

# Discipline through punishment?

Neeraja Raghavan

Teachers are expected to be up-to-date with all that is happening in the education sector: well, if not *all*, at least the significant developments. Given the packed day of a teacher, however, there is scarcely any time to browse through the literature and cull out the valuable findings of researchers and educators. Thinking Teacher is launching this series with the intent of bridging this gap: we will bring to the readers of *Teacher Plus* the *essence of one research paper in each article*. Along with the gist of the paper, we will also suggest ways of putting into practice the main import of the paper through some strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. We invite your responses – if and when you do practice any of these strategies at < [thinkingteacher22@gmail.com](mailto:thinkingteacher22@gmail.com) > .

**H**ow on earth do I manage this undisciplined class?" As a teacher, have you ever asked yourself (or your colleagues) this question?

If you have, you would surely be interested to know what researchers have to say about the subject. Here is a paper from the Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research by Rahimi et al (2015) titled *The role of teachers' classroom discipline in their teaching effectiveness and students' language learning motivation and achievement: A path method* (see box) that offers several important insights for any teacher.

The authors declare that a teacher's disciplining strategies not only determine the effectiveness of her class, *but also affect the students' perception of the professional adequacy of the teacher*. They focus on classes where English is taught (in Iran) as a foreign language (EFL) because they state that creating a caring environment is as important (in the learning of a foreign language) as controlling it. Further, a teacher needs to motivate his students to learn a foreign language and this demands that he maintains a caring atmosphere in the class. Also, students are called upon to talk, argue, and discuss far more in language classes than in many other subjects. So this could give room for 'indiscipline': even if it is only because the resulting noise is perceived so.

The paper has three main aims:

- To investigate the strategies used by EFL teachers to discipline their classes.
- To examine the relationship between these strategies and the
  - teacher's effectiveness,
  - students' motivation and achievement.
- To find predictors of motivation and achievement by making statistical tests in specially designed paths.

When I took up this paper for study, I was particularly struck by the third aim above. If we can predict which path will be more effective in motivating our students to learn English well, wouldn't that be wonderful?

**Title of Paper:** The role of teachers' classroom discipline in their teaching effectiveness and students' language learning motivation and achievement: A path method

**Authors:** Mehrak Rahimi, Fatemeh Hosseini Karkami – Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University, Iran

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**Link:** <http://www.urmia.ac.ir/sites/www.urmia.ac.ir/files/Article4.pdf>

The authors begin with a definition of the word discipline ("to teach someone to obey rules and control their behaviour or to punish someone in order to keep order and control" – Longman dictionary) and draw the connection between punishment and discipline. **Coercive or punitive strategies** have been found by many researchers to be far less effective than **relationship-based strategies**, they assert. In the latter, there is discussion between the teacher and students about the reasons for demanding a certain type of behaviour, or an inability by students to comply with such demands. In the former, students are isolated or punished with the hope that such treatment will make them realize that they erred. The authors cite studies that show that caring teachers who use relationship-based strategies are actually perceived by their students as being more effective teachers. Students tend to behave more responsibly when their teachers adopt strategies such as:

- Involving students in decision-making.
- Recognizing positive shifts in behaviour in students.
- Making attempts to understand students' personal feelings and attitudes.

Naturally, this also concomitantly results in effective learning. I found this to be so obvious that I wondered why we need research to tell us this.

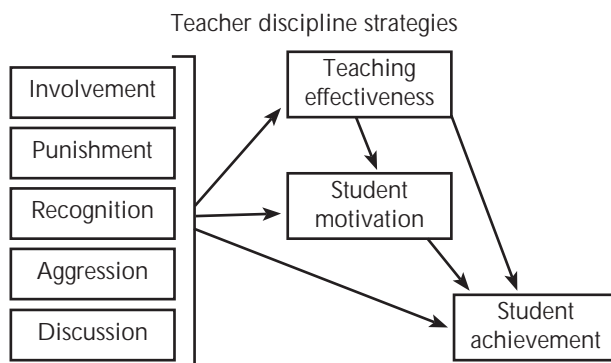
In fact, it begged the question: *why, then, do teachers adopt punitive techniques?*

And I found the answer later in the paper, where the authors acknowledge that teachers resort to such techniques (knowing full well that these are ineffective strategies) *when they are themselves stressed and frustrated, or when they do not feel supported by the management*. When a teacher holds certain beliefs about control and discipline (as which teacher does not?), this impacts the strategies that she uses to teach her class.

The authors summarize cross cultural differences in disciplining strategies (and their effectiveness), by citing research from China, Australia, Singapore, Dutch countries, Malaysia, Korea, America, and Sudan. In Asian countries, the authors declare, teachers are called upon nowadays to adopt learner-centred approaches when teaching English *but they have not been inducted into ways of managing the resultant 'indiscipline'*. Thus, their burden, the authors say, has doubled. I could identify with this finding! I wonder if you can too?

While citing research work (of several other researchers) on factors that motivate or demotivate language learners, the authors state that more work has been done to study demotivating factors than to examine motivating ones! In Japan, for instance, the role of the teacher was found to be critical in motivating students to learn English, while in Iran, teachers were only the fourth factor: with assessment policy, school facility, and instructional materials being more critical.

The authors hypothesize that classroom discipline strategies directly affect the teaching and learning of EFL. This is shown below (Figure taken from the paper):



I found the following sentence to be very powerful: *the way teachers discipline their classes impacts how well they teach and this impacts students' motivation*. If we thought that classroom management and teaching a subject are two prongs of a fork, we are wrong, according to these authors. One prong – if indeed we can separate these two as distinct prongs – significantly affects the other! By adopting the right disciplining strategies, therefore, a teacher can motivate her language learners and impact their achievement. The authors then frame the following questions which are explored during the course of their study:

- 1) Are teachers' discipline strategies related to their teaching effectiveness and their students' motivation/achievement in learning English as a foreign language?
- 2) How do teachers' discipline strategies influence their teaching effectiveness and their students' motivation/achievement in learning English as a foreign language?

So the first question asks if there is a link between teachers' discipline strategies and EFL teaching-learning effectiveness, while the second goes on to examine the nature of this link.

The authors studied 1,408 students from 35 schools in a district in Iran and employed questionnaires for students as well as teachers, in addition to scrutinizing reports. I skipped through most of the statistics and figures as I was eager to read their conclusions.

Finally, they arrived at the following conclusions: Teaching effectiveness was found to be significantly and positively related to involvement, recognition, and discussion while it was inversely related to both punishment and aggression strategies. Motivation was also found to be positively related to involvement, recognition, and discussion while it was negatively related to punishment and aggression strategies. Achievement was found to be inversely related to punishment, discussion, and aggression strategies. Further, teaching effectiveness was found to be positively related to both motivation and achievement. Motivation and achievement were also found to be positively related.

While none of the above seemed at all surprising to me, I found it interesting that students perceive teachers who use punishment as a disciplinary strategy to be *less effective as teachers* and this then lowers their own motivation.

What about predictors? Given the following three factors:

1. teaching effectiveness
2. discipline strategies and
3. motivation

Which of these is the strongest predictor of achievement in learning English? The authors found that motivation was the strongest predictor of achievement in learning English: the more motivated a learner, the higher that learner's achievement. Discipline strategies and teaching effectiveness were less important!

And what are the factors that predict motivation? The study revealed that the strongest predictors of motivation in learners were teaching effectiveness (which motivated) and punishment (which demotivated). Students who experienced punishment lost their motivation to learn English as a foreign language. By far, for me, the most powerful sentences in the paper were those at the end of the abstract: Teaching effectiveness was found to mediate the effect of punishment on motivation while motivation mediated the effect of punitive strategies on achievement. Motivation was found to have the strongest effect on achievement.

So I found it curious that even though a learner's achievement is largely determined by his/her own motivation, the latter can be significantly impacted by a teacher's effectiveness as well as her disciplining strategies. I was left wondering how many of these findings pertain only to EFL and how many could apply equally across subjects. My take-away from this paper was to see if certain strategies adopted by us as teachers could be examined in light of the above findings. The box below contains my suggestions. It would be great if you would respond with your own take-aways too!

#### Now bring it into the classroom!

- Whenever you have faced an act of indiscipline in your class, what has been your most frequently used/least often used strategy to address it? (*Relationship-based* – Dialogue, Reasoning, Involving students in decision-making; or *Coercive/Controlling*: Coercive, Punitive, Aggressive; or *Ignoring*: Any other)
- What does your response to the above question tell you about *the beliefs that you hold* about discipline and effective learning?
- How do you think the above beliefs and strategies may have impacted your own effectiveness as a teacher? [Or impacted *the way your students perceive* your effectiveness as a teacher?]
- When you were a student, which of your own teachers did you perceive as being highly effective? Highly ineffective?
- What were the disciplining techniques employed by these two types of teachers in your student days? (How) Does this connect to the findings in this paper?
- Can you recall any instance of the level of motivation of your student(s) dropping/increasing *because of something that you did as a teacher*? Please do share it with us at [thinkingteacher22@gmail.com](mailto:thinkingteacher22@gmail.com).

Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research *out of* the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research *into* the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help teachers to build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. Neeraja Raghavan is the Founder Director of Thinking Teacher ([www.thinkingteacher.in](http://www.thinkingteacher.in)).