

Classroom Management: Time-out technique to ensure students behaviour modification: Case of 1st year EFL students at Tlemcen University

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Abstract---In didactics, the concept of classroom management refers to the process teachers can use to ensure that their lectures run smoothly without disruptive student behaviour which compromises the delivery of instruction. To do so, different skills and techniques do exist to keep students organized, orderly, focused, attentive, on task, and academically productive during a class. This paper is about the time-out technique, which is now considered a crucial component of many evidence-based behaviours management systems. The main purpose is to theorize that time-out is now used in progressive classrooms to provide an emotional breathing space in a less socially charged area of the room. It also highlights that time-out is a way for students to decompress, reflect on and develop self-awareness, and then return to their seats with improved self-regulation. To do so, a mixed method research design is used based on a questionnaire to teachers and a 1st year EFL Students classroom observation. The main results reveal that in behavioural terms, time-out is a punishment procedure which does not necessarily require removal of the student but rather a continuum of strategies intended to reduce problem behaviour.

Keywords---Classroom Management, Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Skills and Techniques, Time-out.

Introduction

In didactics, the concept of classroom management refers to the set of strategies, practices, and competencies that teachers employ to create and maintain an effective learning environment. It encompasses not only the prevention and handling of disruptive behaviours, but also the establishment of routines, expectations, and a positive classroom climate conducive to learning. Effective classroom

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management ensures that instructional time is maximized and that students remain engaged, attentive, and academically productive throughout the lesson.

Disruptive behaviour can be defined as any action that interferes with the teaching process or with other students' right to learn. These behaviours are often low-level but persistent, gradually undermining the quality of instruction and classroom cohesion. Educationalists commonly identify examples such as calling out without permission, interrupting peers, engaging in off-task conversations, displaying restlessness, leaving one's seat without authorization, and failing to follow the teacher's instructions. Although such behaviours may appear minor, their cumulative effect can significantly reduce instructional time and negatively affect both teacher efficacy and student achievement.

To address these challenges, teachers rely on a range of classroom management skills and techniques. These include establishing clear rules and procedures, reinforcing positive behaviour, maintaining consistent routines, fostering respectful teacher–student relationships, and applying corrective strategies when necessary. Among the various behaviour management techniques, the time-out strategy has gained increasing recognition as a structured and evidence-based intervention. Originating from behavioural psychology, time-out involves temporarily removing a student from a reinforcing environment following inappropriate behaviour, with the aim of decreasing the likelihood of that behaviour recurring.

This paper hypothesizes that the time-out technique has become a crucial component of contemporary behaviour management systems, particularly within frameworks grounded in evidence-based practices. Rather than being merely punitive, time-out—when implemented appropriately—serves as a corrective and instructional tool that helps students reflect on their behaviour and regain self-control.

In this context, the central research question guiding this study is: When should time-out be used as a disciplinary technique? More specifically, under what conditions is time-out pedagogically justified, developmentally appropriate, and ethically sound? By examining theoretical foundations and practical considerations, this paper seeks to clarify the appropriate use of time-out within a comprehensive classroom management approach.

Literature Review

1. Time-Out

The time-out technique has evolved from a purely behaviourist intervention into a more reflective and developmental strategy used in progressive classrooms. Traditionally rooted in operant conditioning, time-out was designed as a temporary removal of a student from a reinforcing environment following inappropriate behaviour. However, in contemporary educational settings, it is increasingly framed as an opportunity to provide students with an emotional “breathing space” in a less socially charged area of the classroom. Rather than serving solely as a punitive measure, time-out is now viewed as a structured pause that enables learners to decompress, reflect on their behaviour, develop self-awareness, and return to classroom activities with improved self-regulation.

Central to this reconceptualization of time-out is the notion of self-regulation. Barry J. Zimmerman (1990) argues that self-regulation involves a set of self-directed processes through which individuals plan, monitor, and evaluate their actions in pursuit of specific goals. In a similar vein, Paul R. Pintrich and Elisabeth V. De Groot (1990) conceptualize self-regulation as an active learning process in which individuals deliberately activate and sustain cognitions, motivations, and behaviours oriented toward goal attainment. From this perspective, self-regulated learners are not passive recipients of instruction; rather, they are agents who take responsibility for their own learning trajectories.

Further elaborating on this construct, Prasad, Lim, and Chen (2010) emphasize that self-regulation is closely associated with an individual's capacity for self-control. This capacity entails managing impulses, regulating emotions, and aligning behaviour with long-term objectives. Expanding his earlier work, Zimmerman (2008) identifies three interrelated dimensions of self-regulation: the metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural aspects. The metacognitive dimension involves planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's cognitive strategies; the motivational dimension relates to self-efficacy beliefs, intrinsic interest, and goal orientation; and the behavioural dimension concerns the strategic management of actions and environmental conditions. Together, these dimensions contribute to the development of learners who can set realistic goals, plan appropriate strategies, and regulate their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses to achieve those goals.

The second key concept underpinning the time-out technique is self-awareness. Daniel Goleman (1996, p. 63) highlights that self-awareness refers to an individual's ability to understand and manage personal potentials for future development. Within the broader framework of emotional intelligence, self-awareness entails recognizing one's emotions, strengths, limitations, and behavioural tendencies. In this sense, it is not merely introspection but an informed understanding of the self in relation to one's environment.

Similarly, Jess Feist and Gregory J. Feist (2013) stress that self-awareness encompasses awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, memories, and internal states, as well as sensitivity to contextual factors. It reflects an integrative process through which individuals come to understand their psychological functioning. From a philosophical standpoint, Amie L. Thomasson (2006) associates self-awareness with the capacity for self-understanding and self-acceptance, which enables individuals to recognize both their strengths and weaknesses.

In light of these theoretical perspectives, time-out can be interpreted not simply as a behavioural corrective tool but as a pedagogical strategy that fosters self-regulation and self-awareness. When implemented thoughtfully, it provides students with structured moments for reflection, emotional recalibration, and behavioural adjustment. Consequently, time-out may serve as a bridge between behavioural management and socio-emotional development, aligning disciplinary practices with broader educational objectives aimed at cultivating autonomous, reflective, and self-regulated learners.

2. Examining Research

Time-out procedures, when implemented within a clear and systematic framework, can be effective in reducing a range of problem behaviours, particularly among younger learners. Importantly, research suggests that less intrusive forms of time-out—such as planned ignoring or brief removal from a reinforcing activity—may be as effective as, or even more effective than, highly restrictive strategies for certain behaviours. This highlights a crucial principle in behaviour management: the function of the behaviour within the classroom context must be carefully considered before selecting an intervention.

According to John O. Cooper et al. (2007, p. 357), time-out “is defined as the withdrawal of the opportunity to earn positive reinforcement, or the loss of access to positive reinforcers for a specified period of time, contingent on the occurrence of a behaviour.” This definition situates time-out firmly within the principles of applied behaviour analysis, where the procedure is understood not as punishment per se, but as a temporary removal of reinforcement contingent upon inappropriate behaviour. Similarly, Raymond G. Miltenberger (2008) reports that time-out procedures have been effective with certain individuals, particularly when applied consistently and in conjunction with reinforcement of appropriate behaviours.

However, despite its documented effectiveness, scholars emphasize that time-out should not be used indiscriminately. John O. Cooper, William L. Heward, and Timothy E. Heron (2007, p. 363)

recommend that time-out be considered a “last resort.” Before resorting to time-out, practitioners are encouraged to conduct functional behavioural assessments in order to identify the underlying causes and maintaining variables of the target behaviour. Foundational work by Brian A. Iwata, Robert F. Dorsey, Keith J. Slifer, Kenneth E. Bauman, and George S. Richman (1994) underscores the importance of analysing the function of behaviour—whether it is maintained by attention, escape, tangible rewards, or sensory stimulation—before selecting an intervention strategy.

Within this framework, the least restrictive approach should initially be employed to eliminate or reduce the target behaviour. Only when these procedures prove ineffective should more restrictive interventions be considered. Richard P. Hastings and Susan J. Noone (2005) argue that restrictive strategies must be carefully justified and ethically grounded. The principle of using more intrusive procedures only after less invasive methods have failed is commonly referred to as the “least restrictive treatment model,” a term introduced by Richard M. Foxx (1982), or the “least restrictive alternative” (Cooper et al., 2007).

In essence, time-out should be applied to children only after alternative approaches—particularly those grounded in positive reinforcement and proactive classroom management—have been systematically attempted and found insufficient. Nevertheless, Hastings and Noone (2005) acknowledge that there are exceptional circumstances in which more intrusive interventions, including time-out or even physical restraint, may be warranted without prior use of less restrictive strategies. Such cases are limited to situations where the target behaviour presents an immediate threat to the child’s life or to the safety of others.

Thus, the responsible use of time-out depends on functional assessment, adherence to the least restrictive principle, and careful ethical consideration within the broader framework of evidence-based classroom management.

3. Just as important as understanding what time-out IS, is understanding what time-out IS NOT

Clarifying the conceptual boundaries of time-out is essential to ensure its ethical and pedagogical use. Misinterpretations may lead to inappropriate applications that either dilute its effectiveness or transform it into a punitive exclusionary practice. As defined within applied behaviour analysis (John O. Cooper et al., 2007), time-out specifically involves the contingent withdrawal of access to positive reinforcement following the occurrence of a target behaviour. Therefore, not every removal, break, or separation qualifies as time-out.

To better understand what time-out is not, the following situations must be examined carefully:

- ❖ Student working independently in a distraction-free environment?
This is not time-out if the purpose is to enhance concentration or academic performance. Independent work in a quiet area is an instructional strategy, not a behavioural consequence.
- ❖ Individual one-to-one instruction or practice?
This is clearly not time-out. On the contrary, it represents increased adult attention and instructional support, which constitutes positive reinforcement rather than its withdrawal.
- ❖ Student requests to go to a separate area for a break?
If the break is self-initiated and designed as a self-regulation strategy (e.g., a “calm-down corner”), it is not technically time-out. Instead, it reflects proactive emotional regulation and autonomy.
- ❖ Having a student sit on a chair in the classroom away from classmates?
This may qualify as a form of time-out (often called non-exclusionary time-out) only if it results in the temporary withdrawal of access to reinforcement and is contingent upon inappropriate behaviour. Without these elements, it is simply relocation.

- ❖ Sending a student to sit or stand in the hallway?
This could constitute exclusionary time-out if it is structured, supervised, brief, and contingent on behaviour. However, if used inconsistently or punitively, it shifts from behavioural intervention to disciplinary removal.
- ❖ Sending a student to the principal's office?
This is generally not considered time-out in behavioural terms. It represents administrative discipline and may inadvertently reinforce behaviour if the student gains attention or escapes academic demands.

Understanding these distinctions is crucial. When educators confuse time-out with general removal or punitive exclusion, the technique may lose its instructional value and potentially harm the student–teacher relationship. Properly conceptualized, time-out is not about isolating students, but about temporarily interrupting reinforcement patterns in order to promote reflection, self-regulation, and responsible re-engagement in the learning environment.

Methodology

A deliberate blending of techniques in data collection, data analysis, and evidence interpretation is fundamental to mixed methods research. The term “mixed” is not merely descriptive; it reflects the intentional integration of quantitative and qualitative components at specific stages of the research process. This integration—often referred to as data linkage or methodological triangulation—is the defining feature that distinguishes mixed methods research from studies that simply use multiple methods independently.

The strength of mixed methods research lies in its capacity to connect numerical trends with contextualized meanings. Quantitative data may provide measurable patterns, frequencies, or correlations, while qualitative data offer depth, explanation, and insight into participants' experiences and perspectives. However, these components achieve their full potential only when they are purposefully integrated. Integration may occur during the design phase (e.g., sequential or concurrent designs), during data collection (e.g., embedding one dataset within another), during analysis (e.g., transforming qualitative themes into quantitative codes), or at the interpretation stage through joint displays and comparative discussion.

Through deliberate data integration, researchers can construct a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of their study context. By examining phenomena from multiple angles and through diverse methodological lenses, they enhance the validity, credibility, and explanatory power of their findings. This multidimensional approach enables the confirmation, complementarity, or expansion of results, ultimately producing richer and more robust conclusions than would be possible through a single-method design.

The following figure summarises the rationale behind using mixed methods research design in the present investigation.

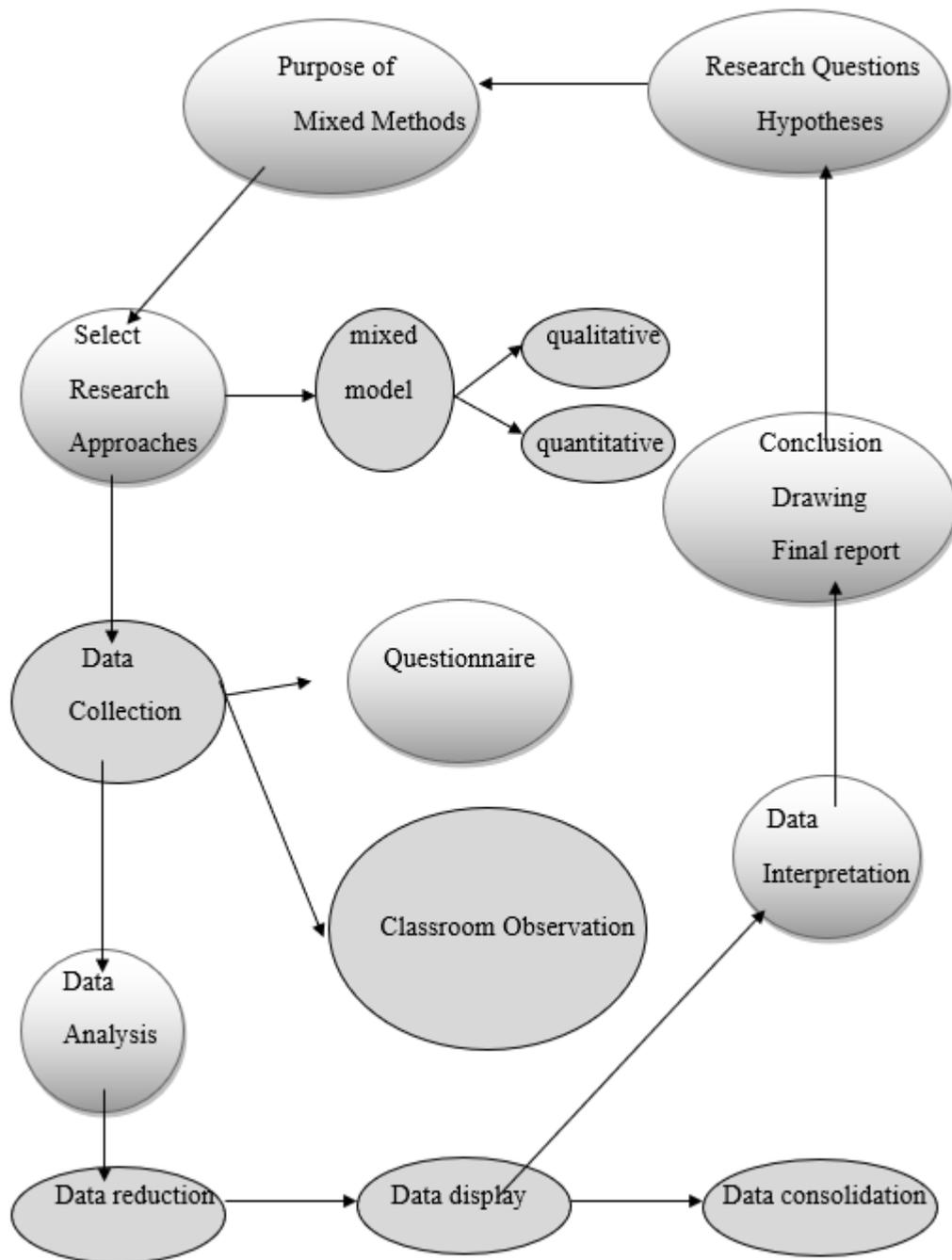


Figure 1: Mixed Methods Research Design Adapted from (Burke and Anthony, 2004: 23)

Results

The main results of the study are consistent with the established understanding that time-out is, by definition, a behaviour-reduction strategy. As such, its primary function is to decrease the frequency,

intensity, or duration of undesirable behaviours by temporarily withdrawing access to reinforcement contingent upon the occurrence of a target behaviour (John O. Cooper et al., 2007). In this respect, time-out operates within the framework of applied behaviour analysis and is not designed to serve as a comprehensive instructional strategy.

In the same line of reasoning, time-out alone cannot teach new, alternative, or desirable behaviours. While it may suppress inappropriate conduct, it does not inherently provide students with the skills necessary to replace that conduct with socially acceptable or academically appropriate alternatives. For this reason, scholars such as Raymond G. Miltenberger (2008) emphasize that time-out should be combined with positive reinforcement procedures, modelling, and explicit instruction in replacement behaviours. Without such complementary strategies, time-out risks becoming merely suppressive rather than educative.

Moreover, time-out procedures are grounded in several core principles of behaviour modification, including:

- ❖ Contingency: The intervention must be directly linked to the occurrence of a clearly defined target behaviour.
- ❖ Withdrawal of reinforcement: Time-out functions by removing access to reinforcing stimuli, whether social attention, peer interaction, or preferred activities.
- ❖ Consistency: The procedure must be applied reliably and systematically to ensure behavioural learning.
- ❖ Functional assessment: The selection of time-out should follow an analysis of the behaviour's function, as highlighted in the work of Brian A. Iwata et al. (1994).
- ❖ Least restrictive alternative: Time-out should be implemented only after less intrusive, reinforcement-based strategies have been attempted, in accordance with the least restrictive treatment model.

In essence, the findings reaffirm that time-out is not a stand-alone pedagogical solution but a component within a broader, ethically grounded behaviour management system. Its effectiveness depends on careful planning, functional analysis, and the simultaneous promotion of positive, self-regulated behaviours.

Table 1. Principles of Behaviour Modification

| Principle | Definition |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Consistency | To ensure that the learner understands when and why the approach is being used, it is crucial to implement it in a predictable and consistent manner. |
| Clarity | Parents or other adult caregivers should give a straightforward explanation of the rules the learner has violated and the repercussions of doing so. actions. |
| Temporality | In order to help students learn to link his actions to consequences, the time out should be brief and appropriate for the wrong behaviour |
| Positive reinforcement | To reinforce desired behaviours and promote parenting focused on rewarding accomplishments, it's critical to combine time outs with positive reinforcement of proper conduct. |

Conclusion

To sum up, time-out is an operant conditioning-based behaviour modification strategy grounded in the principles of applied behaviour analysis, as articulated by scholars such as B. F. Skinner and later systematized in educational contexts by John O. Cooper and colleagues. Its primary function is to reduce undesirable behaviours by temporarily withdrawing access to reinforcement following a clearly defined target behaviour.

When implemented consistently, clearly, and proportionately, time-out can serve as a constructive tool that supports students in regulating their conduct and developing a sense of accountability. By interrupting maladaptive behavioural patterns, it creates an opportunity for reflection and emotional recalibration, especially when paired with explicit instruction in alternative, appropriate behaviours. In this sense, time-out can contribute to the development of self-management and self-regulation skills rather than merely suppressing misconduct.

Nevertheless, its effectiveness depends largely on careful planning and ethical application. Educators must take into account each student's developmental level, emotional needs, and the functional causes of the behaviour. Overuse, inconsistency, or application without prior reinforcement-based strategies may reduce its effectiveness and negatively impact the student-teacher relationship. Furthermore, time-out should never replace proactive classroom management, positive reinforcement, and social-emotional learning practices.

Ultimately, time-out should be understood not as a universal solution, but as one component within a comprehensive, evidence-based behaviour management framework. When adapted thoughtfully to individual circumstances and used alongside alternative strategies, it can support both behavioural improvement and the broader goal of fostering responsible, self-regulated learners.

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