Teaching English to Kids - And How to Manage Them

When teaching English to kids you need all the qualities that any teacher needs, but you also need an extra amount of patience, and a blend of kindness and firmness. Children will usually look up to the teacher and you will be a role model - whether you like it or not - giving you extra responsibility [by children I mean 7 to 11 year olds - elementary or primary school children].

Children have shorter attention spans than adults, less knowledge of the world, have more need to be physically active and are more likely to react emotionally to problems. They are also likely to respect and want to please a teacher when they are younger, but become more distant when older - largely, I think - because of their negative experiences within an education system that focusses on exam results above all else.

Teaching English to Kids - Individuals & Their Problems

Any teacher teaching English to kids will have noticed that there are certain types of student which they find from year to year. Below are some of the types that have given me some stress in classrooms around the world. Briefly these are: the silent child, the clown, the genius, the sulker, the know-it-all, the tantrum thrower, the acrobat and the dreamer. Some of them are, of course, much easier to deal with than others; and sometimes they only need to be recognized for the solution to appear.

The Silent Child

Whilst teaching English to kids I've had students who never joined in the class, unless I made them. Who sat in silence, unless forced to speak, and appeared in pain when they did. Even then they were so quiet that I had to put my ear inches away from their mouth to hear, and I still sometimes had to guess what they were saying.

Often these students could read and write well. On occasions they could write very well, and they sometimes had a better vocabulary than some of their noisier classmates; but they couldn't, or wouldn't speak. I tried for years, when teaching English to kids, to bring these students into class activities; with some limited success. Then I realized that I would be better to work with their strengths, rather than focus on their weaknesses.

Their strengths were individual work, which they were often proud of, and happy to read out aloud to the class. These were the same students who could hardly utter a sound. When they were holding their notebooks in front of them they could speak with much more confidence. I'm not suggesting giving up on involving these students in classroom activities. Just recognizing where their strengths may lie, and then giving them plenty of opportunities to excel at these.
The Clown

Teaching English to kids would not be the same without the class clown. The clown pulls faces, jokes, or does anything to get the attention of the other students, and you. This tactic often works well. Although simply telling the student to stop it, does sometimes work, it doesn't often permanently solve the problem. A better solution is to channel the class clown's energy creatively.

A class that is interesting and challenging - but not too challenging, with plenty of changes of pace will involve the rest of the class, taking away the clown's audience. Then giving the clown a role in the class, helping the teacher in some way, will help satisfy the desire for attention in a positive way. As an example of changes of pace I mean switching between whole class work, pairwork [both open and closed] group work and individual work.
The Genius

Even if you've been teaching English to kids for a while, spotting the genius - by genius here, I just mean a bright child, not necessarily an Einstein - can sometimes be tricky. It's easy to mistake them for troublemakers. This is because they often become bored or disillusioned with the pace of the class. If children see the class as being too easy they will usually either switch off and become disengaged or become disruptive. Of course, it's not only the bright children who display these behaviors.

To check if there's a genius in your classroom. Ask the most difficult questions you can using the language they've learnt. Or better still, make the question a little harder than you think the best student should be able to answer. Use some language structures you think they won't know. See what happens. If the student makes a good attempt at it you may have a genius - or at least, you probably have a student who needs more challenge.

If the student answers easily, quickly check how many other students can do the same. Children won't always tell you whether the class is to easy. The solution is to create more - but not too much - challenge. It's best to do this gradually. They may only need a little extra vocabulary to make learning more interesting to them. Or they may need speaking, listening, reading or writing activities which involve them more.

When teaching English to kids, I have a minimum level of language which I need all students to master, but I also have 'extra' vocabulary and grammar which allows the best students to be stimulated intellectually, and have the feeling they are really making progress. It can be an honor for children to be given more challenging work, if they see that it's because their level is higher than other students.
The Sulker

Unhappy about something, this student keeps the anger or resentment within and broods. Unhealthy and unpleasant, but not as much trouble as the tantrum thrower or the acrobat. There's probably little you can do about the causes, but there's a lot you can do to make your life - and that of the other students better.

Keep things moving. Keep the pace fairly fast, and ignore the mood completely. Don't pay it any attention. Be neither concerned nor irritated by the cloud around this child. Activity, and tasks to do - if set at the right level of challenge - will usually be enough to bring this child into the class; or at least should lessen the moodiness.
The Know-It-All

The name describes this student, and it's not only when teaching English to kids where you might encounter the know-it-all. Occasionally this may be a Genius in disguise, but often only a little more knowledge than the rest, with an uncontrollable desire to show-off leads to this.

The general cure of a fast paced class, with a wide variety of tasks will lessen opportunities for smart aleck behavior to develop. However, it's also works to ask for the student to stand and speak to the class - not as a punishment, of course, but as 'assistance' to the child's language development. You could ask the student questions using recently learnt language, or ask them to become a 'little teacher' and teach the class a small language point. Quite good when you have a few things to write on the board. Or simply talk for 30 seconds on a random topic. Usually this reduces the know-it-all behavior.
The Tantrum Thrower

If you are teaching English to kids under 6, this will be more common, but the problem still occasionally persists when children are older. The tantrum needs to be dealt with quickly and firmly. Tell the child that this behavior is not acceptable in the classroom. Use the child's native language, if possible. If not explain in the simplest English you can. A reminder that if the behavior continues there will be consequences [extra homework, calling the parents] can help.

As with the Sulker, ignore the almost inevitable sulk that follows the tantrum and continue with the class. Include the student in the rest of the class, of course, and encourage any positive contribution the student may make. Thus showing that it is the behavior that is the problem - not the student - even if this is not true. This article is aimed at those teaching English to kids aged 7 - 11. If you are teaching English to kids under the age of seven, then the children will probably need comforting after the tantrum - I'm assuming the child here should really have outgrown this behavior pattern.
The Acrobat

The child who can't keep still, or even in the seat is usually just a very physical child, and like all children, has a low attention span. The Acrobat is a useful reminder for the teacher to include physical activity in the class - TPR, games involving movement, mingle activities for example. All students will benefit from this. Also, when you need help giving out photocopies, crayons and so on, this is one of the students to ask to help you.
The Dreamer

The Dreamer is often absent from the class, in another world. One of more interest to the child. This kind of student is seldom a problem to the teacher, but still needs to be focussed in the present. Gentleness works better than harder discipline here. Lead student back into the class when you see the eyes wander off elsewhere. Engaging and imaginative activities help - as always when teaching English to kids. Individual work can benefit this child, and they can often become absorbed in written tasks, and writing and coloring tasks when younger. Working with another student when doing pairwork can help too.
The "Happy Chair"

A technique which has worked well for me when teaching English to kids is the "Happy Chair." When a student is being disruptive, I ask "Are you happy?" The answer is inevitably "no." Then I tell them that I have a special chair, and that if they sit there, they will certainly feel happy. This is an empty chair next to me. When they sit down I tell them that if they sit there for long enough they will become happy. When they sit down and say they're still not happy, I tell them that's because they haven't sat there for long enough yet. Students soon see that as soon as they convince me they are happy again I will let them return, "happier," to their own chairs. Usually, this convinces them to become "happy."

Of course it's a trick, but it can work well. Once they say they are happy, they actually feel less unhappy than before, or if nothing else the humor of the situation is obvious to them and the class. After using the happy chair a few times, I've found that simply the offer of "help" to make the student happy, can actually quieten them down. The only time I used this technique and it really didn't work, was with one particularly grumpy boy. When I asked him if he was happy, he repeatedly said no. I told him that at least I was happy, so the chair must be working in some way.

English to Kids - Classroom Management of Groups

Classes with many changes of pace [neither too fast, nor too slow], with interesting and fun activities, a teacher who maintains eye contact with the children, who is enthusiastic, and a little unpredictable - for example don't go round the class one by one in order asking questions. Randomly ask students, and remember who you have asked, so you don't keep asking the same student. Grade your language and activities to the language level, and age of the students. A great game for a seven year old may appear childish to an eleven year old.

When teaching English to kids involve all of the students as much as possible. Switching to group drilling, when some of the students attention is going helps. Also involve the students on a deeper level. Trust them to do activities themselves. If you have high expectations of behavior, you will usually have good behavior. If you have low expectations, then too, you will usually get what you expect to.
Having clear, fair, and consistently and fairly implemented rules, is important. If the children have a say in the creation of the rules; so much the better. However, don't have too many rules - keep it simple. A friendly, but firm approach works best when teaching English to kids.
Students Like Horses

CG Jung once gave an analogy which compared managing groups of people to driving a team of horses pulling a carriage. I think in teaching esl for kids the same analogy can be applied. At certain times - when the children are all pulling in different directions - discipline is needed. Once discipline has been established the students can focus more easily on learning. Once there is some order in the class - let go of the reins a little - and allow the children some freedom. For a while they will naturally continue applying the discipline to themselves. Eventually they will begin to pull in different directions. At this stage they will be experimenting and playing more with the language. This is the creative stage, and also good. Later still the students will pull further in different directions. It is at this stage, before chaos breaks out, that discipline should be re-established. The cycle can continue indefinitely. I've applied the above approach to teaching English to children very successfully.
Allowing a stage in which the students can experiment and play more with the language requires the teacher to place some trust in the children. In my experience, when you ask a class of twenty, thirty or even fifty children to do pairwork - to give one very simple example - most of the children will respond well to the trust placed in them, and seriously attempt the activity. There will often be a couple of pairs of students in a large class who will just chat, but this is a price worth paying for the involvement of so many others.
Choice

A good rule is to gradually increase the control and choice the students have over what they do - managed by the teacher. The choices should be appropriate for the situation in your class, and the age of your students. Overall control needs to remain with the teacher, of course. Over time giving the students more choice will increase their independence and responsibility and perhaps self-respect.
Environmental Psychology for the ESL Classroom

The physical layout of the classroom will affect the behavior patterns of the children, and so your class. You may have fixed desk positions, or you may have have desks arranged in a semicircle, or you may all be sitting around a large table. Children in rows are easier to control, but the interaction between them is more limited. Teaching English to kids who are sitting in a large semicircle will allow more opportunities for speaking. A table can be good for groupwork.
If you have the luxury of being able to arrange the seating yourself, and choose the semicircle, remember to bring the circle closer together when there are less students in the class - by moving empty chairs away. Don't let some students sit much further back, or in groups of friends, with big spaces between other students. As a general rule I'll seat 7 or 8 year olds boy - girl - boy - girl around the class. With older children this should be less necessary, and may perhaps be counterproductive.
Changing the Past

When teaching English to kids, it helps a lot to change their past. By giving each student experiences of success in your class, when they are next in the class, or speaking English, they will remember their past successes, and so, will gain greater confidence and enjoyment of learning and speaking English.