Preventing Bullying in the University Foreign Language Classroom

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Although it is widely understood that bullying is a problem at the elementary, junior high and high school levels, taunting and excluding students certainly occurs in the university classroom as well. Many university classes consist of lectures in which students may not interact with each other. However, foreign language classes often involve pair work and as such a harmonious and constructive environment for all students is essential. This paper describes bullying and how it may interfere with classroom teaching, and explores strategies specifically tailored to the university foreign language classroom which the instructor may appropriately employ to prevent this behavior and maintain an effective educational environment. Readers of this paper will hopefully feel better equipped to handle situations in which students are being bullied in their university classrooms.

Keywords: bullying prevention, student pair work, classroom environment, classroom management, collaborative learning

Bullying in a school can be defined as a persistent and deliberate attempt by one student or group of students to hurt or humiliate another student. Most bullying appears to have three primary traits:

1. It is an aggressive behavior which involves negative actions.
2. It is repeated over time.
3. There is an imbalance of power, which makes it hard for those being bullied to defend themselves. (Olweus, 1993, p.9-10).

One might assume, based on the relative lack of academic research which has been performed regarding bullying by students at the university level, that it isn’t much of a problem. However, it exists, but often goes

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According to Karim (2010), psychologist and bullying specialist Pauline Rennie-Peyton has stated that bullying often goes unreported at universities because students do not believe that any disciplinary action will actually be taken, and students believe that bullying activity at the university level will eventually cease on its own.

In one recent example of bullying at a Japanese university, in 2007 an Indian student at a university in Osaka committed suicide as a result of school bullying. The student had Indian parents, but had been raised in Japan. According to local media, he had been given the nickname “bin Laden” and made to disrobe in front of others. He left a note which stated, “The bullying I keep getting at school ... Cannot take it anymore” (Agence France-Presse, 2010).

At a university in Tokyo in 2007, a male cheerleader committed suicide after being bullied by other students. An investigation by the university revealed that violent behavior such as chasing younger members with fireworks and hitting them in the face was common on the cheerleading team (Reuters, 2007).

In September 2010 in the United States, Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi was secretly filmed by his roommate in an intimate encounter with another student, and the video was streamed live over the Internet. Several days later, Clementi committed suicide as a result of this incident. Although the case is still pending in court at the time of this writing, these facts are not in dispute (Foderaro, 2010, p.A1). As a result of this incident, the US state of New Jersey passed a 2011 law called the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. Among its requirements, this law mandates the following:

- Staff training regarding harassment, intimidation, and bullying must be increased at all public schools
- All public schools must implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies
- All bullying incidents must be reported by public schools according to strict deadlines
- An anti-bullying specialist must be appointed in each public school
- Each school district must appoint an anti-bullying coordinator
- A safety team consisting of staff members, teachers, and parents must be formed at each school, for the purpose of reviewing complaints (Hu, 2011)

These measures underscore the revulsion both legislators and citizens felt in reaction to the 2010 incident of bullying at Rutgers, and the desire to prevent similar incidents in the future. The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights has been passed as an acknowledgement that earlier statutes were overly deferential to the schools themselves, and it is seen as a step toward rectifying this (Duncan, 2011). Its tenets emerged from the work of professors such as Duncan and Wright, who in 2005 co-authored a paper urging that school districts adopt anti-bullying measures such as adhering to specific reporting procedures, and subjecting schools to penalties which do not adhere to anti-bullying policies (Kosse & Wright, 2005).
Similar measures have been passed in Japan. For example, the School Education Law, revised in 2001, requires that boards of education establish rules which temporarily bar violent students and bullies from both middle and elementary schools. However, 20 percent of school boards in municipalities have failed to act as required (Daily Yomiuri, 2011).

Besides the potential for physical and emotional harm, bullying has been shown to negatively affect classroom performance. Williams (as cited by the American Sociological Association, 2011, par.4) has found a .049 point decrease in the grade point average of students in the 12th grade who were bullied in the 10th grade. According to Williams, family background, school characteristics, and “the experience of being bullied” are all significant factors in grades.

With report cards which must be signed by parents, parent-teacher conferences, homerooms, and many other opportunities outside regular classroom time to attempt to modify student behavior, teachers in primary, middle and high schools have a wide variety of ways to attempt to eliminate incidences of bullying. However, the amount of contact university instructors have with students is often limited to an hour or less per week, in large classes, for a single semester. A teacher may not even recognize that bullying is occurring, let alone take preventative action. Thus, the limited amount of time in the classroom is greatly elevated in importance in this regard. As university foreign language classes often involve pair work and group work, a productive and cooperative working relationship between students attending them is particularly essential. Although much research has been conducted as regards the reduction of bullying in primary, middle and high schools, virtually none has been done which directly applies to university classes.

Which K-12 classroom management strategies have proven effective in preventing bullying, and how can they be modified to apply to university foreign language classes?

Swearer, Espelage and Napolitano (2009) have noted that as a prerequisite to formulating and implementing effective anti-bullying strategies in the classroom, it is necessary that a teacher understand that several common beliefs regarding bullying are inaccurate. Once these common misperceptions are thoroughly debunked, the teacher is ready to tackle the practical nuts and bolts of altering his or her classroom management practices by formulating a few simple guidelines. These misperceptions include:

1. **Bullying is an isolated, individual aggressive action.**
Bullying/victimization factors need to be assessed accurately. Bullying may be influenced by peers, families, schools, and communities.

2. **Bullying occurs between a “bully” and a “victim”.**
In fact, bullying is a dynamic, social relationship problem. It has been demonstrated that the “bully” and “victim” dyadic bias has been debunked (Espelage & Swearer, 2003, p.95).

3. **Bullying is a “normal” part of growing up.**
Bullying is not confined to one developmental period (a fact that university educators should take heed of) and is not acceptable. It’s not a viable stage of human growth that people pass through; it’s a significant problem, and it can have serious legal ramifications.

4. **Bullying prevention and intervention are complicated and expensive.**
In fact, employing classroom strategies for reducing bullying (discussed next in this paper) can be free, and as simple as altering classroom management techniques in an effective manner.

5. **Physical bullying is more damaging than relational or verbal bullying.**
Relational and verbal bullying can be just as damaging, and can inflict even greater, more long-lasting damage. This may be due in part to the fact that it often goes completely unnoticed by authority figures, so it can continue for months or even years.

6. **Figuring out how to evaluate anti-bullying efforts is too complicated.**
Evaluation of an anti-bullying program is not an abstract and excessively difficult task, but rather can be performed by recording and analyzing the effects of any interventions, and this can be integrated into the curriculum.

According to Rowan (2007, p.182) if the environment of a classroom is positive and orderly, this has the effect of reducing bullying frequency. She reports that a powerful relationship between bullying and classroom management and content exists.

She compared criteria such as the location of the bullying incidents, frequency, and bully gender, to the types of schools (private or public), the manner in which the teachers reacted to specific types of incidents, and ratings of teachers’ “overall effectiveness in classroom management” according to survey data. A connection between classroom management skills and the frequency of bullying was revealed. A survey was conducted of 105 preservice teachers with a mean age of 21.3, consisting of eighty-four percent females and sixteen percent males. They observed K-12 classes in both public and private schools for three or more weeks. Eighty-seven percent of the one hundred and five classes in which no bullying was observed were led by teachers who had above average to excellent ratings pertaining to classroom discipline, and the classes with the greatest frequency of bullying were shown to be led by teachers who were not able to maintain classroom discipline. Thus, this
suggested several ways in which teachers could modify their classes to reduce the amount of bullying.

It was found that literature should be used which promotes prosocial behavior. Such literature typically promotes traits such as friendship, tolerance and service to others. For example, a book like *The Brand New Kid* (2000) by Couric would be appropriate to meet this goal. Another appropriate text is Dazai’s classic *Hashire Merosu* [Run Melos!] (1940/2005), which promotes the virtue of friendship.

For university level classes, a textbook promoting prosocial behavior is Pickett’s *The Chicken Smells Good: Dialogs and Stories* (1997). This reading text features lively dialogues, many of which encourage friendship, tolerance, and service to others. For instance, chapter eight, “Women and Decisions”, deals with themes such as gender equality and women’s empowerment.

In a university foreign language class, this suggestion could be utilized by maintaining procedures such as assigned class seating, requiring strict adherence to lateness and attendance policies, consistently checking homework and penalizing those who fail to complete it, and ensuring that students who finish class work more quickly than others are not left with free time, but rather are given additional, stimulating work to keep them occupied while their classmates complete their work.

Rowan recommends that teachers be proactive (2007, p.185). If a student is being bullied, for example, the teacher should not hesitate to take direct action by talking to students about it and even demonstrating conflict resolution through role-playing. The teacher could also initiate contact with a student (either the bully or the bullied student) by talking to the students after the class period has ended, as the other students are leaving the classroom and preoccupied with getting to their next classes.

A warning to a bully that continued provocative action will lead to a failure in the class (a student who attends the class but does not participate, and even disrupts other students, after all, is essentially absent) may be one effective strategy to employ. For example, in one of my university classes, I encountered a situation in which two students would loudly snicker every time a third student spoke. This negative behavior was repeated over time, and it was hard for the student to defend himself, as he was extremely shy. After I noticed this clear instance of bullying, I waited until class ended, and spoke to the two students after the rest of the class had left. I explained that harassment is unacceptable and it had to stop immediately. The following week, the students repeated the same bullying behavior, snickering whenever the shy student spoke. In class, I took no action, as I certainly didn’t want to embarrass the shy student in any way. However, after class, I spoke to the two students again. This time, we had a lengthy conversation. Initially, I showed them with my expression that I was angry with them, and they looked extremely surprised that I was taking their behavior so seriously. I then clearly explained to them that they would both fail my class if the bullying continued. Becoming a bit “personal”, I spoke to them about my belief that it’s important to be good to others, rather than cruel. I explained that as a child, I was also bullied sometimes, and it was a terrible experience. I told them that laughing at another student might be a little funny for them, but for the person being bullied, it’s an absolutely miserable experience with poten-
tially very serious consequences. The boys seemed to understand the gravity of the situation, in that what they were doing was morally wrong, and would also earn them failing grades in the class. For the remainder of the semester, I monitored them carefully, and confirmed that the bullying behavior ceased. When the semester ended, I checked which teacher would be giving them language classes during the following semester, as I wanted to meet with him or her and ensure that the students would continue to be monitored carefully. When I learned that the instructor came to the campus on a day on which we would be unable to meet, I wrote a detailed note explaining the situation, and made sure it was received. I followed up after the semester began to make sure that no further instances of bullying were noticed or recorded. Fortunately, they weren’t.

Indeed, it is recommended that teachers collaborate with other educators, administrators, and counselors. While full-time university staff have ample opportunity to communicate and share expertise, information, and strategies regarding disruptive students, part-time and full-time staff at many universities often have very little interaction. Typically, they meet very rarely, or not at all (Moses & El-Khawas, 1994). Part-time staff should thus be strongly encouraged to seek out and consult with their colleagues regarding any significant classroom management issues which arise over the course of the academic year. Development programs which explore anti-bullying topics among faculty may also be beneficial. A presentation of the videotape “Set Straight on Bullies” is recommended as an excellent ice breaker and discussion starter (Hoover & Oliver, 1996, p.40).

In a university classroom, classes are often very large and teachers may find it difficult to monitor the students and their work (Davis, 2009, p.162). As a way to tackle this problem, teachers may find it beneficial to arrange the students in such a way that there are spaces between them, and at individual desks or small tables rather than long tables in parallel rows. If the tables are smaller, the teacher can easily circulate among the students while they are doing class work and monitor their activity, provide encouragement, answer questions and ensure that the students stay on task. Indeed, it has been found that teacher location can play an important role in maintaining discipline in the classroom (Wall, 1993).

University teachers should also not hesitate to quickly halt disruptive and off-task behaviors, rather than speaking at the front of the classroom oblivious to what the students are doing and whether or not they are paying attention. According to Colvin (2010):

Off-task behavior is a very common problem behavior in classrooms. Unless these behaviors are managed effectively and efficiently, learning opportunities may be lost. In addition, it is always possible for even low-level off-task behavior to escalate to more serious, disruptive, and unsafe behavior (Colvin, 2010, p.45).

It has been found that an effective rule which teachers can implement to reduce off-task and disruptive behavior is “listen while others talk” (Lindberg, Kelley & Swick, 2005, p.57). Applied to a university classroom, this
rule would be effective not only in curbing peer conflicts by aiding each student’s ability to work and express him or herself without undue interruption, but also in maintaining order and focus in the classroom during lectures by the teacher. If a student starts to talk to another student while the teacher is delivering a lecture, the teacher can follow the “listen while others talk” rule by stopping speaking and looking directly at the disruptive student who is speaking. If the student continues to speak, the teacher may choose to remind the student about the rule in class, or during a private conversation after class.

In addition to students talking out of turn, according to Mayer (2002), there are several more conditions which tend to encourage antisocial behavior in the classroom. Those which pertain to a university foreign language classroom include the following:

1. An over-reliance on punitive methods of control
   As Rowan found, classrooms which are orderly are likely to have less bullying. One way a teacher can maintain an orderly classroom is through a system of rules, and punishments for violating those rules. For example, a student who falls asleep during a class or spends a class period writing email might lose points on a test, or receive an absence for that day. However, an over-reliance on these methods of control has been shown to be ineffective in combating bullying. It is critical that students are interested and involved in the class material, in addition to understanding and following the class rules.

2. Unclear rules for student deportment
   On the first day of class, university teachers should make the rules for student behavior clear. Foreign language teachers who desire to conduct their classes completely in English, including the rules of the class, must ensure that they are written in such a way that all the students understand them, and also provide an opportunity for students to ask for clarification.

3. Academic failure experiences
   Continual academic failure without an opportunity to get extra help or make up the work can lead to disruptive and antisocial behavior in the classroom. Universities should make resource centers available to the students, and instructors should encourage students to visit during office hours, and expand those hours to accommodate the number of students seeking help if necessary.

4. Students lacking critical social skills that form the basis of doing well academically and relating positively to others, such as persistence on task, complying with requests, paying attention, negotiating differences, handling criticism and teasing
   Foreign language classes often consist of students from a variety of cultures and countries. Social rules may
vary. In the university classroom, as stated above, instructors must make the rules of the class clear. However, an understanding of cultural differences may help the teacher understand when a student is acting inappropriately or rudely, as opposed to doing something that may be considered acceptable in his or her homeland. If a teacher in fact determines that a student lacks critical skills to do well academically and relate well to other students, it is appropriate to discuss the situation with the student’s other instructors on campus to develop a strategy to help him or her.

5. Lack of student involvement

Uninspired students who are not involved in class work may engage in antisocial behavior directed at other students. University instructors should strive to create lesson plans which fully engage their classes. Work on assignments that require sharing and collaboration can demonstrate that everyone is valued and respected, and help to create an atmosphere of trust (Hoover & Oliver, 1996).

It has been found that another alternative to an overly punitive approach in attempting to stop bullying behavior in the K-12 classroom is to assign bullies extra responsibilities, such as chores, or being posted to a location for a specific purpose. The bully is thus able to direct his energy in a positive direction rather than in an antisocial manner toward another student (U.S. Department of Justice, 2004, p.23).

In a university classroom, there are typically not physical chores for the students to perform, nor various settings where one could be posted. However, an instructor may assign a bully to a position of leadership in a group, and also assign him or her specific activities which may help release energy in a non-antisocial way, like giving a speech or writing and performing a role-play based on the current topic.

How do all the pieces fit together? Some K-12 schools have chosen to implement comprehensive anti-bullying programs. In North America the most popular of these is probably the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus & Limber, 1999). This program includes bullies, victims, other students, teachers, parents, and staff. Once instituted, it is considered to be a permanent part of the school program. It involves surveying students at the school to find out how widespread the bullying problem is, holding conferences with staff, students and parents to provide education about bullying, enforcement of classroom rules against bullying, and direct intervention by teachers when bullying is detected. Universities may wish to consider instituting similar programs if the need arises.

Bullying is a widespread problem with potentially serious consequences, including suicide, physical harm, and academic failure. Most of the focus of anti-bullying research has involved K-12 schools, but university instructors should also be aware of this issue and monitor their classes for indications of antisocial behavior. In this paper, proven strategies for reducing bullying in K-12 schools have been altered to suit the university for-
eign language classroom. It is hoped that they may be useful to university instructors who wish to eliminate the harmful impact of bullies in their classes. In the appendix, a checklist has been provided for a quick reference of suggestions which may help to alleviate a bullying problem in a university classroom.

Appendix

Checklist of actions an instructor can take to help curb bullying in a university classroom

☐ Use a textbook which promotes prosocial behavior (Rowan, 2007)
☐ Talk to the bully directly
☐ Alter the seating arrangement to move a bullied student away from a bully
☐ Assign additional stimulating work to students who finish class work earlier than others
☐ Warn the bully that continued provocative action could result in a failing grade in the class
☐ Consult with colleagues, compare notes and experiences, and develop a strategy to curb the bullying
☐ Arrange desks in such a way that it is easy to monitor what the students are doing, and circulate among them
☐ Institute a “listen while others talk” rule, enforce consistently (Lindberg, Kelley & Swick, 2005)
☐ Ensure that all the rules of the class are clear (Mayer, 2002)
☐ Provide information to students who are struggling academically about a resource center for extra help, and help during office hours
☐ Learn about the cultural backgrounds of students to more fully understand the possible intent behind various behaviors
☐ Create assignments which stress sharing and collaboration to foster an atmosphere of trust (Hoover and Oliver, 1996)
☐ Assign bullies extra responsibilities to divert their energy, such as positions of leadership during group work

References


大学の外国語授業のためのいじめ防止策

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いじめは授業環境を崩壊させ、学生を危険にさらすものである。いじめが小学校、中学校、高校において問題になっていることは広く知られているが、大学においてもあざけりや集団からの排除などの問題行動が起こっている。

多くの大学の講義では学生同士が互いに関わることなく進行するが、外国語の授業においては学生同士の顕著な共同作業が不可欠である。

本論はいかにいじめが授業の妨げになるかを述べるとともに、授業環境を保つ適切な指導法など、大学の外国語授業のためのいじめ防止対策を考察した。

キーワード：いじめ防止、共同作業、授業環境、クラス管理、協調

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