tak and Wai-Shing, 2008). It is not limited to the implementation of procedures to organize the students and set up rules for a disciplined classroom. It also includes how a teacher ascertains his/her authority by offering interesting lessons. Hue Ming-Tak and Li Wai-Shing (2008: pg- 47) have defined classroom management as “teachers steering and coordinating a complex environment for the purpose of effective learning and teaching”. According to Kounin (1970) (cited: Laslett, and Smith, 2008: pg- 01), when a teacher generates ‘a high rate of work involvement with a low rate of deviancy in academic settings’ that can be called as a successful classroom management. Whereas Jim Scrivener (1994: pg- 80) defined classroom management as a combination of decisions and actions where the ‘actions’ are those which are done in the classroom and ‘decisions’ refers to how and when the actions are to be done, whether to be done or not and if done who will do that etc.

Managing a classroom can be trouble free if a teacher can break down the class into smaller components. Hue Ming-Tak and Li Wai-Shing (2008) suggested four major components of classroom management. One of those is “Management of the Physical Environment” (pg-47). It involves the management of floor space, wall space, countertop space, shelf, cupboard and closet space and general ambience. According to them, to ensure students’ comfort and provide them with a pleasant atmosphere for learning,



teachers need to create the best possible physical environment. Seating arrangement is one of the most important parts of floor space. There are some common seating arrangements which include horizontal rows, vertical rows, circles and long tables which serve different purposes (Hue Ming-Tak and Li Wai-Shing, 2008: pg- 49). Ming-Tak and Li Wai-Shing believes “a good seating arrangement is one which facilitates specific learning tasks and activities and communicates a teacher’s beliefs about learning and teaching” (pg- 48, 49).

Moreover, changing seating arrangement plays a vital role to make the learners more involved in the class. “Changing seating arrangements can help students interact with different people” stated Jim Scrivener (1994: pg- 87). He suggested “circles, squares and horseshoes rather than parallel rows” (Scrivener, 1994: pg- 86) to increase student interaction. He backed up his point by saying, “in a circle or horseshoe, learners can make eye contact with everyone else in the group and thus interact much more naturally” (Scrivener, 1994: pg-88). Moreover, students who are weaker have less chance of hiding themselves and students who are stronger have less chance to dominate in the class in this seating arrangement, which shows ‘a much greater sense of equality’ (Scrivener, 1994: pg- 88). Scrivener gave some ideas about what a teacher can do with fixed and movable seating arrangements. Some of them are:

- When the seating is fixed, turn around and sit backwards to work with the people behind you.
- Instead of getting stuck in an unsuitable seating arrangement, ask students to rearrange the seating arrangements when it is preferable.

- If not possible, then sit on the ends of the row and work with people in the next row.

In many studies, it is seen that seating arrangement is a very important factor in 'the process of beginning a lesson smoothly and promptly' (Laslett, and Smith, 2008: pg- 01). Additionally, it depends on the type of lessons taught and the type of furniture in the class. Marland, (1975) (cited: Laslett, and Smith, 2008: pg- 02) agrees with the fact that proper seating arrangement takes care of students' disruptive behaviors in the class and says it not only helps to avoid the disruptive behaviors of the students but also helps the teachers to remember the names of the student quickly. Francis (1975) (cited: Laslett, and Smith, 2008: pg- 02) stated that it helps to reorganize children for different task and activities, increase involvement and decrease distraction but the teacher needs to be concerned about the fact that the change of the seating arrangement is under his/her control.

Teacher's position in the classroom is another very important factor of classroom management which is also related to seating arrangement. To communicate with all the students in the class, teachers sometimes need to move from one place to another which requires some free space in the class. Jones (2000) (Sited: Ming-Tak and Wai-Shing, 2008: pg- 49) affirmed that leaving sufficient space in the classroom is very important to give teachers easy and efficient access to different groups of students. He adds that the daily routine movement areas of the classroom should be free from congestion to avoid disruptive behaviors.

Jeremy Harmer (1998: pg- 31, 32) proposed three types of seating arrangements.

These are:

- **Orderly rows:** In orderly rows seating arrangement, both teacher and students can see each other clearly and can have eye contacts. Maintaining discipline is easier in this seating arrangement. Teacher can also walk up and down if there is an aisle and can have personal interaction with the students. This type of arrangement is suitable for watching a video, using the board, explaining a grammar point, demonstrating text organization etc where the teacher can work with the whole class. Teacher needs to engage the whole class while working with them in this arrangement and for this teacher must move round. Orderly row is best suited for medium to large classrooms.

- **Circles and horseshoes:** This type of seating is preferable in smaller classrooms. There is a slight difference between circles and horseshoes, that is, in horseshoe; teachers' position is at the open end of the arrangement where the blackboard is situated, whereas in circle, teachers' position is between the circle. In circle seating arrangement, there is a feeling of equity among the students since the teacher's position is among them. In horseshoe, it may not be true since the teacher stays at the centre of the classroom although there is a greater chance to get close to the students. The most important advantage of this type of seating arrangement is that, all the students can see each other which are not possible in orderly row arrangement.

- **Separate tables:** Separate table is more informal than other seating arrangements where students are seated in small groups in separate tables. In this arrangement, teacher work as a facilitator who moves around and monitors the students activity. The atmosphere of the class is less hierarchical in this arrangement compared to the others.



When the teacher works with the students of one table, the other students get on with their own works. The negative sides of this arrangement are that the students may not want to work with the same peers all the time. Another problem of this arrangement is that it is difficult to teach the whole class since the students are more scattered and separated.

Besides, teachers need to consider the nature of the students while arranging the seats. They should arrange the seating in such a manner so that the teaching and learning can occur in the class as effectively as possible. They also need to ensure the participation of all the students in the class. It should not happen that students who are seated in the front or at the centre of the classroom are interacting and participating in the activities more than the students seated in the corner or back of the classroom.

According to Alexandra Ramsden (1999), "The best arrangement depends on the situation of the class and teacher". In his paper, he discussed six common types of seating arrangements which can be used by the teachers. He also pointed out the positive as well as the negative sides of the arrangements. Some of these are discussed below:

- **Clusters:** This seating arrangement consist of four to five desks together facing each other. Each desk consists of a group of four to five people. It's not arranged in any linear position. Clusters are scattered in different places of the classroom and there is enough space between two clusters so that the chairs do not smack each other and teachers can easily move from one place to another and can work with each group. Cluster is very favorable for the class where there is a lot of group work. Students in a



group can easily make eye contacts and work with each other and can help each other as well. Before setting up a cluster, the teacher needs to think about the group of students whether they are able to do group work or not. Students have to be from different levels in each group so that they can help each other. The idea of this arrangement is to promote more collaborative learning. Teacher in this arrangement helps and guides the students. Students are also allowed to do individual work in this arrangement.



Clusters have some disadvantages too. It is not favorable during exams since there is a chance of cheating in the exam. It also creates problems when teacher is giving instruction since the students may not face towards the teacher. Instead of listening to the instructions or doing the tasks, students may talk among themselves.

- **Desk rows:** Desk rows are the most traditional seating arrangement. In this arrangement desks are placed in several rows facing towards the front of the classroom. There is a gap between each desk vertically. So the teacher can walk back and forth without moving anything. Before setting up this arrangement, teacher needs to analyze student behavior and decide who should sit at the back and who should sit at the front. This arrangement is perfect for the test taking situation and also good for giving

instructions since the students are all facing the front and can see all the instructional aids clearly. It is easy for the teacher to monitor the class.



The problem of this arrangement is that some students may sit at the back or corner of the class to avoid classroom participation and interaction. It is also problematic for group work.

- **Table Rows:** In table row seating arrangement, long tables are placed in rows vertically from the front to back of the room. Students sit next to each other. This arrangement is good for group work. The purpose of this arrangement is again collaborative learning. Students can do peer correction during writing activities and can share their works with peers just turning to the person next to them.





Some problems of this arrangement are - i.) Students who are seating at the end of the table may not be able to see the teacher during the direct instruction. ii.) It is also difficult for the teacher to see all the students and monitor their activities. iii.) This arrangement is bad for test taking situation. Moreover, it is very difficult to have a whole class discussion since the students need to move from their place to see who is talking. This arrangement is good for the situations where there is no direct instruction and students do group work.

- **Semi-circle:** Semi-circle seating arrangement consists of few desks touching each other placed in a semi-circle shape. All the desks are faced in front of the classroom. In this arrangement, both teacher and students can see each other. Since the seats are faced front of the room, students can see the instructional aids clearly as well. The purpose of the teacher who sets up this type of seating arrangement can be direct instruction and collaborative learning. Almost all the other ideas can be implemented in this seating arrangement. Since all the students are facing towards the front of the class, they can see all the instructional aids which support direct instruction. Students can do different types of classroom activities such as debate, group discussion, group project etc since the set up accommodates these kinds of activities. Teacher can easily walk around the class and can monitor the students through which s/he can have full control over the students.



Besides, it is difficult for the teacher to interact with the students on one on one basis since the seats are placed very close to each other. Also, semi-circle is not favorable in situation a where teacher wants to have some other types of activities (i.e. role play) outside the desk area because it occupies almost the whole class.

- **Pairs:** Pairs consist of two desks placed together. Each pair of desks is away from other pairs. Students are faced towards the front of the class in this setting. So they can easily see the instructional aids. This arrangement is good for test taking situation.



Teacher, in this arrangement, can walk around the whole class and monitor the students easily. Before setting up this type of seating arrangement, teacher needs to decide who can be paired with whom considering some other factors such as what lowers their academic stamina, whether they misbehave or not, whether one student is comfortable with his/her pair etc. Students are allowed to do both individual as well as pair work in this arrangement. The drawback of this arrangement is again some student will sit at the end or corners of the room to avoid classroom participation.



### **3. Implementation of theories into practice**

I worked in a school for three months as an intern to gain practical knowledge about teaching. I was appointed there as a trainee teacher. I used to assist the main teachers. During this period of my internship, I did not teach any class but observed a few. The objective of my internship was to see how the theories that I have studied in my courses are implemented and how they work in a real life context. The focus of this section will be my observations of the classes that I assisted to teach with reference to seating arrangement.

I worked in play group. There were four sections in play group. I observed all the four sections of play group during the period of my internship. There were two teachers assigned for each class. The number of students in each of the classes ranged from 30 to 35. Although the classroom setting was more or less similar in all the sections, but the seating arrangement was different in different sections. In one section called Munia, the seating arrangement was quite interesting. It was the mixture of separate tables and individual desks in column. There were six tables placed vertically from front to back of the classroom in two rows. In each table 4-6 students can sit. There was a spacious aisle between two rows. At the back of the classroom, there were a few single desks placed horizontally.

This arrangement was very good for the students of elementary level. In this class, teachers needed to move a lot from one student to another because the students always

need teachers help. Students also needed to move from their seats to do board work or to submit their works. So, this arrangement was good for this class since there was enough space in the classroom for teacher to move and work with the students. Students even could do other activities such as dancing, singing etc in the aisle of the room. Moreover, both teachers and students could keep eye contact with each other which was very important for the teachers to monitor the elementary level students. Even, the students who were seated at the back of the room can not hide themselves from the teachers because they were clearly visible even from the front of the classroom. This arrangement was also very good for group work although no group work took place in that class because the students were so young to do group works.

Sometimes it became difficult for the teacher to manage the whole class when all the students wanted teachers' help at a time. It became difficult for the teacher to go to all the tables and help the students at the same time. But there was a solution to this problem. Teachers placed students in one table who needs teachers help so frequently. So, it became easy for the teachers to work with all the students who needed help so frequently at the same time. While teachers worked with those weak students, other students worked on their own since they did not need much help from the teacher. Teachers also changed the seats of some students in order to maintain discipline. Teachers used to place the disruptive students in isolated seats. Although they were placed in an isolated seat, they were not disconnected with the teacher and other classroom activities. If any student needed one on one interaction or help from the teacher, they used to be placed in single tables where teachers can easily interact with them on one on one basis.



There were some problems with this arrangement. To see the blackboard and the other instructional aides, some students need to turn back who were sitting at the tables because they were not facing the board. Some students also did not allow some other students to sit next to them. In this situation, teachers either placed them in single tables or placed them with their friends with whom they wanted to sit. Another problem of this arrangement was that since the students sat in a group, most of the time they talked with their friends instead of doing the class work. So, teachers changed the seats of those students who talked a lot. During the exam time, teachers changed the seats so that they can not cheat in the exam. Teachers changed those students' seats that were friends and sit together. Students did not cheat when the teacher changes one's seat and placed him or her next to someone who was not his or her friend.

The classroom setting of other sections was different from the section Munia. The seating arrangements in other sections were very conventional. The other sections follow desk row seating arrangement. The seats were arranged into rows. In every row, there were two chairs and tables placed in column. There were aisles between the rows which made it easy for the teachers to move. Teachers could go back and forth while teaching. They could easily monitor the students. Students also could see the board and instructional aids easily from any point of the classroom in this seating arrangement. The problem of this arrangement was again the same as before. Some of the students used to sit at the back or at the corner of the class to hide them from the teacher. So, when teacher used to ask the entire class to repeat what they said (i.e. rhyme or any lesson), students who sat at the back never used to repeat.

#### **4. Recommendation**

Young learners are very unstable. They always like changes. They become bored very easily. So it becomes very difficult for the teachers to motivate them. To motivate them, teacher should try to make them feel comfortable in the class. They can change the classroom setting after few days. Instead of fixed seating arrangement they can try different types of seating arrangement. The concept of fixed seating should be changed. I believe, one type of fixed seating arrangement can not benefit the students all the time and it also does not fulfill the purpose. So, the school authority can consider this issue and can allow the teachers to arrange the seats according to need. During my internship, I have noticed few problems of seating arrangement in the class where. Some problems that I have noticed and the solutions to those problems are given below:

- The seating arrangement of this school is fixed. To remove the students' monotony, it can be changed once in two months. It will also grow students' interest in classroom activities because it will make them feel that they are in a new place. The changing can be done during the vacation period.
- Before setting up any arrangement, teachers at first need to analyze the type/level of students, the size and the type of lesson taught in the class.
- There are different types of students in each class. Some students are weak and some strong. Some need teachers help so frequently whereas some do not need any help. So, if the teachers place those types of students together, it will be easy for the teacher to work with them. Otherwise teachers have to move from one place to another very frequently.



- To motivate the weak students, teacher can set up the arrangement in such a manner where there will be a mix of strong and weak students. When weak students see others working and doing well, they may be motivated to do their class works. This way, strong students can also help the weak ones. Then the teachers will not need to go to all of the students personally to solve their problems, which will save teachers time.

- Teachers also need to be careful about who sits where in the class. During my internship, I noticed that there were some students who always sit at the back or corners of the classroom so that the teachers do not see them properly. They even sometimes sleep in the classroom sitting at the back. So, teachers need to change their seats time to time.

- There was another thing which I noticed was that although both male and female students were there in the class, most of the time girls sit next to the girls and boys sit next to the boys. Some girls do not even allow boys to sit next to her and some boys also do the same. Teachers should take a notice of it and encourage mixed seating, so that, the class do not get divided into male and female students and turn into a unitary whole.

## **5. Conclusion**

So, in conclusion, it can be said that, classroom management is not only controlling students' disruptive behaviors and maintaining discipline; it also entails the other factors that establish a productive working environment in a language classroom. Seating arrangement is one of the most important aspects of classroom management which is connected to the other aspects of it. In a language classroom, seating arrangement is important to create a positive learning environment. There are different types of seating arrangement for different type of classroom. All type of seating arrangement has some positive and negative sides. All of them are not suitable for all classes. Some are good for some classroom contexts whereas some are not. So, it needs to be analyzed before setting up any type of seating arrangement. From my internship experience, I have noticed that, it is very difficult to manage the young learners in the class if the seating arrangement is not properly set up. So, it needs to be seriously taken care of by the teachers.

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