Discipline Problems in The EFL Class: Is There a Cure?

Problemas con la disciplina en el aula de inglés: ¿Existe una cura?

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This article discusses the findings of an action research project carried out to minimize the negative class participation of 10 EFL pre-intermediate students, aged-11-14, in a language school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. First, some theoretical issues concerning discipline in the language class will be discussed. Second, the original project I developed in 1995 to minimize the negative class participation of 14 EFL beginner students, aged 12-15, will be reviewed. Next, the experiment with the 2003 group will be described. The results seem to confirm that, although some adaptations to the original project were necessary, when students reflect upon their importance in the lessons, they tend to behave better in class and to show a more positive attitude towards learning.

Key words: Classroom management, discipline, awareness-raising activities

Este artículo discute los resultados de una investigación acción realizada para minimizar los problemas de disciplina en una clase de 10 alumnos de inglés, de nivel pre-intermedio, con edades entre 11-14 años, en un instituto de Rio de Janeiro, Brasil. En primer lugar, se discuten algunos presupuestos teóricos; en segundo lugar, presento el proyecto original que desarrollé en 1995 para trabajar con la indisciplina en mi clase de 14 alumnos principiantes en inglés, con edad entre 12-15 años. A continuación, se describe el experimento realizado con el grupo de 2003. Los resultados parecen confirmar que, aunque fueron necesarias algunas adaptaciones al proyecto inicial, cuando los alumnos reflexionan sobre su importancia para las clases, tienden a portarse mejor y demuestran una actitud más positiva hacia el aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: Manejo del aula, disciplina, tareas de concientización

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Introduction

The range of roles EFL teachers play to ensure that learning takes place is undoubtedly wide. Among these, we may see teachers as planners, deciding which aspects of the subject to teach and how to do it; as facilitators, providing learners with strategies to guide them in the quest for knowledge; and as managers, establishing the patterns of interaction among students and making sure they focus their attention on the lesson and engage in the proposed tasks. Considering these roles, I think the latter seems to be the hardest one to perform since it involves managing people's attitude and behavior, which means establishing and maintaining discipline in such way that it does not affect teacher–student rapport or create an unfriendly, threatening atmosphere in the classroom. This job seems to become even more demanding when instances of negative class participation[1] such as disruptive talking, the use of L1 when L2 is expected, little concern about homework, tardiness and lack of attention and interest are commonplace in the classroom.

In 2003, I took over a class of 10 pre-intermediate students aged 11-13 with a record of misbehavior and teacher confrontation in the language institute where I work in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At this institution, the lessons are based on the communicative approach and taught in the target language right from the first class. However, the students in this group showed instances of negative class participation such as the refusal to use the target language and lack of attention and interest in the lessons. Moreover, they insisted that I teach the lessons in Portuguese, their mother tongue, and not in English.

Upon analyzing this situation, I decided to revisit the principles and activities of another research I carried out in 1995, at the same language institute, in order to minimize the discipline problems I was facing when teaching a class of 14 EFL beginner students, aged 12-15. Their low motivation and the resulting teacher–student conflicts made me stop to think about my repertoire of techniques to establish discipline and to resort to literature in order to find new ways to deal with these problems.

At that time, the statement that the occurrence of indiscipline can be minimized when students feel responsible for the lessons they are studying seemed to be the solution to my problems. In order to test this hypothesis, I carried out action research to investigate the causes of indiscipline in that group and devised / implemented awareness-raising activities which aimed at controlling the instances of negative class participation I had identified.

The actions taken to improve discipline in my 1995 group proved to be so effective that I decided to replicate this study in order to test its validity with my 2003 group.

The discussion of the underlying principles of the project, the actions taken and results obtained in both contexts are revealed in this article.

Review of Literature

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995, p. 390) defines the word discipline as "the training which produces

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1   The wide range of passive and active behaviors that are detrimental to classroom learning as contrasted with positive class participation such as using L2; taking notes and asking pertinent questions. (Wadden & McGovern, 1989, p. 2)

obedience or self-control, often in the form of rules and punishments if these are broken, or the obedience or self control produced by this training". Notwithstanding, it is common knowledge among EFL teachers that obtaining "obedience and self-control" from students requires much more than "training" due to the diversity of settings in which EFL teachers work.

According to Wadden & McGovern (1991), factors such as the large numbers of students who are not in the classroom by choice; the number of students per class; the lack of importance students give to English in the school curriculum when compared to other school subjects such as math or science, and the fact that, in the same group, EFL teachers work with students from different cultural and academic backgrounds, can affect discipline in class. The authors go on to say that applied linguists and teacher trainers tend to overlook this issue of classroom management in the genuine language classroom by putting forward theories and pedagogy which revolve around the concept of ideal learners, leaving teachers with little but their intuition to guide them as regards discipline. Brown (1994, p. 417) adds to the complexity of this issue by stating that, "If all of your students were hard–working, intrinsically motivated, active, dedicated intelligent learners - well, you would still have what we could label as discipline problems!"

Upon analyzing these facts, one may assume that the possible reasons why it is difficult to maintain discipline in the language classroom is that, although the phrase "classroom discipline" has for most teachers an immediate and clear meaning (Ur, 1996), teachers and students do not always share the same views on what is or is not acceptable behavior. For instance, a more introverted and quiet student may associate the noise produced by group work with a lack of classroom management skills on the teacher's part. Consequently, he/she may think no learning can take place in such an environment while the teacher may view the same context as evidence that the students are motivated and engaged in the task, thus, learning is taking place. This situation may trigger restless behavior on the student's part as he/she may be reluctant to engage in the activities and, at the same time, depending on the teacher's and student's personality, lead to confrontation because the teacher may interpret the student's lack of willingness to participate as an undisciplined act.

This touches upon an issue which is crucial if teachers and students are to live peacefully in the classroom –the need for the establishment of shared beliefs about teaching and learning a foreign language at a language school. About this issue, Nunan & Lamb (1996, p. 112) say that

"Many of the classroom management problems experienced by teachers working in unfamiliar cultural contexts arise from a mismatch between the roles and expectations of the teacher and those of the learners. In some cases, the mismatches and resulting management problems are a result of a clash of educational values and perceptions (for example, when teachers see themselves as facilitators, while students see them as dispensers of wisdom)."

The authors' observation about the clash of educational values and perceptions is also valid in a monolingual context if we take into account the two different learning environments to which Brazilian EFL students are exposed. On the one hand, we have

English as a school subject, being taught the same way math, science, geography and other school subjects are: The teacher talks, the students listen and copy. On the other hand, we have English taught communicatively at specialized language schools. Since students' first contact with education is in primary school, early in life they master the traditional set of beliefs about what a class is like and how they are supposed to behave during this event. Consequently, when these same students step into a foreign language classroom in a language institute, they expect to find a routine which reflects the set of educational beliefs they are familiar with. Notwithstanding, depending on the method / approach adopted by the institution where they want to study, they are faced with procedures which are completely new to them. This "shock" may cause a mismatch between the teachers' expectations, as they are aware of the rationale behind their practice, and the students', who are unaware of the underlying principles regarding the method / approach in question. This happens because these teaching practices were, firstly, aimed at teaching a second language to Americans and Europeans, whose educational values do not always correspond to the values and beliefs shared by Brazilian teachers and students. Therefore, it is the teacher's role to make it clear to the students what he/she means by discipline. Consequently, "we must decide before stepping into the classroom what we expect our students to be doing, and we need to formulate a set of strategies for dealing with situations in which our expectations are not met" (Nunan & Lamb, 1996, p. 123).

Since prevention is better than cure, and indiscipline very often emerges as a result of confusion over rules and expectations,

Nunan and Lamb (1996), Harmer (1996), Wadden & McGovern (1991) and Ur (1996) propose the establishment of an explicit code of conduct to clarify both students' and teacher's responsibilities in the classroom.

The Code of Conduct

In order to minimize discipline problems and to avoid unfairness / inconsistency when reprimanding students' misbehavior, a list of guidelines that enables students to know, from the very beginning, what is expected of them and how their performance affects their test score and evaluations is a very useful tool. This list is usually referred to as **the code of conduct**. Therefore, when misbehavior occurs, the teacher refers the student to **the code** and carries out the disciplinary process dispassionately.

Although the establishment of this **code** is a must to avoid mismatches between teacher's and students' expectations, it is possible that if imposed on the students, it will have little effect since teenagers, in general, do not enjoy the idea of being told what they must or must not do. Instead, if the teacher proposes an activity aimed at raising the students' awareness to the fact that their good behavior is crucial to learning and that **negative class participation** affects the learner's work as well as the teacher's, the **code** is likely to be followed. Therefore, it can be assumed that when teachers and students work collaboratively to create their own **code of conduct**, the students tend to feel responsible for it and to conclude that their work is as important as their teacher's for their success.

Having this belief in mind, I developed a set of procedures to establish a **code of**

conduct to solve the problems I was facing with my teenage group in 1995. This is described in the next section of this article.

Methodology of the Research

The situation which led me to introduce the use of **codes of conduct** in my teaching practice was rather peculiar. In 1995, I was assigned to take over a group of students who had spent the first month of classes studying in another class with another teacher. As their original group had grown too large, the group was split and I was nominated to take over this second half. Among the learners in my group were five special students: three teenagers, labeled "problem students" at their regular school due to their poor behavior in class and their lack of respect for the school rules, and two students who were extremely shy. Due to the splitting of the original group, I had to deal with affective problems such as the students' reluctance to study away from their peers as they had already gotten used to being in the larger group, and the fact that they were the ones that had to go and study with "the new teacher".

This situation generated frequent misbehavior such as the lack of interest in the lessons, refusal to try to use English in class, failure to do class / homework, and disruptive talking. A chaotic atmosphere had emerged and all my efforts to control the situation such as calling students' attention, reseating them, scolding them, even shouting at them and giving "surprise tests" to make them do homework only created stress and confrontation between my students and me. At that point, I decided to review the literature on this issue and started to question myself about the possible reasons which led

these learners to insist on **negative class participation** and why the measures taken to fight the problem had been in vain. This brainstorming resulted in a set of hypotheses which guided the action research project I carried out to reverse this situation.

My original idea was that if I managed to make it clear to the learners, in a practical way, why their attitude towards the lesson was harmful to their learning process, they would understand that a disciplined atmosphere could only help them learn the language. Besides, if I managed to make them feel committed and take responsibility for the good flow of the lessons, the misbehavior would be likely to diminish. After all these considerations, I decided to devise the following project, which is reviewed in the next section.

The 1995 Project

Originally, this was a three-phase project in which, by means of reflecting upon my students' views on the classes and observing their behavior, I wished to understand the causes of their misbehavior and to plan and test a course of action to minimize it during the semester.

The first phase aimed at identifying the possible causes for my students' **negative class participation**. In order to do so, I devised a questionnaire containing seven open questions in L1 about the level of difficulty of the lessons, the use of Portuguese in class, discipline control, homework assignments, interest in the lessons and disruptive talking (see Appendix 1). Next, I asked the students to answer the questions in L1, individually and anonymously, in the last 10 minutes of the day's lesson. At home, I listed all the comments

made on each question and tried to identify the subjects the students touched upon. My aim with this analysis was twofold: I wished to check if my assumptions about the causes of indiscipline matched the students' ideas and I also sought for a better understanding of my students' behavior in class. This procedure also enabled me to spot relevant issues for discussion with the whole group.

In the subsequent lesson, I implemented the second phase of this project by proposing an awareness-raising activity devised by me so as to show the students the importance of their role in the lessons and to foster the learners' commitment to the fulfillment of their duties.

For this activity, which was carried out in L1, I divided the class into two groups and asked group A to list all the things a good teacher has to do in order to teach a good lesson, while I asked group B to list all the things a good student has to do in order to profit from a lesson. Next, I divided the white board into two and listed under "teacher's duties" all the ideas elicited from group A and, on the other side, under "student's duties", the ideas elicited from group B. At this point, I asked the students to work in pairs and to try and correlate each item from A's column to B's column (see Appendix 2). While I elicited the answers, I pointed out the importance of the fulfillment of each duty if the lesson is to be successful and that both students and teacher must cooperate in order to have a profitable semester together. We also had the opportunity to go over the issues raised in the questionnaire and to discuss our views on the lesson and on the things that were hindering the learning process.

The next activity was the proposal of a **code of conduct** in which the groups listed

all the rules we (teacher and students) should observe in order to do our share to improve the atmosphere in class and to let learning take place. After groups A and B had finished, we compiled our code of conduct and I prepared a poster to fix on the classroom notice board to remind us of what we had agreed to do in class (see Appendix 3). At the end of the activity, we all signed a contract promising to do our best in class. After that, I proposed that we monitor our changes in attitude throughout the lesson that term.

In order to do that, five minutes before the end of every class, I asked each student to think about the grade they think they deserved for behavior in that lesson while I graded each of them, too. Next, I invited each student to tell the group his/her grade and why he/she decided on that and I revealed my grade. We discussed the grades and came to a consensus about the average to be recorded on a wall progress chart. This monitoring went on until we had achieved a pacific relationship. That is, the instances of **negative class participation** which I had spotted in the beginning of the semester and which hindered the learning process had gradually disappeared. In this refreshed environment, the students showed respect for one another by understanding that there was a time for them to talk and a time for them to listen to their classmates' contributions. Therefore, they paid more attention to the classes and tried to interact in English as much as possible. In doing so, they demonstrated that they were willing to cooperate for the success of the group.

Based on this change in behavior, I concluded that the activities devised had been successful and the project aims had been achieved. From then on, I developed the habit

of establishing the code of conduct with any new group I taught so that everybody would know "the rules of the game" right from the beginning and take personal responsibility for the lessons they were attending.

2003: A New Challenge

In August 2003, I took over a group of 10 pre-intermediate students, aged 11-13, who had been studying at this same language school for 3 years. In an informal conversation in the staff room, I learned that the group had given a lot of trouble to their former teacher, a newcomer but experienced professional. According to her report, the students were not motivated to study and seemed to pay little attention to the lessons despite all her efforts to make them engage in the activities and use English during the lesson. This situation strained their relationship as she had to call their attention all the time. In her opinion, the students were weak and difficult to control.

In our first class of the term I noticed that the students did not make use of English at all and that they were more interested in talking to their friends, as eight of them belonged to the same class at secondary school, than in listening to me. The only two students who seemed to be following the lesson and were making use of the target language were the ones that did not study together at school. Therefore, I believed that the establishment of our **code of conduct** would, in the short run, make them change their behavior in class.

Notwithstanding, after monitoring my students' behavior in class for one month using the grade system I had adopted in 1995 and the **code of conduct** we had set on the first

day of class, my efforts to raise the students` awareness about the importance of using L2 in class not only to complete the tasks, but also for communication, did not seem to be as effective as they had been with the 1995 group. This ineffectiveness was clear to me since I usually had to spend a considerable amount of time reminding the students about the **code of conduct,** mainly as regards the fact that they should not make use of L1 and that they were talking too much during the lesson. Besides, whenever we carried out the grading session at the end of the lesson, some students would complain that I was being too strict and that they had had a good performance in class. In fact, I was unable to convince them that my point of view was right and the discrepancy between some of the grades was too high to be ignored, as shown in Appendix 4.

Consequently, these results called for another approach in order to try and minimize the problem of disruptive talking and the students` insistence on the use of L1.

At this point, I asked the students to answer individually, in written form, the same questionnaire I had prepared in 1995 (see Appendix 1) and started to observe their reactions during the lessons so that I could understand the reasons they behaved that way. The data I collected are described and discussed in the next sections of this article.

Statement of Results

Upon the analysis of the answers to the questionnaire, which followed the same procedure adopted in 1995, I learned that six of them regarded the lessons interesting while one said they were not very interesting and three found them boring.

Although the majority of the students liked the classes, seven stated that there were times when they clicked off. The reasons were boredom (one student); having to copy from the board (one student); daydreaming (two students); lack of interest in viewing activities (one student); lack of vocabulary to follow the lesson (one student) and a dislike of English (one student). Among the reasons given by the three student who kept their attention throughout the class were the fact that, quoting the students', "the games were relaxing" (one student) and that "the classes were really interesting" (two students).

As regards the most serious problem I faced with this group, the questionnaire answers showed that all students admitted engaging in disruptive talking. Through observation, I noticed that this talking was done mostly in L1 (Portuguese) and signaled that students were not on task / paying attention to the teacher / classmates' oral contributions. Contrary to my beliefs, five students did not see this type of talking as harmful to the flow of the lesson as long as a) they spoke in a low voice (three students); b) they were doing nothing in class (one student); or c) when they were able to control themselves (one student). However, even the four students who believed it to be harmful engaged in this activity. Instances of this unwanted talking took place, according to the answers to the questionnaire, a) during their "leisure moments", as stated by one student; b) as soon as they had finished their exercises (four students); c) whenever possible (one student); when they had to copy something from the board (one student); or when I was not looking (one student). The reasons they talked in L1 may be connected to the fact that six of them believed that the lesson should be taught in Portuguese, whereas three disagreed with the use of L1, and one student thought L1 should be used to explain more complex language items.

As far as the level of difficulty of the lessons was concerned, four students thought the lessons were easy; three thought they were difficult because they were taught in English; two found them of average difficulty; and one believed that misbehavior hindered their understanding.

Concerning the measures taken to control discipline problems, that is, the implementation of the **code of conduct**, five of the respondents believed the **code** to be efficient and necessary; three stated that it was not always effective and that the teacher should a) phone the parents of the students who disturb the class (one student); b) allow the use of Portuguese (L1) to prevent the students from getting tired of the lesson (one student); c) change the students' desks for a table and a chair, which, according to the respondent's view, would give "a more serious atmosphere to the class" (one student). One student did not know what to say and another thought that contracts and codes were childish measures.

About the fulfillment of homework assignments, nine of the respondents always tried to do them and one sometimes did the assignments. Seven of them found it easy to complete the tasks alone; two did them without any help most of the times, and one student usually asked a parent for help. Although the striking majority did the assignments, two students said they did not regard homework as an important activity to help them learn.

Analysis and Discussion of Data

Based on the answers provided by the 2003 questionnaire, I confirmed my observation that I would not have to worry about completion of homework as I had done in 1995. This group seemed to accept homework as part of their duties and I could be certain that despite our discipline problems, which made the lesson not as effective as I had planned, at least while doing their homework, the students would practice the language items a bit further and bring their doubts to be solved in class.

Another piece of evidence that called my attention was their views on the role of L1, as illustrated in the following excerpts taken from the answers given to *question a* (Do you think the lessons are easy / difficult to follow? Why?), and to *question b* (Do you think the teacher should use Portuguese to explain new grammar/ vocabulary? Why? Why not?)

> St 1: ...she should explain in English and tell us the new words in Portuguese because this makes the lesson easier. (question c)

> St 2: The classes would be better if they were explained in Portuguese (question a)

> It would be easier to understand the lessons. (question c)

> St 3: For those who have difficulty in English, the lessons are difficult (question c)

> St 4: I think the lessons are cool but they are a bit difficult because everything is explained in English. If the lessons were in Portuguese, they would be easier. (question a)

> Yes. because as I said, not always can we understand all that is taught in English. (question c)

> St 5: Yes, because we can understand better. (question c)

> St 6: I think the classes would be better and we would learn more if the teacher taught the new subjects in Portuguese. question a)

> Yes. To understand the subject better and to consolidate learning to train later in English. (question c)

As we can see from the quotes, the students believed L1 should be permitted and used even by the teacher, an idea which I personally did not agree with because this group had been studying English for about three years and, therefore, should be able to communicate in simple English without resorting to L1 at the first sign of difficulty. In theory, the students were conscious that they should be making use of the target language. However, they did not agree with this as they stated in their comments. Therefore, this mismatch could be a possible reason the students had not been following the code of conduct as I had expected.

Through their answers, I also identified another mismatch between my views and theirs, this time regarding what we understood as "disruptive talking". To me, any kind of talk that was not pertinent to the lesson, was done at moments in which someone else was talking, or distracted students' attention in class, could be considered unwanted, thus disruptive. Nonetheless, from what the students said, I could realize that the great majority of the group did not seem to feel they were being inconvenient when chatting to a friend.

This evidence raised another issue that was crucial to the understanding of the differences between these students and the 1995 group. Although one of the aims of the code was to minimize the mismatches

between the practices adopted to teach English at school and the ones adopted to teach English at the language institute, this was a real challenge as eight of the students came to my class straight from school, only to meet the same people again. Consequently, it was difficult for the group to accept that my classes were not an extension of theirs at secondary school, as there the lessons were carried out in Portuguese and the students were required to make use of L2 only during the completion of the tasks. No matter what I did, students would resort to Portuguese or initiate chats while doing listening, viewing or reading activities, just as they told me they did at school.

It was at that point of the project that I had an insight about why the set of procedures which had worked very well with my 1995 group seemed to fail with them. If in 1995 I had students who were not familiar with the institute's routine of the English lesson, did not know any English and did not want to be kept apart from their original group, I now had students who had been studying together at the language institute for three years and whose partners were best friends from school. Moreover, they were used to the routine, although they deliberately had chosen not to follow it. The fact of the matter was that quite often I listened to comments such as "How can I talk about this it if I can't speak English?" as an answer to my request to use the target language to communicate with their peers. Furthermore, some of the students seemed to be frustrated and gave up paying attention when I refused to explain something in Portuguese, or asked them to try to understand my explanation in English. On many occasions, they would say "Forget about it, teacher." when they asked

questions in Portuguese about the subject and I asked them to try and express that doubt in English. As this kind of behavior was common practice not only in my class but also in their former teacher's, they had apparently got used to seeing themselves as "unable" to speak English well. Consequently, this insistence on using Portuguese in class caused their former teacher to label them as "difficult to control".

These observations, which were recorded in my project diary, seemed to contribute to my feeling that those students had a low opinion of themselves as learners of English and that this was a problem which needed attention. This reflection was corroborated by the following incident: After receiving the results of their first written test, one of the students said, "Teacher, I have improved a lot because in the previous semester I got a 4 (out of 10 mark) and now I have a 7". This comment took me back to what Wingate (2003) says about negative messages. Wingate (Ibid.) establishes that "teachers should value the learner as an individual, show empathy by understanding the learners' situation and be transparent, being "self" not teacher, having no mask or pretence" (p. 27). He also suggests the use of messages that communicate "I value you" to the learners even while also communicating "… but I don't value this bad homework or this behavior." Analyzing my behavior as a teacher, I wondered if I could be signaling "you are no good" when I refused to listen to their comments about their private / school life in Portuguese, and also did not let this socializing happen among best friends who were working together.

From this point on, I reconsidered my ideas about what to do in order to foster the use of L2 and to get their attention.

Therefore, I gave up the monitoring system and tried a bit of the "if you cannot beat them, join them" policy. That is, I started to allow occasional uses of L1 when they wanted to make a comment about themselves, about school or to make jokes. In doing so, the lessons became more relaxing since I tried to control myself and diminish my demands for the exclusive use of L2. This caused the incidents of disruptive talking to drop a bit because the students would listen to their peers` open class comments in Portuguese, which I helped them to translate into English. This helped them realize that their English was not as bad as they had thought and that, with a little help from me and their partners, they were beginning to interact in English more often. Besides, I also tried to identify with them by joining their conversations and replying to them in a mix of Portuguese and English, thus trying to gain their attention by seeing them as people, and not just as "good" or "bad" learners. In doing so, eventually I was able to become part of the group and I even heard comments such as "you are a cool teacher", which confirmed that I had managed to prove to them, through the establishment of rapport, that I was there not to punish them, but to share and help them grow. Nevertheless, as I did not want to give up our **code** since I firmly believed in its principles, we came to a consensus that something more stimulating was needed. After this first move towards the students' awareness that if they tried harder, they could communicate in English and enjoy the lessons, they were finally willing to accept a new challenge: to control themselves in order to drop the use of Portuguese for good.

The Need for a Follow-up to the Code of Conduct

In order to help the learners make an effort to use the **code** and, hopefully, improve their behavior, I proposed a game-like activity in which each student would be awarded 50 points at the beginning of the month and that, whenever they broke any rule of the **code**, they would lose a certain amount of points. The winner would be the student with most points left at the end of each month, and the prize would be one extra mark for the end-of-term oral test.

All the students agreed to it and the following penalty system for breaking the rules was devised by the students: a) use of Portuguese = -1; b) disruptive talking in Portuguese = -2; c) disruptive talking in English = -1; d) chewing bubble gum = -2.

In the subsequent lessons, I monitored the game by writing down in the teacher's record next to the student's name, the amount of points taken from each student whenever he/she broke a rule of the **code of conduct**. At the end of the class, I would inform the group how many points each of them had left and I proposed a system in which, if in the following class the student did not break any of the rules, I could give him / her back the points he / she had lost the previous class. This measure aimed at keeping their interest in the activity and also stimulated their willingness to try harder in future classes.

Positive Outcomes

The positive impact of the introduction of the competition was visible right from the beginning as illustrated in this extract from my research diary:

Day 16

Sts seem to have bought the idea of the competition and looked enthusiastic.

The moment we started it, Marina, Felipe, Silvia and Sandro[2] stood up and spit their chewing gums[3] into the dustbin! No more stress about it, I hope.

They really made an effort not to use Portuguese and not to engage in parallel talking. The few occasions I got hold of the class register to write the penalty, they asked me to forgive their peer because this first class was just a test-drive of the activity. I hope this works out!

During the following classes, the results were really amazing as I could notice they were doing their best to fight for the right to have an extra mark in the oral test. This game went on for 15 classes and, generally speaking, the occurrences of code breaking dropped as they tried hard to control themselves and to stick to the agreed rules, as shown in the chart in Appendix 5.

At the end of the "competition", I awarded everybody the mark because of their commitment and effort to change their behavior during the term. Moreover, in the class before our end-of-term exams, I asked the students to assess the project by writing a short note to me. The answers given revealed that they were satisfied with the improvements made in those last 15 classes of the semester, and not only in terms of discipline as shown in these extracts:

> St 1: That mess which disturbed me during the lesson doesn't happen now and the teacher is not stressed with us. So I think the project was good

> St 7: I admit I sometimes speak with my partner after I finish the exercise, but now I try to control myself more now.

> St 8: Those students that disturbed the class are calmer now and I can concentrate on your explanation, teacher… but also in terms of their ability to speak the language.

> St 10: I don't like English but I think the oral test will be easier this time because I tried to speak only English in class.

> St 9: I am happy because I can say a lot of things in English now. I'm not so bad as I thought I was in English!

In the end, as the chart in Appendix 5 shows, disruptive talking and the use of L1 were practically null as the students really made an effort to pay attention to the lesson and to use L2 at all times.

Therefore, although the establishment of certain agreed rules is a must, if we are to have an environment in which learning can take place, giving love, support and affection to our students, and making students feel able to overcome their obstacles is crucial. Above all, I have learned through experience that these pre-adolescents may have looked tough from the outside, but deep inside they were little creatures who needed all our care in order to grow as human beings and to develop to their full potential.

Conclusion

The action-research project described in this paper aimed at minimizing discipline problems in my group of 10 pre-intermediate EFL students by replicating, in 2003, the set of measures I adopted with my group of beginner EFL students in 1995, at the same language institution where I teach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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2   Fictitious names.

3   This is not allowed in the classroom by the institution. Before the establishment of this activity, I always had to remind them to get rid of their chewing gum before entering the classroom.

Recurrent episodes of disruptive talking, especially when I was eliciting students' contributions, incomplete homework and unwillingness to speak only English in class deeply worried me as many learning opportunities were being wasted and I was unable to teach the lessons as I had planned. These incidents led me to investigate the causes of **negative class participation** and what could be done to minimize the problems I was facing. In addition, the literature I reviewed encouraged me to experiment with the use of a **code of conduct** and to develop awareness-raising activities in 1995, which were reconsidered in 2003 as alternative means to hinder misbehavior in my classroom.

Upon analyzing the results of this project, I can assume that, despite the adaptations to the original project to best cater for my 2003 students' needs, above all we should value students as individuals and show them they are capable of going beyond their perceived limitations. We should also help them to understand that they are responsible for building up the learning atmosphere by contributing their share to the learning process. In doing so, misbehavior and **negative class participation** episodes are likely to be less frequent than when the students are unaware of their importance to the smooth flow of the lesson.

In conclusion, it can be said that the issues discussed in this article are highly relevant to any teacher because discipline is definitely a key factor to make the lesson a profitable event for the students and a rewarding experience for the teacher.

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About the Author

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Appendix 1: An English Version of the Questionnaire Answered by the Students

Hello, dear student!
What's your opinion about our lessons? Could you answer the questions below, please?

1) Do you think the lessons are easy / difficult to follow? Why?

   _____

2) Do you think the lessons are interesting? Is there any part of the lesson in which you tend to switch off? Why do you think it happens?

   _____

3) Do you think you do much parallel talking in class? In what moments do you do it? Do you think it disturbs the lesson? Why? Why not?

   _____

4) Do you think the teacher should use Portuguese to explain new grammar/ vocabulary? Why? Why not?

   _____

5) Do you think the measures the teacher takes to control discipline in class are appropriate? Why? Why not?

   _____

6) Do you do your homework? How often? Why? Do you think it is important?

   _____

7) Do you find it easy to do the homework on your own? Does anybody help you?

   _____

Appendix 2: Teacher's and Students' Duties

Teacher's duties (List A)	Students' duties (List B)
• Correct homework ⟶	Do homework
• Teach in English ⟶	Speak only English
• Pay attention to what the students say ⟶	Pay attention to what the teacher says
• Teach the lessons and involve the students ⟶	Participate in class and learn the lessons
• Answer students' questions ⟶	Ask questions
• Prepare the lessons ⟶	Study the lessons
• Give tests ⟶	Take tests

Appendix 3: An English Version of our Code of Conduct (1995)
The Code of Conduct

To take advantage of our classes we promise to:

1. Use English in class to do the activities and to talk to the teacher and classmates.
2. Do our homework and respect the deadlines.
3. Pay attention to the lesson and tell the teacher when we do not understand something.
4. Respect the teacher and our classmates.
5. Listen to our classmates when they are talking.
6. Try to do our best in class.

Student	6th August		11th August		13th August		18th August	
	T's	St's	T's	St's	T's	St's	T's	St's
Andreas	6.0	9.5	10	10	9.0	9.0	9.5	9.5
Antony	A	A	5.5	9.0	7.0	8.0	7.0	9.5
Breno	3.0	8.0	4.5	9.0	6.0	8.0	7.5	9.5
Felipe	3.0	7.7	5.0	7.0	5.5	8.0	5.0	8.5
Jandira	9.0	9.0	10	10	9.0	9.0	9.5	9.5
Jasmine	9.0	9.0	10	10	9.0	9.0	10	10
Loredane	6.0	8.0	A	A	A	A	7.5	8.5
Marina	6.0	8.5	6.0	8.0	7.0	9.0	6.0	8.5
Sandro	3.0	8.0	5.0	6.0	9.0	9.0	7.0	8.0
Silvia	6.0	7.0	6.5	7.0	6.0	6.0	6.0	7.0

Appendix 4: 2003 Progress Chart Sample

T's = Teacher's Grade   **St's = Student's Grade**   **A= Absent**

Student	6th August		11th August		13th August		18th August	
	T's	St's	T's	St's	T's	St's	T's	St's
Andreas	6.0	9.5	10	10	9.0	9.0	9.5	9.5
Antony	A	A	5.5	9.0	7.0	8.0	7.0	9.5
Breno	3.0	8.0	4.5	9.0	6.0	8.0	7.5	9.5
Felipe	3.0	7.7	5.0	7.0	5.5	8.0	5.0	8.5
Jandira	9.0	9.0	10	10	9.0	9.0	9.5	9.5
Jasmine	9.0	9.0	10	10	9.0	9.0	10	10
Loredane	6.0	8.0	A	A	A	A	7.5	8.5
Marina	6.0	8.5	6.0	8.0	7.0	9.0	6.0	8.5
Sandro	3.0	8.0	5.0	6.0	9.0	9.0	7.0	8.0
Silvia	6.0	7.0	6.5	7.0	6.0	6.0	6.0	7.0

Appendix 5: Sample of Points Lost by the Students
on Three First Two Weeks

T's = Teacher's Grade St's = Student's Grade A= Absent

Student	6th Oct. -/+ T		8th Oct. -/+ T		13th Oct. -/+ T		15th Oct. -/+ T	
Andreas	0	50	0	50	0	50	0	50
Antony	A	50	A	50	5	45	4	41
Breno	-7	43	5	38	A	38	3	35
Felipe	-3	47	1	46	1	45	1	44
Jandira	0	50	0	50	1	49	0	49
Jasmine	-1	49	0	49	-1 /+1	49	0	49
Loredane	-3	47	0	47	0 /+ 3	50	2	48
Marina	-3	47	-1	46	-1	45	0	45
Sandro	-6	44	-4	40	-1	39	-3	36
Silvia	-2	48	0	48	0 /+2	50	0	50