

# International Journal for Innovation Education and Research

ONLINE ISSN: 2411-2933 PRINT - ISSN: 2411-3123

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**Published Date:** 1/31/2019

**Page:**74-92

**Vol 7 No 1 2019**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.31686/ijer.Vol7.Iss1.1286>

## Giving effective instructions in EFL classrooms

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the positive effect of giving effective instructions on students' achievement. A great number of teachers, nowadays, are dissatisfied with their students' low achievement in learning English in Morocco. They claim that students are not interested at all in the learning process. However, research in teaching foreign languages reveals that there is a kind of stumbling block in the way of grasping the teacher's instructions. Regardless of how much effort teachers make, students do not understand their ambiguous instructions and thereby failing to do the activity at hand. This article attempts to explore three research questions: (1) Does the poor level of students at learning English have any relationship with the way teachers of English give instructions? (2) What is the teachers of English perception of the effect of instructions on teaching? And (3) are teachers of English familiar with what research has revealed in giving effective instructions? The results show that students achieve less not because things are too difficult to understand, but because the way teachers deliver their instructions is ineffective. Teachers really need update in how to effectively give instructions; otherwise, the teaching process will be doomed to failure.

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### 1. Introduction

Almost all teachers, regardless of being professional or novice ones, work day in, day out on how to manage their classes well. Classroom management is a stepping stone to success in the teaching process. According to the English Language Guidelines for Secondary Schools, "classroom management covers a wide range of areas including lesson planning, managing pair and group work, handling transitions, giving instructions, dealing with disruptive behavior, etc." (the Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 54). In this respect, this paper is going to shed light on a vital issue in classroom management, i.e. giving instructions. Teachers are, therefore, in dire need of well-thought-out instructions, especially when an activity necessitates changing the mode of work from individual to pair or group work. The period between these stages requires so thoroughly planned instructions that a smooth transition can be guaranteed. If the teacher's instructions, for instance, are unplanned, the whole activity will be ultimately unsuccessful. To Scrivener (2005, p. 90), unplanned instruction sounds "like a joke" as teachers "are often unaware that they are talking in this way." When they reconsider what they have taught via recording either a video or an audio script for themselves, they realize how confusing they have been. Scrivener (ibid.) argues that unplanned instruction in EFL classrooms would definitely hinder students' understanding as "the essential information about what to do is embedded in confusing and unnecessary babble." It is so obvious that giving instructions to students is not an easy task because the teacher should be a master of

the know-how to do that, otherwise ‘the best activity in the world is a waste of time if the students do not understand what they are supposed to do’ (Harmer, 1998, p. 4). They face difficulties in understanding the point taught not because they are lazy or not paying attention to the teacher, but simply because the instructions are ineffective. Similarly, Scrivener (2005, p. 90) argues that “an essentially simple activity can become impossible, not because the students could not do it, but because they did not understand what to do”. On the whole, teacher’s talk is really considered as the most essential source of comprehensible input. However, it may turn to be a major hindrance to students’ understanding of the activity in case instruction-giving is unplanned. Therefore, this article aims at raising the teachers’ awareness to the effectiveness of giving much importance to instructions as well as highlighting the relationship between success in EFL classrooms and prior preparation of detailed instructions at home.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. Giving effective instructions

Beyond a shadow of doubt, in many a class, students get confused and do not know what to do although their teacher has made great efforts in preparing the lesson at home. This is probably true because there is usually a lack of managerial and technical know-how to give instructions. Delivering effective instructions is not an easy job; it necessitates knowledge and experience.

#### 2.1.1. Pre-planning instructions

Through-out the literature, pre-planning instructions is of the utmost importance in the teaching process. Ur (1996) argues that students would face no problem understanding the activity if their teacher thinks of its instructions and puts them down ahead, i.e. thinking about the right words as well as the illustrations to use. She points out that “experience shows that teachers’ explanations are often not as clear to their students as they are to themselves”; that is why, improvising a clear explanation does not usually take place (ibid., p. 16). Once the teacher becomes aware of the significance of analyzing the “instructions beforehand so as to include only the essential information in simple, clear language and sequence it in a sensible order”, misunderstanding disappears (Scrivener, 2005, p. 90). In this respect, Harmer (1998, p. 4) raises general rules for giving “logical” instructions; he argues that teachers “must ask the following questions: What is the important information I am trying to convey? What must the students know if they are to complete this activity successfully? Which information do they need first? Which should come next?” Consequently, designing the lesson without knowing what instructions to give at each step is useless because planning them in advance is the key to success in teaching.

**2.1.2. Being brief** Research shows evidence that students switch off when the teacher’s talking time (TTT) is higher in comparison to the student’s talking time (STT). Ur (1996, p. 17) points out that students “have only a limited attention span; they cannot listen to you for very long at maximum concentration.” Of course, talking is one of the main resources the teacher has, but keeping it to the minimum possible and in a clear way would be better. That is why when teachers talk a lot while giving instructions, students get lost. In fact, teachers should talk less and when it comes to giving instructions to a certain task, their language should be short and clear enough to be understood, otherwise students would not follow them (Ur, ibid.). Scrivener (2005, p. 90) also advises teachers to ‘use short sentences — one sentence for each key piece of

information'. When students receive long and unplanned instructions, they get lost. He mentions an example of unplanned instructions as follows:

Ok, everybody, would you, Maria, sit down. Now what you have to do is, when you, you take this sheet of paper that I'm handing out now and keep it secret, and some of you are 'A', it's written at the top, and some are labeled 'B'. Ok, can you see that? Don't show your paper to anyone and then you have to describe to your partner; sit face to face. Could you move your chairs around and describe what's on your paper so that your partner can find out what's different, and you must agree; when you find something, draw it on your paper. OK? Do you understand? (Scrivener, *ibid.*)

He (*ibid.*, p. 91) therefore suggests a better version of instructions which are short and clearer; here they are:

- a. Sit opposite your partner.
- b. Some of you are "A" (gesture to letter A on the handouts).
- c. Some are "B" (gesture).
- d. Don't show your paper to anyone (mime hiding).
- e. Distribute the handout.
- f. Some things in picture A are different from picture B.
- g. Describe your picture.
- h. When you find something different draw it. (mime)

It is evident now that being precise and concise helps students get the instructions clearly. They would, in short, get involved in the activity without difficulty as long as the language they have received is brief and simple, away from any needless babble. This is often referred to in the literature as "KISS"<sup>1</sup>, meaning "keep instructions short and simple."

### 2.1.3. Using repetition or paraphrase

It seems that giving information more than once is necessary in the teaching process. According to Ur (1996, p.17), "a repetition or paraphrase of the necessary information may make all the difference: learners' attention wanders occasionally, and it is important to give them more than one chance to understand what they have to do." In other words, students need to be told what to do more than once and differently as paraphrasing some instructions would be helpful to some students who switch off from time to time. More than that, it is advisable, while repeating the instruction for the second time, to represent it "in a different mode: for example, say it and also write it up on the board" Ur (*ibid.*). What is worse, the teacher may repeat the same instructions and deliver them the same way they have done before. Consequently, everybody would agree that the same deed will lead to the same result, i.e. lack of understanding. To sum up, repetition is a must, but what matters is doing it using a different mode.

### 2.1.4. Demonstrating or modeling

Almost all teachers practitioners agree upon the fact that babbling without modeling is useless. There are several ways of demonstration that teachers should highlight; they have to show their students how to do things rather than telling only. Accordingly, Scrivener (2005, p.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from: <http://elteachertrainer.com/2010/04/25/practical-session-on-how-to-give-classroominstructions/>

91) advises teachers to “demonstrate rather than explain whenever possible.” Ur (1996) calls this situation “actual demonstration”; that is, the teacher models the activity either with one of the students or with the whole class:

When giving instructions for an activity, it often helps to do a ‘dry run’: an actual demonstration of the activity yourself with the full class or with a volunteer student before inviting learners to tackle the task on their own. (p. 17)

In fact, the whole story is about giving an example of what and how students should do an activity instead of talking. That is why it is suggested in the literature that teachers “should do a demonstration so students can see the activity in action.”<sup>2</sup> Research shows that modeling can take at least four forms<sup>3</sup>. A teacher may ask students to role-play an activity in order to make sure that instructions are well understood. Teachers can also ask their students “to repeat back the instructions” without choosing “the strongest person in the group to do this” as high achievers normally get the instructions from the first time contrary to low achievers. Moreover, “asking two students to demonstrate the activity in front of the class” is another option. Last but not least, a teacher may not give instructions to students at all and let them look at the activity and see what they have to do. Such a technique may be used while dealing with activities students are familiar with and not new ones. By and large, it has become evident that demonstrating is an effective option for delivering instructions; it is like magic as students see things in action rather than get bombarded with words.

**2.1.5. Supporting the instructions** The teacher’s language is unanimously agreed upon to be the main source of giving instructions. Put differently, the verbal language can never be replaced in the classroom. However, it can be supported by non-verbal language and then learning may take place effortlessly. In this respect, the teacher should carefully choose the teaching aids that are suitable for both the students and the activity.

It is common knowledge in the research literature that instructions can be very effective if supported by pictures, realia, gestures, facial expressions, voice and key words instructions on the board. In other words, students easily understand their teacher’s instructions when accompanied by non-verbal facilitators. It seems that these non-verbal supporters help students better understand the verbal language, i.e. oral instruction. Teaching aids are generally agreed on to be advantageous. Mohan and Phil (2012, p.13) raise some benefits of these supports. They argue that a teaching aid is advantageous for the following reasons:

- [It] adds interest and involvement.
- [It] makes learning permanent.
- [It] reduces verbalism.
- [It] develops greater understanding.
- [It] stimulates self-activity.
- [It] brings the world into the classroom.

Patel and Jain (2008, pp. 66-67) advise teachers to help themselves through the use of teaching aids. They argue that these types of instructional aids are beneficial not only to the student but to the teacher as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from: <https://akoaooteaoroa.ac.nz/download/ng/file/group-4/n2441-esol-teaching-skills-taskbook-unit2-c---giving-instructions.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.eslbase.com/articles/instructions>

Teachers usually find it easy clarifying their points of view if they make use of well-chosen teaching aids. According to them (ibid.), teaching aids have the following benefits:

- [They] supplement oral teaching.
- [They] prevent indiscipline and monotony.
- [They] save time and energy.
- [They] provide direct experience.

Non-verbal facilitators, such as pictures, prove to be very effective in the teaching process. All of us have already heard of the Chinese proverb<sup>4</sup> “A picture is worth a thousand words.” “This proverb refers to the notion that a complex idea can be conveyed with just a single still image.”<sup>5</sup> When a picture is used in such a context it is usually meant to match it with “the written instructions” or “make a poster of typical instructions with pictures to illustrate each one.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, a picture can also serve another goal in the sense that it can “prepare the students mentally, psychologically and linguistically for the theme of the unit” (the Ministry of Education, 2007b, p. 8). In a nutshell, pictures serve as magic in teaching.

Of course, mime and gestures, as non-verbal supporters, do play an essential role in teaching as they reduce TTT and increase STT. Scrivener (2005, p. 95) advises the teacher to use a set of gestures and facial expressions so as not to repeat “basic instructions” and meanwhile give more chances to students to talk. He (ibid.) illustrates the use of gestures to indicate ‘time’, for example, by “pointing to the ground” to indicate the present, “pointing ahead” to refer to the future and “pointing behind, over the shoulder” to indicate the past. To exemplify, he (ibid.) comes with the gestures in figure 1 below to be used instead of the following instructions in a way to minimize TTT:

1. Work in pairs
2. What do you think?
3. Stand up
4. Give a longer answer
5. Five minutes left
6. Don't show your information sheet to your partner

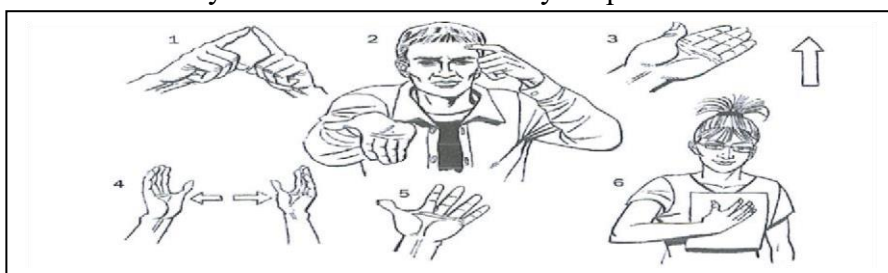


Figure 1. Supporting instructions

Consequently, using gestures in teaching is in fact the application of the silent way method which makes use of gestures as a teaching technique.

The voice, another essential teaching aid, is generally believed to be the most important instrument the teacher has. Varying it to serve different functions in giving instructions is a must. Harmer (1998, p.17) argues that teachers have to vary their voice according to the situation in hand; thus, “the kind of voice you

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/a-picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words.html>

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_picture\\_is\\_worth\\_a\\_thousand\\_words](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_picture_is_worth_a_thousand_words) <sup>6</sup> Retrieved from: <http://edition.tefl.net/ideas/instructions/>

use to give instructions or introduce a new activity will be different from the voice which is most appropriate for conversation or an informal exchange of views or information.” He (ibid.) adds saying that some teachers think that they have to raise their voices loudly in order to stop students chatting or at least to be heard by them; instead, “speaking quietly is often just as effective a way of getting the students’ attention since, when they realize that you are talking, they will want to stop and listen in case you are saying something important or interesting.” It sounds that speaking in a low voice can catch the students’ attention far better than a very loud one.

Finally, teaching aids not only facilitate teaching but making it more enjoyable and varied. Still, it should be clear that these “teaching aids supplement the teacher and they do not supplant him” (Mohan and Phil, 2012, p.12).

### 2.1.6. Selecting the right directives

The classroom is a natural environment for the use of directives for the sake of directing students to do or not to do something, to start or to end an activity and so forth.

According to Richards and Schmidt (2010, p. 543), a directive refers to “a speech act that has the function of getting the listener to do something, such as a suggestion, a request, or a command.” Searle (1979) defines directives as “the type of speech acts whose function is to direct the addressee to perform or not to perform an act, such as ordering or requesting. They are attempts . . . . .by the speaker to get the hearer to do something.”<sup>6</sup> Holmes (1983) argues that the structure of directives teachers use in their classrooms is of three types: imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives (as cited in Liruso and De Debat, 2002-2003, p.142). They are grouped in the following table:

Table 1. Syntactic forms of directives

Speech Function: Directives		
	Form	Example
<b>1. Imperatives</b>	a. Base form of verb b. You + imperative c. Present participle d. Verb ellipsis e. Imperative + modifier f. Let + 1 <sup>st</sup> person pronoun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak louder.</li> <li>• You go on with the work.</li> <li>• Looking at me.</li> <li>• Hands up.</li> <li>• Turn around, please Jo.</li> <li>• Let’s try.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Interrogatives</b>	a. Modals b. Non-modals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will you read this page for me?</li> <li>• People at the back! Are you listening?</li> </ul>
<b>3. Declaratives</b>	a. Embedded agent b. Hints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I want you to draw a picture.</li> <li>• Sally, you are not saying much.</li> </ul>

To Holmes, teachers’ directives take different manifestations in the classroom. They may refer to six imperative forms and two interrogative and declarative ones. However, “Holmes found in her data that

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.opf.slu.cz/vvr/akce/turecko/pdf/Toksoz.pdf>

imperatives were the most frequent type in all its variants and those were explicit enough not to cause any misunderstanding except for those that contained elliptical forms” (Liruso and De Debat, *ibid.*).

With the exception of the sixth form of imperatives (let’s + bare infinitive), the rest are pure commands. Wright (2003, p. 12) raises some types of commands which help in “establishing classroom control.” He advises teachers to deliver brief commands as students find them “easy to understand and hard to misinterpret.” He (*ibid.*) warns teachers of long explanations after giving a command since students “diminish the force of the directive”; if an explanation is a must, it should be brief and most importantly delivered before the command, not after it. He also recommends delivering a command which refers to “one task or objective at a time”. He argues that “when a command contains multi-step directions, students can mishear, misinterpret, or forget key steps. A student who appears to be noncompliant may simply be confused about which step in a multi-step directive to do first!” (Wright, 2003, *ibid.*).

Interrogatives are usually used in giving instructions in classrooms. Research shows that some practitioners prefer using request forms instead of commands. Sue Swift<sup>7</sup> – a teacher, teacher trainer and materials writer– advises teachers to avoid the imperative as an inappropriate form to use for fear that students might use it in everyday life. She accepts the use of the command when it “is more socially acceptable in the students’ own language (for example Italian) so that they are liable to transfer the use into English.” Wright (*op. cit.*), by contrast, argues that “effective commands are stated as directives rather than questions. He (*ibid.*) admits the fact that it is polite to use request forms, such as “Could we all take out our math books now?”, but again there is danger that the student “may believe that he or she has the option to decline!” Consequently, Wright (*ibid.*) is for using questions but just in case the situation demands from the student to either accept or decline exactly as the case of teaching functions such as requests, suggestions and offer.

On the whole, the three kinds of directives Holmes (1983) has raised are very common in giving instructions in the classroom. It has been proved that declaratives are rarely used compared with interrogatives and imperatives. Yet, the imperative remains the most frequently used among the three. Such a directive is very common in EFL classrooms as it is so effective, especially if it is delivered in a clear and short form.

### 2.1.7. Improving instructions

It is true that a great number of teachers make effort designing their lesson plans at home. However, understanding does not usually take place due to the deficiency in having the necessary managerial skills to draw the students’ attention. Failing to attract students’ attention is a direct cause towards missing the lesson’s objectives. According to Scrivener (2005, p. 92), no matter how hard the teachers look for effective ways to give their instructions, students may fail to follow the activity simply as “they were not fully paying attention when they were given.” Scrivener (*ibid.*) also argues that not winning the student’s attention before wording instructions is a significant factor hindering understanding; “an instruction given over student chatter, or when students are looking the other way, stands little chance of working.” That is why a teacher has to keep silent and wait until they get everyone’s attention or “use a signal for zero noise (e.g. if I clap once, I want you all keep silent)”<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, Scrivener (*op. cit.*) suggests a surefire way of getting students’ attention; it is as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.eslbase.com/articles/instructions>

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <http://eltguide.wordpress.com/category/classroom-management/>



- a. Start making eye contact with as many people as possible.
- b. Establish a gesture that means you want to speak (e.g. cupped hand to your ear or holding your hand up).
- c. Just wait.
- d. Don't look impatient or anxious. Keep moving your eyes around the room from person to person, patiently.
- e. Think of this as 'gathering attention'. Enjoy it.
- f. Wait as long as necessary until there is silence and people are looking your way.
- g. If this doesn't work, don't alter it dramatically. Just add in a clear attention-drawing word such as 'OK'. Say it once and then go back to the waiting.

Generally speaking, apart from the only uttered word 'OK' at the last stage, the teacher uses different techniques to attract his students' attention. All these techniques revolve around a different type of non-verbal language in the form of eye contact, gestures and so forth. One last piece of advice to teachers; speak but do not shout (Scrivener, *ibid.*).

### 2.1.8. Instruction-giving order

It is well-known in the literature that giving effective instructions dictates having a specific order. Reaching students' understanding, teachers have to follow such "a sensible order" to the letter (Scrivener, 2005, p. 90). When the order of instructions delivered is wrong, vagueness takes place and therefore students usually miss the teacher's message. The teacher's disordered actions distort instructions, making them ineffective. Although instructions are wellplanned, they turn to be ineffective because they do not respect the appropriate sequencing. Of course, the case when instructions themselves are neither planned nor sequenced appropriately results in students being at a loss to understand what to do. Literature shows different recipes for a certain order of instructions, but all of them agree upon the main stages. For example, ESOL Teaching Skills Task Book<sup>9</sup> suggests the following sequencing:

- a. Get the students' attention
- b. Hold up the worksheet
- c. Gesture the interaction pattern to be used (e.g. work in pairs)
- d. Give instructions
- e. Check the instructions
- f. Hand out the worksheet

Similarly, the Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR)<sup>10</sup> in Michigan State University proposes the following order of instructions:

- a. Give signal to engage class attention
- b. State briefly the overall nature of the activity
- c. Organize seating/groups
- d. Give instructions and model when appropriate
- e. Signal to start
- f. Monitor understanding— repeat/re-phrase as necessary

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<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from <https://akoaootea.ac.nz/download/ng/file/group-4/n2441-esol-teaching-skills-taskbook-unit2-c---giving-instructions.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from <http://clear.msu.edu/vault/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Giving-instructions-PDF.pdf>

It becomes evident from the two examples of ordering instructions above that there is a fixed set of steps to follow if teachers want their activities to be successful. For instance, the two cases target winning students' attention first (a/a). Then, deciding the mode of work students have to respect is in order (c/c). Next, the teacher is in a strong position to give instructions (d/d) and then follow them by checking or monitoring (e/f) students' understanding; there will be room for repeating or rephrasing instructions in case something is not clear.

To sum up, delivering easy-to-understand instructions, the teacher needs first to "identify the essential instructions" he would like to give, delete "unnecessary language" and then put them "in the right order" (Scrivener, 2005, p. 91).

### 2.1.9. Checking understanding

As a common classroom practice, giving instructions is invariably followed by checking understanding. To do so, a teacher may choose among several techniques. Research shows that a great number of teachers usually use only the technique of questions such as:

- Have you understood?
- Do you understand?
- Is it Ok?
- Ok?

There is no harm to use questions in order to see whether students understand the instructions or not. Yet, this is not an effective way of checking understanding; students may lie out of different motives. To explain, the overwhelming majority of students want to please their teachers, saying that they have grasped everything; in fact, they have not. Ur (1996, p.17) argues that students usually say so because they want to be polite or unwilling "to lose face, or because they think they know what they have to do, but have in fact completely misunderstood!" Therefore, to make sure that students make sense of the instructions given, teachers may opt for tried and tested methods that research has proved their effectiveness. According to Harmer

(1998, p. 4), checking students' understanding of the instructions can be attained "either by asking a student to explain the activity after the teacher has given the instruction or by getting someone to show the other people in the class how the exercise works." Ur (op. cit.) also argues that checking understanding has to move away from relying only on asking students if they have grasped the instructions; they should be asked to prove by doing something that confirms their understanding. "Sometimes asking a student to re-explain in his/her own words to the class is appropriate to confirm your directions were understood."<sup>11</sup> Scrivener (2005, p. 91) points out that teachers should not presume that automatic absorption of their instructions will take place. He argues that teachers have to "get concrete evidence from the students that they know what is required. Getting one or two students to tell you what they are going to do is one very simple way of achieving this." Likewise, Swift<sup>12</sup> suggests going around the groups or pairs working on the activity and see whether they are on task or not. She points out that this control should be done as quickly as possible and without stopping to help any group. In case the teacher discovers that there is only one group which misunderstands the instructions, they go to it and give it a hand; but if they make sure that "several groups are off track", they should "stop the activity and explain again, using the students who have understood to

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from: <http://clear.msu.edu/vaultt/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Giving-instructions-PDF.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.eslbase.com/articles/instructions>

demonstrate to the others.” In brief, many are the ways to check students’ understanding of the instructions given. What is important is that teachers should not be deceived by their students’ nodding as an indication that they have grasped the instructions. Students should prove their understanding in a way or another rather than nodding or saying ‘yes, we do’.

Giving effective instructions seem to be within easy reach of all EFL teachers. However, being effective is conditioned by a variety of interrelated matters which have to be approached on the basis of knowledge and experience. In order to be effective in their instructions, teachers need to conduct research and see the positive effect of pre-planning, demonstrating, supporting, and checking understanding, to name but a few. Then, trying them in the classroom to gain experience and come up with tried and tested procedures is advisable.

### 3. Data and method

This research paper aims at shedding light on the positive effect of giving effective instructions on students’ achievement in English. It is worth mentioning that data has been collected by means of two instruments: a questionnaire and classes’ observation. Firstly, I have administered the questionnaire to twenty-one teachers of English in different high schools<sup>13</sup> so as to see how they perceive instruction-giving and what effect it has on the whole learning process. For the sake of having extra ideas that the questionnaire may not help with, I have also attended twenty-two classes both in El Farabi High School in Had Kourt and Sidi Aissa High School in Souk Arbaa El Gharb. Of course, I did not care about the level, whether it is common core, first year or second year baccalaureate; I was interested in seeing how teachers give instructions, paying attention to the three stages of giving instructions and the extent to which the students understand them. It is worth noting that scores are displayed in frequency tables and histograms.

### 4. Research results and discussion

#### 4.1. Questionnaire

Since delivering effective instructions in EFL classes is not an easy job, this paper sheds light on its difficulties encountered in terms of the critical transition period between one step and another teachers go through while presenting their activities.

##### 4.1.1. Pre-planning instructions

Designing every day lesson plans has proved its effectiveness as it enables teachers to think of the “what if” phrase, meaning that teachers prepare Plan B in case their students do not get the point explained, i.e. anticipating learning problems beforehand (Harmer, 2007). What is remarkable is that only one teacher, the least experienced one, who rarely designs lesson plans; the rest do not. To note, this teacher, who has been teaching English for less than five years, does not include detailed instructions in their lesson plans

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<sup>13</sup> El Farabi in Had Kourt, Sidi Aissa and Moulay El Hassan in Souk Arbaa El Gharb, Moulay Rchid in Mechraa Belksiri, El Mansour Dahbi in Sidi Kacem, Masmouda in Ouzzane, Ibn Batouta and El Masira El Khadraa in Kenitra

when they rarely design them. Therefore, 100 percent of teachers, as figure 2 below shows, do not prepare instructions at home.

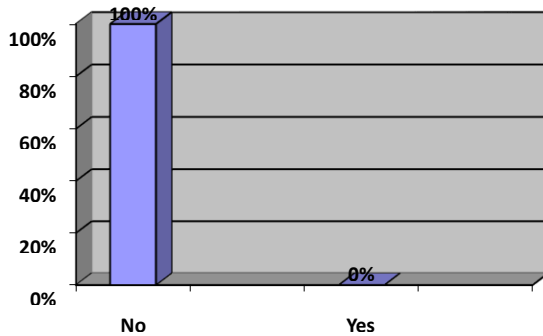


Figure 2. Preparing instructions at home

This is easily understood when we know that twenty teachers, representing 95.23 percent, go to the classroom without any lesson plan made at home. Chatting with some of them, I got the following direct answer, “experience talks.” Consequently, Scrivener (2005, p. 376) argues that “learning teaching” is a non-stop process; it “is a refusal to say ‘I know it all. I can relax for the rest of my career.’” It seems clear that my subjects work without thinking of professional development. Research has proved evidence that reflection on what teachers do is a short cut to learning teaching. By and large, my respondents do not think of action research so as to become more effective in their teaching. They believe that the many years they have taught English represent the experience they need to teach English.

#### 4.1.2. Demonstrating or modeling

As seen in the literature review, research shows that babbling with no demonstration does not lead to understanding; instead, modeling, rather than explaining, does result in grasping the instructions (Scrivener (2005, p. 91). Put differently, teachers would help their students a lot if they mix between verbal instructions and what Ur (1996, p. 17) refers to as ‘actual demonstration’. In this respect, the table below shows that 61.90% of my respondents said that they have *sometimes* modeled an activity before asking students to do it. In other words, demonstration, which is a must in instructions-giving delivery, is not a regular activity in their classrooms as table 2 below indicates.

Table 2. Demonstrating or modelling

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
<b>Respondents</b>	0	1	13	6	1	<b>21</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	0%	4.76%	61.90%	28.57%	4.76%	<b>100%</b>

Reading the table’s percentage, one makes sure that learning can hardly take place, and if it does it would be very limited. In other words, it is very probable that high achievers in the classes these teachers teach would be only a few in number. Instead, teachers have to depend on demonstration more than wording, especially while giving instructions to beginners. Having only one respondent who ‘*usually*’ models their activities is very significant. What makes matters worse is that almost all respondents (20 out of 21) either ‘*sometimes*’ or ‘*rarely*’ model their work. The two ticked adverbs of frequency give a clear idea of the negligence of demonstration or modelling. Concerning the type of demonstration these 20 respondents

usually use as seen in table 3 below, all of them opt for one technique, i.e. asking the best students to demonstrate the activity in front of the class.

Table 3. Demonstration types

Type of demonstration	Two students role-play the activity	Two students repeat back the instructions	Two of the best students demonstrate the activity in front of the class	Other: .....
<b>Respondents</b>	0	0	20 (out of 21 respondents)	0
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>95.23%</b>	<b>0%</b>

In short, modeling in its different forms, as seen in the related review of literature, is missing if we consider the very low percentage of the respondents who make use of this very effective way of supporting their verbal instructions.

### 4.1.3. Supporting instructions

Supporting instructions using different types, such as VAs, realia, facial expressions, voice and gestures proves its effectiveness. Hence, instead of paying attention to the verbal message only, students focus on the kind of support the teacher uses to help them understand the instruction given. When asked whether they support their instructions or not, more than half of my respondents, representing 52.38 percent, said ‘no’.

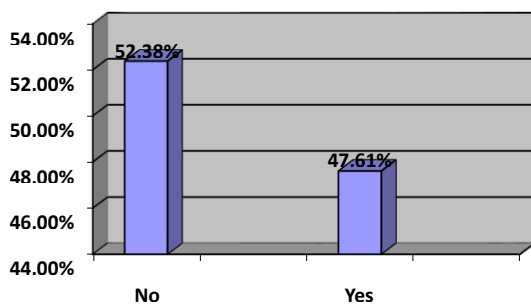


Figure 3. Supporting instructions

Ten informants said that they use gestures, mime and sometimes write instructions on the board. One of these teachers wrote a note, saying that they use these types of support with common core students only; while teaching first year or second year baccalaureate students, they always give verbal instructions. It goes without saying that my informants are aware of the importance of non-verbal facilitators, but using them rarely and depending on verbalism instead, would inevitably do harm to the whole process.

### 4.1.4. Selecting the right directives:

It is common knowledge that the classroom is the most common place for directives. According to Holmes<sup>14</sup>, there are three kinds of directives, namely imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives. These normally refer to the situation in which the teacher directs the student towards doing something in the classroom. In this respect, all my respondents said that they always use imperatives while giving instructions. To note, three of them, making 14.28 percent, ticked both the imperative and interrogative

<sup>14</sup> See pp. 6-7

boxes. For declaratives, no respondent checked it. All in all, it would be better if my informants make use of the three types of directives; yet, using the imperative has proved to be the best among the three and could satisfy the needs for the students.

**4.1.5. Instruction-giving order**

Research shows that though teachers prepare their activities beforehand, the order of steps they usually follow to give classroom instructions would result in different outcomes. It is likely to have very high achievers in a certain class whose teacher knows the right order of steps they follow before starting a particular activity. By contrast, it is very likely to contribute in the making of low achievers if the teacher does not have any idea about which step to start with regardless of how hardworking they are. To illustrate the point, the following two tables below summarize how problematic this issue is. My informants' responses show that these teachers are lost if we compare between what they do in their classrooms and what literature has proved evidence. Classifying their responses, I came up with two groups of teachers who have different ordering, except for the step beginning a certain activity and the one ending it.

**Table 4. Instruction-giving order (Group 1)**

Steps	Get the students' attention	Hand out the worksheet/ask students to go to a certain page in the textbook	Give instructions	Check the instructions	Organize the mode of work individual, pair, group) students should adopt	Signal to start
<b>Order</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Respondents</b>	21/21	17/21	17/21	17/21	17/21	21/21
<b>Percentage</b>	100%	80.95%	80.95%	80.95%	80.95%	100%

Having a close look at the results in the table above, one hundred percent of teachers agree on getting the students' attention as the first step to start with in any activity. They also share the same view about signaling to start the activity as the last step. Concerning the four other steps, 17 respondents, making 80.95 percent, were of the same opinion about asking students to 'hand out the worksheet/ask students to go to a certain page in the textbook' as the second step, 'give instructions' as the third, 'check the instructions' as the fourth and 'organize the mode of work (individual, pair, group) students should adopt' as the fifth before the last one which is 'signaling to start'.

**Table 5. Instruction-givng order (Group 2)**

Steps	Get the students' attention	Organize the mode of work individual, pair, group) students should adopt	Hand out the worksheet/ask students to go to a certain page in the textbook	Give instructions	Check the instructions	Signal to start
<b>Order</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Respondents</b>	21/21	4/21	4/21	4/21	4/21	21/21
<b>Percentage</b>	100%	19.04%	19.04%	19.04%	19.04%	100%

However, four respondents, representing 19.04 percent, are in agreement about ‘organizing the mode of work (individual, pair, group) students should adopt’ as the second step before ‘handing out the worksheet/asking students to go to a certain page in the textbook’ as the third step, ‘giving instructions’ as the fourth and ‘checking the instructions’ as the fifth.

Going back to what is raised in the review of literature, it seems evident that my respondents, who have been teaching English for a very long time, know nothing about this issue in theory and they have been presenting the steps of activities in the order they see suitable. Yet, research<sup>15</sup> shows that the right order is as follows:

1. Get the students’ attention
2. Organize seating/groups
3. Give instructions
4. Check the instructions
5. Hand out the worksheet/ask students to go to a certain page in the textbook
6. Signal to start

Consequently, the two groups of my informants are lost here; they cannot lead their students to do the classroom activities correctly. In other words, their very well-prepared activities must go astray due to their poor knowledge of which step goes first, which goes second and so on. It is well-known in the literature that handing out the worksheet or asking students to go to a certain page in the textbook and then giving instructions, as the case of the two groups of my respondents, would hinder students from listening to the instructions of the teacher as they would be busy looking at something else. In a nutshell, failing to put the steps in the right order would undoubtedly lead to ineffective instructions and therefore failing to understand what to do on the part of students.

#### **4.1.6. Checking understanding:**

Checking students’ understanding has also taken its value in the research literature. It has been made evidence that teachers should make sure, through several ways, that their students really understand the instructions. With respect to how my informants check their students’ understanding, the overwhelming majority say that they usually ask questions such as ‘Have you understood?’, ‘Is it OK?’ and such like. Of course, using questions to check students’ understanding is a possibility, but it is not an effective technique as students usually please their teachers, saying that they have grasped everything. In fact, students have to clearly show to their teacher that everything is OK through different ways, such as explaining the activity, showing to the others what to do or modeling in front of their classmates. All in all, checking the students’ understanding via asking them whether they understand or not proves to be ineffective. However, researchers have raised a variety of ways to do when teachers make sure that their students have not understood their instructions. Seeing the collected data about this issue necessitates a brief pause.

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<sup>15</sup> See p. 8

Table 6. Checking understanding

	re-phrase instructions	resort to L1	individualize instructions	ask those who have understood to tell their classmates what to do	ask students who have understood to demonstrate their understanding in front of their classmates	Total
<b>Respondents</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>80.95%</b>	<b>14.28%</b>	<b>4.76%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>100%</b>

As the table above shows, 80.95 percent of my respondents have already erased four techniques from their list when their students fail to understand what to do. Remarkably, twenty respondents are divided between the two techniques — re-phrasing instructions and resorting to L1. It sounds interesting to have 14.28 percent of my informants who think of making use of L1 in relation to 80.95 percent who re-phrase instructions in case students show their lack of understanding. However, “translating English instructions should especially be avoided”, but

“pre-teaching key phrases with L1 translations then giving the instructions in English”, or “providing a list of useful classroom instructions vocabulary with translations for them to study at home before the lesson”<sup>16</sup> are acceptable ways if the students’ level at English is a bit low. Concerning re-phrasing instructions, which is favored by 80.95 percent of my questionnaire participants, it is a must in case students are lost. Teachers have to give a second chance to their students when the latter lose concentration and do not follow their teachers’ instructions, which is very common in EFL classrooms (Ur 1996, p.17). On the whole, it warms the cockles of my heart to see my informants using one of the most effective techniques in giving instructions, that is ‘re-phrasing’. Still, they are to blame for not using the rest of ways.

As a conclusion to the questionnaire data collection, I have become convinced that the majority of my respondents are completely in the dark as far as giving effective instructions in EFL classrooms is concerned. To put it another way, their everyday classroom practices would not help students understand what to do. This is caused by the great number of mistakes these respondents make in terms of giving instructions. These informants give instructions while their students are busy looking at the activity in the handout or textbook; that is, they are not listening carefully to what the teacher is saying. They also give instructions without knowing that there is a specific order to respect, and therefore the whole activity is subject to failure. Moreover, my subjects use no other way to check the students’ understanding other than asking direct questions, such as ‘have you understood?’ Of course, students usually say ‘yes, we have’, which is not true in most cases. The problem is that even when students do not understand, almost all my informants resort to ‘rephrasing the instructions’ only and forget about the rest of ways available in the literature, like individualizing instructions and asking those who understand to tell or demonstrate in front of those who do not. Exhausting verbal instructions at the expense of modeling, which is very limited in the reality of my respondents’ classrooms, is another error made by these informants. Most importantly, no one of my respondents has ever prepared detailed instructions ahead. In short, the context I examined is a common place for missing the point of instruction-giving, and therefore progress in learning English would be very limited.

<sup>16</sup> Retrieved from <http://edition.tefl.net/ideas/instructions/>



## 4.2. Classes' observation

Attending classes was also beneficial in collecting data. My attendance revealed another part of instruction-giving difficulties. Actually, I had the opportunity to attend twenty-two English classes in both El Farabi and Sidi Aissa High Schools in Had Kourt and Souk Arbaa El Gharb respectively. In fact, I was not interested in the level my informants were teaching, but to how effective the teacher was in giving instructions. Therefore, I paid attention to the pre-, while- and post-giving instructions phases.

### 4.2.1. Pre-giving-instructions stage

The importance of this critical stage lies in the fact that it is the opening and the success of the whole activity is based on it. This phase is considered to be the backbone of the activity at hand. Scrivener (2005)<sup>17</sup> argues that the moment which precedes the instruction-giving phase is the most significant. This is the moment when eye contact should be established until silence in the classroom is absolute. This particular characteristic of such a stage is missing in almost all the classes I attended.

Describing the classroom realities I experienced, almost all classes started with noise. Students were so excited at the very beginning of the class that it was so difficult to stop them, especially if the teacher resorted to insulting them. Out of twenty-two classes, no more than six which were successful at this pre-giving-instructions stage. The rest of the classes were unsuccessful and therefore only a very few students managed to do the exercises later. To sum up, those teachers who were able to get the students' attention at the very beginning had successful classes, while those whose classes experienced disciplinary problems, their students usually ended the session empty-handed.

Consequently, failing to have a successful pre-giving-instructions stage is mainly attributed to the unhealthy noisy atmosphere most classes experienced at the very beginning of the class.

### 4.2.2. While-giving-instructions stage

The while-giving-instructions phase is characterized by careful consideration of the precise details revolving around it. This stage is so important in the sense that the students' understanding of what to do in any activity takes place here. If students miss this phase, they will be lost, and nothing will be achieved. As a matter of fact, its difficulty lies in putting its instructions' steps in a specific order. Also, being long in giving instructions does not help students catch the message which is covered by so many unnecessary words. Moreover, depending on verbal instructions with no demonstrations is what complicates matters further. Unfortunately, classes' observation leaves no doubt that my respondents' way of approaching this stage is ineffective; this is because their knowledge about this issue is very limited.

During my classes' observation period, I made sure of the fact that these teachers have a distorted picture about the right order of the steps to follow while giving instructions, a fact which is confirmed by their responses in the questionnaire. All of them would give students a handout and then start giving them instructions. Instead, handing out the worksheet should be the last step. Because of this, a great number of my host teachers' students switched off since they did not know what to do, not because they were not interested in the activity. What is more, students were not enthusiastic about learning with the presence of a lot of chit-chat dominating the environment. In brief, the overwhelming majority of students were in total confusion due to the wrong ordering of steps the teacher used in delivering instructions.

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<sup>17</sup> See pp. 7-8 for further details.

Research shows that being successful in giving instructions presupposes being brief. Unfortunately, I experienced very long instructions given to students in all the classes that I had attended. I also noticed that even the best few students in the class were obliged to ask the teacher, in most times, to repeat instructions as they had not understood them. In short, the fact that teachers were not to the point and their TTT was very high did not help students catch the instructions easily and therefore confusion took place.

Modeling is a very necessary part in teaching in EFL classrooms. Surprisingly, the setting I experienced myself was void of any demonstration of the type of work the teachers wanted their students to do. Throughout the observation period, almost all teachers did not give a chance to their students who were low achievers to see the instructions in action. In some other situations, even good students missed the point and did not know what to do because they had been chatting and therefore did not follow the instructions carefully. Hence, if demonstration had taken place, everybody would have understood the point and then participation would have been guaranteed. Yet, a marked discrepancy between my informants' responses in the questionnaire about demonstrating or modeling activities and their classroom realities deserves mention here. Of course, I have not attended classes with all my respondents which may justify such an inconsistency.

To conclude, the while-giving-stage is the most critical period in the whole class. If my host teachers had paid attention to it and come to the classroom well-prepared, in terms of the subject matter as well as the know-how to give effective instructions, almost all their students would have grasped everything, and this phase would have gone smoothly and successfully.

**4.2.3. Post-giving-instructions stage** It is common among teachers that checking students' understanding after delivering instructions is indispensable. Observing so many classes in the high school, I made sure of the existence of two types of ineffective teachers' practices which dominate the situation at this stage, i.e. being lazy and misusing the 'individualizing instructions' technique.

To begin with, laziness, taking place in these classes, is the first cause of this stage failure. To illustrate, nine teachers, representing 42.85 percent, in almost all the classes I attended with them would give instructions and go to the desk and after some time came back for correction. There was no checking for students who were off task. I noticed some students who correctly answered many questions in the textbook exercises not because they fully understood the activity, but because they had answers already written in the textbooks borrowed from other students in the school. These students were chatting while the teacher was sitting at the desk. Secondly, most of these teachers did some control and checked their students' understanding after giving instructions. The problem was that these teachers had the habit of individualizing instructions even when a lot of students were off task due to not understanding instructions. This process was time consuming and therefore the activity which should have been done in class changed to be assigned as homework. Instead, the teacher should have stopped the activity and reexplained it to the whole class, making use of those who understood to help in modeling.

On the whole, this post-giving-instructions phase is normally meant to remedy the problems made at the pre- and while-giving stages, but the reality of everyday classroom practices I experienced during my observation reports something different.

In conclusion, the questionnaire's results gave a clear idea of what is going on in my respondents' classrooms. Additionally, observing how my respondents deliver instructions has shown me the other side of the coin. Actually, my subjects are competent in terms of the subject matter they teach, but the problem

is mainly managerial. In other words, most of the problems created in the classroom have to do with classroom management, especially the skill of giving effective instructions.

## 5. Conclusion

Nowadays, involving EFL learners in the classroom activities has become a daunting task. Several are the pedagogical implications that should be taken into consideration if we want to improve the quality of giving instructions in EFL classes. This research paper reaches the conclusion that so many students switch off not because they are not interested in the lesson, but simply they do not know what to do. The way teachers deliver instructions is simply ineffective. A great number of them have very limited knowledge about the issue of giving effective instructions in the classroom. Actually, to improve the way instructions should be delivered, there should be a kind of continuous assessment to high school teachers, highlighting the importance of pre-planning, supporting, modelling and so forth. instructions. Engaging students in any activity presupposes having the know-how to do that. My respondents improvise instructions, thinking that what matters is the content and not the way to deliver it. As a result, the majority of their students are low achievers. As far as the few ones who are good, I cannot tell that they successfully take in what their teachers present in the classroom. Who knows? They may take extra lessons in other places or get some help at home. To attribute their achievement to the way their teachers give instructions is nonsense. In short, I think it is high time these teachers reconsidered their teaching practices for the sake of their students; learning how to deliver effective instructions as a managerial skill would undoubtedly lead to success in EFL classrooms.

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