

Silence please

We have put together a list of techniques for getting silence in class, which you might be able to add to your repertoire. The list is not definitive and there are no rules of thumb. We simply offer the ideas in the hope that one or two of them will be suitable for the very individual needs and characteristics of you and your pupils.

Author: Teacher training services

AT TIMES it is essential to get silence in class. For a number of reasons, however, silence is not always easy to achieve! We all know what it's like to be standing at the front of the class, glaring at the students and waiting patiently for them to be quiet. Sometimes we have to wait for a very long time, and sometimes our patience wears thin.

Giving them a reason to be quiet

WHEN WE say Be quiet, please, pupils often fail to respond. This might be, in part, because they don't know why they are being asked to be quiet. It can help if we make our reasons for wanting silence clear to the students. If it's in order to give instructions that you are appealing for silence, say loud and clearly the word Instructions! Or if it is to ask a question that you need silence, say loud and clearly, I have a question! A question! With the need for silence immediately evident, the students are more likely to respond appropriately.

With very noisy ESO classes it can be extremely difficult (and tiring) to beat the students at their own game and make your voice louder than theirs. That's why I get silence by writing messages in very large letters on the blackboard: **YOU HAVE TWO MINUTES TO FINISH!**, followed by **ONE MORE MINUTE!!**, and then **PLEASE STOP NOW!!!** This also has the advantage of giving students the time and opportunity to complete what they are doing rather than simply cutting them off. And, although a very old-fashioned technique, for those classes that need a little extra persuasion to be quiet and listen, I sometimes find myself forced to add to the last message: **PLEASE STOP NOW OR ... EXTRA HOMEWORK.** For some strange reason this helps immensely.'

Idea contributed by David Spencer (Macmillan author).



The Countdown

AS THE pupils are coming to the end of an activity, the teacher begins a countdown from five (or ten if the amount of noise to be overcome demands it). Encourage the students to join in the countdown with you. Upon zero, the class must be silent. You can also try this technique by saying the first ten letters of the alphabet backwards, which requires more concentration.



Armchair Aerobics

TPR ACTIVITIES are all too often assumed to be suitable for Primary pupils only. This TPR activity is highly suitable for Secondary pupils. It not only ends in silence, but it also helps to prevent the students from getting fidgety, as well as providing a few moments of humor and lots of valuable language input.

The teacher gives instructions to the students such as sit up straight! / stretch your legs! / shrug your shoulders! / wiggle your fingers! / shake your feet! / bend your arms! / click your fingers!, all of which may be done from a sitting-down position. In the tradition of TPR, the teacher should initially do the exercises, as well as giving the instructions.

When the whole group is involved, the ideal instructions to conclude the activity are given:

Breathe in! Hold. Breathe out.
Breathe in! Hold.
(Enjoy the silence!)
Breathe out.

And don't forget to open the window; lack of oxygen makes for restless, irritable pupils.

The Falling Bomb: for the smaller, not so noisy group!

THE TEACHER makes the sound of a falling bomb, which she represents with a slowly falling fist. When the bomb makes contact with the palm of her other hand the class must be silent. (Primary children like to say BOOM! when the bomb makes contact, which is nice punctuation).

Last One Silent

THIS IS a game which you can initiate on the first day of term. You tell the pupils that at any moment in the lesson you will, for example, hold your right ear lobe or put on a pair of sunglasses, and that this will be the signal for them to be quiet. The last pupils to react to the signal will get a dot in the register. At the end of the month (or term) the pupil(s) with the fewest number of dots will receive a small prize.

Importantly, the emphasis of this technique is on rewarding silence rather than chastising conversation.

If you have a class where students are not sitting when you go in, and there is so much noise that nobody even notices the teacher is there, this tip is for you.

Write on the blackboard a quick task. Ideally, choose a task which includes lexis or chunks of language related to the lesson in hand, eg:

MEMORISE THIS QUOTATION:

You can take a horse to water,
But you can't make it drink.
(Ideal if you are going to teach can for ability).

'IF YOU make a habit of writing such mini-tasks on the board as soon as you go into the classroom, the students will tend to sit, ready to be the first to complete the task. A system of positive points for the first to finish can be negotiated as an incentive.'

Idea contributed by Carmen Fernandez Santás.

Everybody Click: a technique that works well with large groups at noisier moments

THE TEACHER, with the initial help of some students at the front of the class, initiates a rhythm of finger clicking.

Everybody click! (Click click click)
Everybody click! (Click click click)

The teacher repeats the instruction until all the pupils have been drawn in to participate.

Everybody click! (Click click click)
Click! (Click)
Click! (Click)
Everybody click! (Click click click)

It is always easier to get silence if the students are in lockstep, because if they are all

doing the same thing at the same time, they can all stop together. The clicking (or tapping on books) brings the students together; it's fun; it requires them to listen and concentrate, so its effect is very calming. The silence created when they all stop together is beautifully deafening!

Don't expect immediate success the first time you try it. The students may, at first, look puzzled. Explain to them that it is a technique you will sometimes use in order to achieve silence. Establish it as a routine. The second time you try it you will hear the difference.

Stop or Silence Please

MAKE A sign, like a road sign, saying STOP or SILENCE PLEASE. Hold it up or pin it to the wall when silence is required. The students should be made aware that whenever this sign appears they have one minute to finish what they are doing and to give the teacher their attention.

Whatever your preferred techniques for getting silence are, it is essential that the students recognise them and know that they signal the need for silence. We would suggest that this be a point of discussion (in English or in L1) at the beginning of your acquaintance with students; establish your routines for getting silence with the students.

We would also suggest, as indeed David Spencer has suggested, that the best techniques for getting silence allow the students a few moments to finish what they are doing rather than just cutting them off. Bear in mind that if we adults, while attending a professional workshop, were told to Be quiet, now! we would probably think the speaker very rude. In fact, why not reflect for a moment upon the last time you attended a workshop or discussion group with 25–30 other teachers. Ask yourself: How easy was it for you and your colleagues to be silent upon request?

