Chapter 1

Running a room

Starts and ends of lessons

Jane is an outstanding teacher.

Before the lesson begins her students are lining up outside the classroom. They're quiet or talking calmly. She stands by the doorway as they enter in single file. She says *bonjour* to each student. Because her school has a clear uniform code, she sometimes has the odd word with them about their appearance, maybe a little *ça va?* a bit of personal chit-chat in English here and there: "What lesson have you had? How was it?" "How did that piano exam go?" "Did you watch that football game?" She shows that she knows something about each student and knows them all by name. She asks them to use some French they recently learned as their entry code.

Her classroom is all ready to go. It's bright, at the right temperature, decorated with samples of student work, some useful French phrases, some positive behaviour statements, a map of France and a few posters showing aspects of French culture. There's a reading corner with a selection of French magazines and on each student table a mini-whiteboard and tissue. The computer, CD/MP3 player and interactive whiteboard are fired up and raring to go. On her desk there's a pile of marked exercise books waiting to be handed out.

The class is now in the room having taken out their materials. They're calmly standing behind their tables, facing the front (because they can see the teacher better that way). Jane is standing front middle and expects total silence at this point. She's smiling, communicating relaxed vigilance to the class. She scans the room from left to right, front to back, then greets the class with a *Bonjour tout le monde!* They reply in unison *Bonjour, madame.* She asks how they all are and they reply in unison Ça *va bien merci, et vous?* She says *Asseyez-vous.* She asks them to hold up their equipment: *pencil case, workbook, pen.* They do so in unison. The students sit down in their allocated places in a pattern and listen

attentively to what she's going to say next. She can immediately see who's absent and makes a note.

That may all seem very familiar to you, but routines like this don't just happen. You can have that start to every lesson by modelling and practising all the desired behaviours and especially if your school's ethos supports best behaviour. Students have to learn routines, they like them and teachers have to practise them until students get them right. Be insistent, persevere and don't accept second best. Use eye contact, make sure the students know you're looking at them as individuals, preferably with a smile – a smile communicates confidence. Definitely smile before Christmas.

The first few minutes of a lesson are critical. In the real world, lessons don't always start perfectly, but you can help the process along with a trick or two. With younger classes you can tell them you're going to count down in the TL from 20 to zero and that they must have all their materials out by the time you get to zero (you can adjust your speed to the class). Or why not have the class recite or sing the alphabet as they come in and they have to have all their books ready by the time they get to Z? When it comes to the class sitting down, you could occasionally break the routine by saying they can sit down when they hear the first letter of their name. Students like to know what they should do, they appreciate clarity and feel safe with routines, as do you.

The mood of a class when it arrives partly depends on the previous lesson. If they've been quiet for an hour they may feel like being noisier now. If they've been allowed to be too noisy in the previous class this could carry over to your lesson. The outstanding teacher is aware of these subtle, or not so subtle, changing moods and adapts to them.

What if you get latecomers? In most cases you don't need to make a fuss; you can defer any individual comment until later to focus on your priority, getting the lesson off to a great start. Make sure the class has seen you've noticed the latecomer. Perhaps you've taught them to say *Excusez-moi, je suis en retard.* Just occasionally you may need to make a big fuss, show real or feigned disapproval. In this way the rest of the class knows that you don't accept lateness and that they may feel foolish if late. This isn't being mean to students; it's showing them how much you care. If a whole class is late for no good reason you may need to have them back at break or lunchtime to make your point.

Some teachers prefer to have a task ready on the board or on students' tables for them to do straight away. This may work well, especially if students arrive in dribs and drabs, but in general I'd go for a whole group activity to set the tone, give lesson objectives and have everyone in the same mindset. Worksheets are best placed face down on tables if you intend to use them later. If you hand out

sheets during a lesson do it while walking round talking about something else so you minimise 'dead time'.

Ends of lessons need tidy routines as well. You can use a song as you did at the start to minimise any time-wasting chit-chat. Have all the students stand up. Try to end the lesson on a positive note, e.g. by mentioning a good website you came across, giving a compliment to one of the students or even telling an amusing story. Then you can end with a *Rangez vos affaires* or equivalent and ask the class to stand up together. To ensure an orderly departure you can let them out in rows or boys first, then girls (or vice versa). Even that last trick makes the class listen to whether you're going to say *boys* or *girls* first. They'll soon let you know if you're favouring one group over the other!

Make sure you leave enough time for your end routine. It's very easy to be too rushed. If you need to fill time, individual students can use an exit code, e.g. a phrase they've learned recently, a verb form, a time or a weather phrase. Give yourself and your class plenty of time to write down any homework – you don't want students telling you next time that they weren't sure what to do. Some say you should set the homework earlier in the lesson; that's great if the lesson sequence allows for it.

Planning lesson sequences

You hopefully have a well-organised scheme of work or curriculum plan in your department. It's both difficult and unwise to plan every lesson too far in advance because you have to adapt to the pace and the needs of the class in front of you and they're all different. Most teachers make a broad plan for weeks ahead, but prepare detailed lessons a week or two in advance. Last minute preparation isn't advised, but it happens and can produce fresh, successful lessons. This gets easier with experience and excellent teachers are great improvisers. Over a sequence of lessons try to mix up the skills you're going to practise. Allow for some reading, listening, speaking and writing. Remember that students become good at what you practise. If you do lots of oral work they'll probably get better at oral work; if you do lots of grammar, they'll get good at grammar, and so on. Research suggests that meaningful input and interaction are the key recipes for success.

Think about the timing of your lessons with the class. Plan for a greater amount of "passive" work like listening, gap-filling, dictation, computer work and reading in the afternoons. The students are tired, so are you; you may find it hard to get a class going for oral work. Conversely, morning lessons may be better for a larger diet of oral work (pair work, group work, question and answer, other teacher-student interactions, repetition and games). Be flexible, though. Great teachers

sometimes change what they'd planned to do if the mood of the class is not as expected. There's no doubt that feeling the class mood and having a degree of flexibility are important attributes. We'll look at this in more detail later.

Over a sequence of lessons, plan to recycle language from one lesson to the next. Your start to the lesson might be a quick recap of a grammar point or some vocabulary from the previous lesson: "Who thinks they can remember five shops in Spanish?" "Who thinks they can go through the verb *fahren* for me?" (Note that adding the word "think" makes the task seem less intimidating to students.) Or: "I'll give you the name of a food item, put your hand up and tell me if you think you should put *du, de la* or *des* in front of it". "I'll give you a sentence in the present tense, you try to put it in the past and change one item." But don't just revise from the previous lesson, go back over various things you've done in the last few lessons. You'll find no shortage of ideas for starters in course books, online or from colleagues. Remember that many students' memories are nowhere near as good as yours. The use of spaced learning or "little and often" is essential for language teachers.

Planning individual lessons

If you have one-hour or even two-hour lessons, you need to build in plenty of variety. The attention span of youngsters is often quite short. In a one-hour session you might include four, five or more different tasks. It's usually best to put oral work nearer the start, when students have more energy. It's a good idea to set short time targets to create a sense of urgency: *Vous avez cinq minutes*. Break up the pattern of oral work by moving between whole-class question and answer and bursts of pair work. The latter is easier to manage than group work and each student gets to speak more.

Make sure that students know what you intend to get done in the lesson (usually in English) and what the outcomes will be for them. "By the end of the lesson you'll be able to…" This doesn't necessarily mean writing up the objectives on the board. You don't need to spell out objectives at the very start; you may prefer to get straight into your starter or main task, then spell out the aims later. Why not invite the class to work out what the aim of the lesson is?

Great teachers make sure each task follows on logically from the previous one, constantly reinforcing the main learning points. You may only be working on one or two key areas in a whole lesson. To maximise the recycling of language you can repeat tasks in slightly different ways. You might do a task from a worksheet or the board orally and then get the class to do the same task in writing. This leads to a quick transition, reinforces previous learning and practises more than one skill.

Be crystal clear with instructions, perhaps checking with the class that they've understood. Say in English: "Who can explain what we've been doing?" Don't use a questioning intonation when you give an instruction. Students are quite happy to be told what to do firmly and politely.

Try to ensure tidy, prompt transitions from one task to the next. This can be a tough one, especially for inexperienced teachers. When you stop one task there is a natural release of tension and students may start talking off the subject at that point. You may actually want a little of that, because it acts as a "pause for breath" before the next task. On the whole, however, it wastes valuable time and you have to work at transitions just like you have to work at starts and ends. Bring the class to silence with a familiar noise, a firm clap, a bell, a countdown or just by raising your arm, telling students they have to raise their arms too when silence is needed. Try saying "Class" with a particular sing-song intonation which students get used to and even copy. Tell the class why it's important to have a quick transition. Let them into your thinking, making them part of the process. If you have a reward system, why not tell them that the first three to finish will get a merit/stamp/house points, etc?

Try to mix up your interaction styles with the class. Don't talk *too* much to them, they'll probably get bored and learn less, but don't forget that teacher talk is important because it supplies high-quality TL input at the right speed, tailor-made for the class and you may have interesting stories to tell which increase their cultural awareness. Elicit responses, ask for hands up and sometimes say that you're going to just select students to answer. The no hands up technique, favoured by many, is a controversial one since we don't want to make students uncomfortable with language learning, or even terrified, yet we do need to ensure they're concentrating. If you use the no hands up technique sparingly it can work well. The class comes to attention and you just need to ensure that you don't throw an impossibly hard question to a student.

I'd argue against random questioning, using lolly sticks with names on or digital spinners, for example, since I believe the teacher is the best judge of who to ask at any point and how to differentiate between students by using skilled questioning. But you have to be careful – research suggests teachers find it hard not to favour the confident students with their hands in the air. If you want to ensure all students are joining in, sometimes get them to write their answers on a mini-whiteboard, allowing them some more thinking time and you to see their responses.

I'd advocate using pair work a lot when you're confident the class will do it usefully. Use games when they have a clear learning goal and you're sure students won't abuse the situation. Your lesson doesn't need to be "fun". It's great when

you're having fun, but the main aim is for students to be engaged in cognitively stimulating and therefore enjoyable activity. Games with a clear learning purpose are described in Chapter 6.

Use technology if you're confident with it. Teachers sometimes report that students who aren't very comfortable learning a language will be more at ease and learn more with a screen and microphone in front of them. Technology is great for us language teachers and you may choose to use it a good deal, but any digital task needs to be linguistically useful, providing high-quality input or practice opportunities. You'll find technology tips at the end of most of the chapters of this book.

When you start teaching you'll need to write out your lesson plan in some detail, preparing exactly which questions you're going to ask, how you're going to drill an item, how you're going to mix, say, group repetition with individual oral work. This takes time and care. With more experience these skills become second nature and your preparation is less time consuming, allowing you to focus on other areas of your professional life. The "dissecting a lesson" chapters in this book give examples of interactions you can plan for in detail.

Last of all, assessment for learning (formative assessment) techniques are important (see Chapters 12 and 13): checking all the class is following, using mini-whiteboards, skilled questioning techniques and the rest, but your personality counts for a lot. Children want you to be firm, friendly and fair. They want to be supported, so when someone is stuck, you can engender a supportive atmósphere by saying "Can anyone help her?" Let's now look at some useful lesson starters.

Great lesson starters activities

Starters or "warmers" get the class in the right mood, help you manage your classroom, but, above all, are an effective way to recycle language, providing students with more TL input and practice. Having a flying start sets the tone for the whole lesson. You can do random starters, but it's better if they fit within your individual lesson or lesson sequence, complementing other activities, either recapping material from the previous lesson or prefacing the content of the lesson to follow.