Managing monkeys in the ELT classroom

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The value of adopting a learner-centred approach to ELT classroom management is nowadays widely accepted. However, one important means of achieving this, namely effective 'monkey management', or the correct assignment of responsibility for the next step in a problem-solving process (Blanchard et al. 1990), does not appear to have received the attention it deserves. This article attempts to show how the monkey concept can provide teachers with useful insights and practical procedures for developing a more learner-centred classroom management style. First of all, I outline the monkey concept, illustrate the typical behaviour of the monkey in ELT, and indicate some of the problems it can cause in the classroom. I then go on to consider why these problems occur. Finally, I discuss several strategies for coping successfully with ELT classroom monkeys and thereby facilitating a more learner-centred approach to ELT classroom management.

Introduction

In recent years, the importance of adopting a learner-centred approach to ELT classroom management has become axiomatic. Nevertheless, many teachers continue to find this difficult to achieve in practice. This article tries to show how an understanding of the 'monkey'—a concept from management studies—can help to alleviate this problem.

The monkey management problem

In management terms, the 'monkey' is the 'next move' in a problem-solving process (Blanchard et al. 1990). Thus, in ELT, the problem might be that a learner does not know the meaning of a word. The 'monkey' would be what needs to be done to solve this problem. This might take the form of the teacher telling the learner the meaning of the word, or getting the learner to look up the word in the dictionary, or any of the many other steps that are possible in such a situation.

The monkey management perspective says that most managers are wrong to think in terms of what needs to be done to solve a problem—in the case in question, to find the meaning of an unknown word. The monkey management approach calls for priority to be given instead to who should solve the problem. This is because it is very easy, in any problem-solving situation, for the wrong person to become responsible for solving a problem. Within an ELT context, this would mean that the teacher too easily accepts responsibility for solving learning problems best solved by the learners. As a result, while a specific problem may have been solved, a more general one has been created—because the wrong person has taken responsibility for providing a solution.
From this perspective, then, the key question is often not how to solve the problem itself, but how to make sure that the right person solves it. Working on this principle, in ELT the main management problem teachers face is to ensure that they and the learners play their proper roles in the problem-solving process, i.e. that the classroom monkeys are managed effectively.

The following scenarios illustrate how this problem typically manifests itself in the ELT classroom. As you read through them, please note in each case what happens to the monkey, and what strategy the teacher uses. Also note that each scenario shows the same basic situation, with the same teacher and the same learner.

Scenario 1

[Monkey is round the learner's neck.]
L: Excuse me, I don't understand this word.
T: [As he or she talks, the learner gives the monkey to the teacher, who puts it round his or her neck.] OK, let me see if I can help. Ah, yes, 'delegate'. Well, for example, if I ask one of you to do something for me that I normally do, like clean the blackboard or give out the books, that's to 'delegate'. Is that clear for you now?
L: Yes, I think so.
T: OK.
[Teacher staggers away with the monkey round his or her neck.]

Scenario 2

[Monkey is round the learner's neck. Throughout the dialogue, learner keeps trying to push it on to the teacher, who keeps pushing it back.]
L: Excuse me, I don't understand this word.
T: Hm, 'delegate'. OK, so the meaning has to be found. (pause) Do you remember seeing it before anywhere?
L: Ah, yes, now I remember. I think it was in the last unit. (flips through pages) Here it is. It means to get someone else to do something that you normally do yourself.
T: Yes. Can you think of an example?
L: Yes, like when you ask one of us to clean the blackboard, or give out the books. Then you 'delegate' those jobs to us, right?
T: Right.
[Teacher walks away; monkey stays round learner's neck.]

In each of the scenarios, the problem is the unknown word, and the monkey is what needs to be done to make the meaning clear.

In the first treatment of the problem, the teacher takes responsibility for solving it, so the monkey moves from the learner to the teacher. However, in the second scenario, the learner is given responsibility for solving the problem, so the monkey stays with the learner.

From the monkey management perspective these two scenarios show that a problem always belongs to two people—a monkey 'worker', i.e. someone who actually takes responsibility for solving the problem, and a
What are the effects of picking up learners' monkeys?

In addition to the burden of overwork, what other problems can inappropriate picking-up of monkeys cause? There are at least four other reasons for concern.

1. First, and most obviously, picking up learners' monkeys deprives them of opportunities to learn how to solve their own problems, so they may fail to develop their potential for independent learning.

2. More indirectly, but no less importantly, by making learners feel incapable of solving problems themselves, it gives them the message that they are 'not OK'.

3. Picking up learners' monkeys gives them the impression that the teacher actually wants their monkeys. Thus, the more monkeys teachers pick up, the more their learners will give them.

4. Unnecessary picking-up of learners' monkeys causes teachers to ignore those which it is their responsibility to handle, because they are too busy dealing with their learners' ones. This can result in neglect of the teacher's own 'mega'-monkey, i.e. proper overall classroom management (Garratt 1987). It is clear that picking up learners' monkeys unnecessarily can cause a number of major classroom management problems. It is therefore important to look for ways of helping teachers to reduce their monkey burden. In order to do so, we first need to understand the causes of excessive monkey-working.

Why do teachers pick up their learners' monkeys?

There appear to be two main sets of factors at play. The first is what might be called 'external pressures'.

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Teachers, like other managers, will often explain their motives for picking up other people's monkeys in terms of factors beyond their control, e.g.:

—shortage of time: getting learners to do more of the work for themselves takes too long;
—examination pressures: results often appear to be better when the approach is more teacher-centred;
—materials constraints: the methodology of the textbook forces the teacher to adopt a teacher-centred approach;
—the head of department/headmaster/inspector threat: the 'powers-that-be' will not tolerate a more learner-centred style;
—cultural expectations: the socio-cultural norm is for teachers to transmit knowledge and learners to passively absorb it;
—learner resistance: learners, for all sorts of reasons, may be reluctant to take responsibility for managing their own learning.

All these reasons for picking up learners' monkeys are undoubtedly an important part of the story. We have to acknowledge the very real pressures which the work-place can exert, and the powerful influence of such factors on teachers' behaviour. Nevertheless, some teachers still pick up their learners' monkeys even when they are using learner-centred materials, or doggedly refuse to use teacher-centred materials in a more learner-centred way, even when this is possible. In other words, they continue to pick up monkeys even when there is no apparent pressure to do so.

There must therefore be other, more deep-seated reasons for such behaviour. We need to consider the role which self-induced pressures can play, in particular, and to look not only at pressures which are largely beyond the control of teachers, but also at those which are of their own making.

A number of factors can cause the kind of internal psychological pressures that result in monkey dependency.

Lack of appropriate training. Garratt (1987) points out that a salient characteristic of many managers is that they do not manage! He ascribes this to lack of training. Employers frequently assume that managers, as part of doing the job, will somehow pick up the competence needed to be effective in it. However, in reality, managers are often unclear about what their new role requires of them, and may actually spend their time doing their subordinates' jobs instead.

Given this tendency, it may be that ELT teacher training pays too little attention to making sure that teachers develop sufficient depth of understanding of their role as classroom managers. Often there is a tendency to concentrate on theoretical justifications for a learner-centred approach, without spelling out what that might mean in classroom management terms, or to focus on how to handle individual learner-centred techniques without necessarily relating them to a
coherent overall theory of classroom management. The result in both cases is a failure to prepare the teacher adequately for the role of a classroom manager.

The Peter Principle A second possible reason for lack of effective classroom management skills is the operation of the ‘Peter Principle’. This states that, in a hierarchy, workers are promoted to their level of incompetence (Peter 1969). In other words, workers are often promoted not because of their potential as managers, but because they were good at the sub-managerial job they have just left behind. The natural instincts of such ‘managers’ is to continue to do their old job in their new position.

In a similar way, ELT teachers are often those who were formerly keen students of the language and who later on ‘fell’ into ELT. Their main talent may therefore be to be a good learner, rather than a good manager of other learners, and they naturally feel more competent in the former role.

‘Fear of flying’ A third possible reason why teachers (and others) are sometimes reluctant to carry out their management role may be because of the degree of risk involved. In essence, management is the art of getting things done through other people (Blanchard et al. 1990).

This is naturally a less predictable process than doing things oneself. It involves a good deal of leaping in the dark, in the hope that one’s impressions about another person’s capabilities for carrying out the task in hand are correct. Also, a teacher is in a more exposed position than a learner: his or her head is on the line if things go wrong, so monkey picking-up may well appear to be a surer way of ensuring that mistakes are avoided.

Feeling wanted Finally, failure to manage the classroom effectively may be caused by feelings of low self-esteem. Our self-image is strongly influenced by how much value we feel others attach to us. In the normal run of things, a feeling that we are appreciated to a satisfactory degree should occur as a natural outcome of our interactions with others. However, should this not occur, we may be tempted to engineer an artificial increase in our feelings of self-worth by picking up our learners’ monkeys, as this will provide us with easy opportunities to shine.

Overcoming ‘monkey mania’ Whatever the exact mix of such factors, inappropriate monkey picking-up by teachers—in other words, a teacher-centred classroom management style—clearly has as much to do with inner psychological drives as with external pressures. More positively, this means that there is some scope for remedying the situation, since, even if teachers cannot change their textbooks or other factors beyond their control, they can be expected to try to develop themselves.

One way of doing this is for monkey-dependent teachers to adopt routines which will help them alter their basic style of classroom behaviour. These procedures can provide the external, tangible support

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which will help them to undergo the inner, psychological growth which is the ultimate cure for monkey worship. One form of such help is to be found in the following 'Rules for Monkey Management' (Blanchard et al. 1990). These are techniques for managing monkeys which, as will be seen, can be readily adapted to the ELT classroom.

**Rule 1: Describe the monkey** This rule simply involves identifying the monkey in question. When a learner brings a problem to a teacher, the teacher's first step should be to clarify what needs to be done next in order to begin to solve the problem.

For example, in Scenario 2 above, the problem was identified when the learner said 'I don't understand this word'. The teacher then said 'So the meaning has to be found' and, in so doing, described the monkey. In other words, the teacher clearly identified for the learner what the next step to be taken was, i.e. to find the meaning, without imposing any 'ownership' of it. This simple procedure can be effective in helping teachers to manage monkeys for the following reasons:

**a.** It buys time for the teacher to think rather than just act, to resist the instinct to rush in and take things over. Also, once the learners begin to realize that the teacher will not immediately take over, the possibility that they will take the initiative themselves is increased.

**b.** It 'depersonalizes' the monkey. This allows the learners to be involved on a more equal basis in potentially making the next move, and thus encourages ownership by learners of the solution to the problem (Rogers and Farson 1979).

**c.** It makes what needs to be done appear less daunting. Lack of discussion before planning the next move often makes the situation appear more complex than it really is, and thus predisposes the teacher to take over responsibility.

**Rule 2: Assign the monkey** Rule 1 helps to establish what the monkey is; Rule 2 is concerned with deciding who should take responsibility for it, based on the following principle: 'All monkeys shall be owned and handled at the lowest organisational level consistent with their welfare.' (Blanchard et al. 1990)

For example, in Scenario 2, once the monkey had been identified, the teacher began the process of assigning it to the learner by asking him if he remembered seeing it before, and so on. The learner's reaction clearly showed that he was capable of taking responsibility for solving the problem, so the teacher proceeded accordingly.

The main benefit of following this rule is that it ensures a focus on the over-arching question of who is the most appropriate person to do the problem-solving. Also, the principle on which this rule is based orientates the taking on of responsibility in a downward direction (from teacher to learners), thus counteracting the natural tendency for monkeys, just like their real-life counterparts, to gravitate upwards (i.e. from learners to teacher).

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Rule 3: Insure the monkey  When learners start trying to solve problems for themselves, they will inevitably make mistakes. Safeguards therefore need be built into the process to ensure that the consequent risks are kept to an acceptable level. This is the purpose of the third monkey management rule. In practical terms, it means that attempts by learners to solve their problems should be ‘insured’ by one of two main ‘insurance policies’ (Blanchard et al. 1990). These two policies allow for varying levels of supervision and trouble-shooting by the teacher of the learners’ problem-solving attempts.

The first policy is ‘Recommend, Then Act’. This is used with learners at the initial stages of learning how to solve the problem in question, who therefore need closer supervision. It means first of all getting them to formulate a course of action which they then ‘recommend’ to the teacher. Then, after consultation, and, as necessary, appropriate modification, the teacher permits the learners to ‘act’ on their recommendations.

Thus, if the learners were about to try out a relatively learner-centred activity for the first time, such as project-work, a ‘Recommend, Then Act’ policy would normally be used. After the activity has been introduced, the learners would prepare and then discuss with the teacher their plan for doing the project (i.e. they would make recommendations to the teacher about how they feel they should proceed). They would go ahead only after securing the teacher’s agreement (i.e. after being given permission by the teacher to ‘act’).²

The second policy is known as ‘Act, Then Advise’. This approach is for problems which the teacher feels confident the learners can look after more independently, and which can therefore be supervised more loosely. The simpler the problem, and the more experience the learners have had of handling it, therefore, the more likely that this policy would be chosen.

For example, if the teacher feels the learners have become reasonably familiar with project work, then, after the teacher has provided the usual preliminary orientation to the task, the procedure would be for the learners to make a plan for carrying it out and to put it into practice on their own (i.e. to ‘act’). They would then inform (i.e. ‘advise’) the teacher about the outcome, and receive feedback and so on, as appropriate.

The recommended general strategy for deciding which degree of supervision (i.e. level of insurance) to use is to encourage use of Level 2 insurance as much as possible, and to require use of Level 1 as much as necessary (Blanchard et al. 1990). This builds in a bias towards the second, lower level of supervision, and thus increases the chances of learners taking ever greater responsibility for managing their own monkeys.

The main overall benefit of this monkey management rule is that it helps the teacher to adopt a dynamic and flexible approach towards developing learners’ problem-solving capabilities. Rather than being an all or nothing matter, this rule allows the teacher to vary the learners’

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level of responsibility for solving their problems on a case-by-case basis. This should help the teacher to feel confident about remaining in overall control of what happens in the classroom, at the same time as the learners are gradually being taught how to manage their own monkeys.

**Conclusion**

Much of what is involved in adopting a learner-centred ELT classroom approach is clearly concerned with effective monkey management. This means making a basic distinction between the solution to a problem and the need to make sure the right person solves the problem, with a primary focus on the latter.

Monkey management also makes it clear that there are two parties to every problem—the problem-solver and the problem-solver’s supervisor—and that it is only too easy for the monkey to leap upwards from the problem-solver’s (learner’s) to the supervisor’s (teacher’s) back. Teacher-centredness can thus be seen in terms of the teacher inappropriately picking up learners’ monkeys.

Such ‘monkey mania’ may well be caused by inappropriate teaching materials or methods, lack of learner training, and other similar external factors. However, it is also likely to have just as much to do with the teacher’s desire to satisfy hidden psychological needs. In these instances, following guidelines such as the monkey management rules, which are aimed at modifying such teachers’ instinctual classroom behaviour, should help them to keep their learners’ monkeys where they belong—around their learners’ necks, and not their own! This should also help teachers to achieve the psychological maturity which is the true cure for self-induced monkey-addiction, and a key factor in enabling them to put a learner-centred approach to ELT classroom management into practice.

**Notes**

1 These scenarios are not intended to be models of vocabulary teaching. Rather, their purpose is solely to illustrate monkey behaviour as clearly as possible. Additional features of teaching that might usefully occur in real life, but which are inessential for this purpose, have therefore been omitted.

2 As with the two earlier classroom scenarios, only the bare essentials of the teaching procedures in question have been included here, for the sake of clarity.

**References**


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