

# Phenomenological Study on Classroom Management Practices in the Eyes of Higher Vocational Teachers in China

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## Abstract

Teachers who possess the ability to manage their classrooms are able to create an environment where learning is the focus. This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, focusing on an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of teachers related to their practice in classroom management. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 higher vocational college teachers in China through purposive sampling. The findings indicate five core practices experienced by these teachers: creating a learning environment, maintaining classroom discipline and order, respecting student diversity and needs, developing students' social abilities, and managing course content and progress. Teachers generally agree that the fundamental task of classroom management is to construct a conducive learning environment, stimulating students' interest in learning, encouraging their active participation, enhancing learning outcomes, and promoting personal growth and psychological well-being.

## Keywords

Classroom Management Practice; Vocational Teachers; A Phenomenological Study.

## 1. Introduction

In Chinese higher vocational classrooms, the learning atmosphere is often dull, and it is difficult to form effective interaction and resonance between teachers and students. Classroom questions are often not timely responded to, and the overall atmosphere needs to be improved. The effect of the practical training course is not satisfactory. Teachers expect students to participate in and cooperate to complete the task actively. However, students often fail to keep pace with teachers, which significantly affects the effect of the practical training course.

Classroom management is important in establishing an environment in which instruction and learning can occur (Gokalp & Can, 2022). Poor classroom management often leads to misbehaviour, which interferes with teaching and learning and produces tremendous stress (Friedman, 2006). Teachers who possess the ability to manage their classrooms are able to create an environment where learning is the focus (Shamina & Mumthas, 2018). It's crucial to fully understand the specific practices of teachers in managing their classrooms and their perspectives on these practices. Although the academic community has accumulated a large number of research results on classroom management, most of these studies focus on the field of general education, while relatively few studies specifically focus on vocational education.

With the development of vocational education in China and the attention it receives from the government, teachers are increasingly focusing on classroom management. Although they have a clear theoretical understanding of classroom management's importance, there is a significant gap between the knowledge base of effective classroom management and the requirements for teacher training. It still needs to be determined to what extent vocational teachers implement effective classroom management measures and how they practice classroom management in

their daily teaching. To fully understand the practical operational status of higher vocational teachers in classroom management and to deeply explore the specific practices of teachers in classroom management along with their personal views and feelings, it is essential to conduct further empirical research. This research can not only help to reveal the current situation and practices of classroom management in higher vocational education but also provide a scientific basis for formulating more effective classroom management strategies and improving teachers' management abilities.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research Design**

The study utilizes a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate teachers' perceptions of classroom management practices in higher vocational colleges in China. Phenomenology aims to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Teherani et al., 2015). This study focuses on immersing into the world of teachers, understanding their perspectives, and discovering how they make meaning from their lived experiences in their own words. Data were collected from teachers' lived experiences within the context of Chinese higher vocational colleges, and the study seeks to understand what matters to them and how they make sense of their experiences.

### **2.2. Participants**

In a phenomenological study, the participants included individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. The participants were purposefully selected using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990) to ensure a wide range of voices. The study included teachers aged 28 to 50 with diverse backgrounds, such as direct from their graduate universities, retired from other universities, from enterprises, from administrative position, and holding bachelor's, master's, and PhD degrees. Their teaching experience in higher vocational colleges ranged from 3 to 21 years. According to Creswell (2016), phenomenology involves a range of 3–10 individuals, and this study involved ten teachers, including five females and five males.

### **2.3. Data Collection**

This phenomenological study gathered data via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants, facilitating a detailed examination of the research topics. To ensure the interview protocol's validity, we consulted with two supervisors, integrating their feedback for protocol refinement. We conducted three pilot interviews to test question clarity, effectiveness, and the interview's temporal structure, which typically spanned 60-90 minutes. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for detailed textual analysis, with each set of recordings and transcripts coded and stored separately for confidentiality and organization.

### **2.4. Data Analysis**

During the qualitative studies, the data was broken down into smaller parts, and patterns were identified and synthesized (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Transcribed interviews were analyzed thematically, with the researcher reviewing each transcript extensively to achieve a deep understanding. Guided by preliminary concepts derived from pertinent scholarly sources and research inquiries, a systematic structural analysis was conducted on each transcript. This analytical process was composed of multiple stages designed to elucidate the intricacies of the textual data. The text was divided into meaning units: sentences or several sentences conveying similar meanings in relation to the study's objectives. Each meaning unit was further condensed and abstracted to formulate meanings regarding teachers' experiences with classroom management strategies. Findings were reported with detailed themes and illustrated with translated quotes from Chinese.

## 2.5. Validity and Reliability of the Study

Participants give their consent and have the option to withdraw at any time. The anonymity of the participants has been protected, and pseudonyms are used throughout this report. It is important to note that the purpose of this study is not to make generalizations, as it is qualitative research. Even though the study involved a limited number of teachers, it resonates with existing literature and provides insight into the experiences of vocational teachers. It serves as an initial study to reach a more comprehensive sample and allows other researchers to relate to the findings based on their professional experiences (Richards, 2003).

## 2.6. Limitations

The study was conducted in a limited number of vocational colleges in China, which may not represent the experiences of all vocational teachers nationwide. It relies heavily on data from interviews, and future research should consider a broader sample and incorporate quantitative measures to validate and extend the findings.

## 3. Results and Discussion

This study aimed to explore teachers' lived experiences in Chinese vocational colleges related to classroom management practice. For this purpose, as a result of the qualitative analysis, the findings were grouped into five main themes: creating a learning environment, maintaining classroom discipline and order, respecting student diversity and needs, developing students' social abilities, and managing course content and progress. The five main themes in these headings are presented below and illustrated by quotations from the interview texts (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Summary of themes and sub-themes

Themes	Description	Example
Creating a Learning Environment	Teachers are committed to creating an environment that promotes knowledge absorption and cultivates students' teamwork skills by integrating ideological and political education, fostering a culture of autonomous learning, and establishing cooperative learning mechanisms.	"Many students in this class have now become proactive in answering questions...Although this may lead to a slower pace of teaching, I firmly believe that maintaining students' positivity and a healthy mindset is more significant than merely imparting specific knowledge points."
Maintaining Classroom Discipline and Order	Teachers maintain classroom discipline by establishing clear rules, implementing reward and punishment mechanisms, and reinforcing students' sense of responsibility.	"Initially, I could only vaguely ask students to hand in their phones and try to sit in the front row, but the effect was not good. Later, I learned from experienced teachers and refined management methods, such as..."
Respecting Student Diversity and Needs	Teachers described how they understand students through psychological knowledge, improve teaching interaction and communication effectiveness, and discover and cultivate students' strengths and talents through encouragement and praise.	"I pay great attention to the needs behind students' emotions and give affirmation and appreciation to all students. During interactions, I provide positive and constructive feedback to help students realize their potential and true feelings."
Developing Students' Social Abilities	Teachers improve students' practical skills and social adaptability through practical teaching and participation in competitions.	"Teamwork is not only important in professional fields but also cultivates students' communication and collaboration skills, especially in the current situation where students heavily rely on online communication."
Managing Course Content and Progress	Managing course content and progress is a crucial aspect of teaching activities, directly impacting the quality of student learning and the achievement of teaching objectives.	"As teachers, we cannot work in isolation from the market. We must know market trends and policies and adjust teaching content when needed."

### 3.1. Theme1:Creating a Learning Environment

Creating a conducive learning environment is widely recognized as a critical factor influencing students' learning outcomes. Teachers are committed to creating an environment that promotes knowledge absorption and cultivates students' teamwork skills by integrating ideological and political education, fostering a culture of autonomous learning, and establishing cooperative learning mechanisms. Interviewed teachers described how they stimulate students' interest in learning, increase classroom participation, and enhance their comprehensive abilities through diverse teaching strategies, group collaboration, and self-directed learning.

Some teachers' strategies of establishing clear rules and employing reward mechanisms resemble behavioural management theories, which suggest that clear expectations and consequences can significantly influence classroom behaviour (Marzano, 2003). Teacher A underscores, "I try to increase student participation by establishing rules and reward mechanisms, lowering teaching difficulty, and assigning simple tasks."

The structure of the Chinese education system incorporates ideological and political education throughout the entire educational process, influencing individuals' values, beliefs, and civic consciousness. Teachers mentioned this more or less, and they themselves believe they are responsible for educating students. Teacher B emphasizes integrating ideological and political education into curriculum teaching to foster an atmosphere of autonomous learning.

Teacher G groups students, either retaining or reshuffling them based on their preferences and cooperation to inspire students to learn. She says, "I often adopt a group cooperative approach to achieve teaching goals. Teacher J says he improves student attention and participation through activities and interactions. Teacher I stresses the importance of creating an equal, accessible, and harmonious classroom atmosphere, encouraging student expression and participation, understanding students through psychological knowledge, and improving teaching interaction and communication effectiveness.

Establishing a conducive learning environment is foundational to educational success. It is a complex ecosystem that nurtures cognitive development and social and emotional competencies. Teachers, as architects of this environment, employ various strategies to stimulate interest and participation.

### 3.2. Theme2: Maintaining Classroom Discipline and Order

Classroom discipline and order are integral components of the teaching process, providing a fundamental guarantee for effective teaching. Teachers maintain classroom discipline by establishing clear rules, implementing reward and punishment mechanisms, and reinforcing students' sense of responsibility. Interviewed teachers elaborated on how they address issues such as tardiness, early departure, and sleeping in class through various management methods and strategies. They also guide students in forming good classroom behavioural habits through positive encouragement and timely feedback.

Discipline and order are believed to be the linchpins of an effective classroom. Teacher K manages the classroom by establishing rules and reward mechanisms, such as making late students do push-ups. Teacher I adopts a strict attitude towards class management, such as attendance taking and phone management.

Reward and punishment mechanisms are still common among these teachers. The research results indicate that there is an improvement in student motivation through the optimization of reward and punishment methods (Kasrina, 2023). Teacher A emphasizes rule establishment: "I realized that I needed to motivate students through actions and events, so I started open communication with them and established clear rules in the class. I reinforced these rules by punishing students who were late or left early, such as not allowing latecomers to enter the

classroom if they were more than 5 minutes late or making them do push-ups. I emphasized to students their responsibility as learners. I made them aware of the money their parents spent on their education, highlighting how skipping class or sleeping in class was irresponsible. I also required students who insisted on sleeping in class to sit upright and not lie down. After the initial two-month adaptation period and rule adjustments, discipline in the class improved significantly. Incidents of sleeping or gaming in class were largely eliminated, and the overall class atmosphere gradually improved."

All participants addressed the modern challenge of digital distractions head-on and tried to use technology to cope with these challenges. Nevertheless, the use of technology is superficial. Teacher H requires students to place their phones outside the classroom to minimize distractions. She maintains classroom discipline through mandatory requirements and organized training. "During my class, I explicitly require all students to place their phones in the classroom lockers." Teacher G uses online and offline teaching methods, using a learning platform for attendance and management. "Our traditional teaching method was offline, and we did not have online courses. We manually received QR codes at the beginning of class and then took attendance."

Teachers often transform their strategies to classroom management, transitioning from a permissive stance to a more nuanced and structured framework incorporating rewards and consequences. This progression underscores the developmental journey that many teachers embark upon, highlighting the necessity for flexibility and growth within pedagogical methods. Teacher C initially struggled with classroom management but later adopted more refined management methods through learning and practice, such as incentivizing students to sit in the front row. He said, "Initially, I did not understand much about classroom management, even though the school had regulations regarding front-row attendance and phone storage rates. Initially, I could only vaguely ask students to hand in their phones and try to sit in the front row, but the effect was not good. Later, I learned from experienced teachers and started to refine management methods, such as asking students to place their phones in order and giving extra points to students sitting in the front row. I also recorded and displayed the bonus points on paper, allowing students to see them intuitively, increasing their enthusiasm for following classroom rules." However, he believed that students should take responsibility for their behaviour and that teachers should not interfere excessively.

### **3.3. Theme3:Respecting Student Diversity and Needs**

In many countries, schools and classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse along a variety of dimensions and to navigate this diversity, adopting a multidimensional and intersectional lens could help education systems promote equity and inclusion in education and foster the well-being and learning of all students(Cerna et al.,2021). Interviewed teachers address the challenges of student diversity by focusing on students' emotions and psychological health and implementing measures such as differentiated teaching. Interviewed teachers described how they understand students through psychological knowledge, improve teaching interaction and communication effectiveness, and discover and cultivate students' strengths and talents through encouragement and praise.

Differentiated teaching, as mentioned by these teachers, is a response to students' varied learning styles and paces. It is underpinned by the belief that education should be personalized to meet individual needs, a concept supported by research in educational psychology (Tomlinson, 2001). Teacher A emphasizes leading by example and guiding students through positive encouragement and praise. She recounted a student's transformation story, "I formulated a rule to start paying attention to each student in the class. I remember a student from a wealthy family who often slept in class, and other teachers could not do anything about it. I publicly called him in class and found out he was brilliant and had his ideas. I believed his

unwillingness to listen was the teacher's problem, not the student's. Therefore, I started to praise him, openly praising him in class. Since then, this student no longer sleeps in my class but actively participates in answering questions."

Education is at its most effective when it respects and accommodates the diverse needs of students. Teachers attuned to their students' emotional and psychological well-being create an environment where every student feels seen and valued. Teacher B pays attention to students' emotions and psychological health, offering comfort and individual counselling. She shared a student's story, "One memorable incident was when a student showed signs of depression, which was noticed since enrollment. As a new teacher, I knew little about the student's situation. Once during class, this student suddenly burst into tears, and classmates seemed accustomed to it, suggesting I ignore it and continue teaching. However, I was still comforted and stayed with him until other students left after class. During this time, I privately sent a We-chat message to the counsellor, hoping the counsellor could come to help him. "

Teacher L pays attention to students' emotions and needs, providing positive feedback and affirmation to the whole class. She says, "I pay great attention to the needs behind students' emotions and give affirmation and appreciation to all students. During interactions, I provide positive and constructive feedback to help students realize their potential and true feelings. For example, a student was once late for class, which is usually not allowed as it disrupts the class. He entered from the back door and sat in the front row. I publicly praised him for coming to class despite being late, which showed his sense of responsibility. At the same time, I praised his courage in sitting in the front row and entering from the back to minimize classroom disruptions. My praise made him shyly smile, and the atmosphere in the whole class became pleasant and inclusive. This incident quickly passed, and we continued with the lesson. The classroom atmosphere was equal, free, and harmonious, which I believe a classroom should have."

Teachers learn to respect and understand students through their experiences. Teacher C, regarding discipline management, reflected after a conflict with a student, believing management should adhere to principles and avoid crossing boundaries. He shared a lesson learned, "In one class, I had a conflict with a student. The student felt uncomfortable because others touched him, and when I handled the situation, I inadvertently handed the microphone to his mouth, which led to him publicly challenging me. This experience made me reflect on my possibly inappropriate attitude in management and realize that as a teacher, I should adhere to principles, maintain integrity, and avoid any boundary-crossing behaviour." He realized he has to respect students. And teacher B concludes that "this incident left a deep impression on me. Since then, I have paid more attention to students' emotions in class."

### **3.4. Theme 4: Developing Students' Social Abilities**

The cultivation of social abilities is an essential goal of modern education. Teachers improve students' practical skills and social adaptability through practical teaching and competition participation. Interviewed teachers described how they cultivate students' social responsibility through classroom management and practical activities and respond promptly to the needs of enterprises and markets through innovative teaching content.

Teachers educate students orally. Teacher B says, "The comprehensive English teaching objectives emphasize the development of students' comprehensive abilities and incorporate ideological and political education. While imparting knowledge, attention is paid to students' ideological and political cultivation. Ideological and political education for students is essential, such as delivering the spirit of the Northeast Iron Man and Daqing Spirit through course content or teaching students about saving water and electricity. Teachers also remind students to turn off lights before leaving class, influencing them through practical actions."

Teachers integrate real-world applications and group work into their teaching, fostering essential skills such as teamwork and communication. Teacher G says, "Group cooperation can effectively promote student learning, especially for passive learners. Collective discussions can pool wisdom from many people and help solve complex problems, which benefits students. Teamwork is important not only in professional fields but also in cultivating students' communication and collaboration skills, especially in the current situation where students heavily rely on online communication. In addition, through group collaboration, students can improve their abilities while completing assignments."

Some teachers are keenly aware of aligning curriculum with student capabilities and market demands. They integrate corporate projects into teaching, increasing student interest and participation to help students combine theory with practice. Teacher E says, "I use an actual corporate project as auxiliary teaching material, and I found that students are very interested. Second, you will achieve corresponding teaching results, especially providing some reference templates to teach, which is more suitable for students in advanced colleges like ours."

### 3.5. Theme 5: Managing Course Content and Progress

Managing course content and progress is a crucial aspect of teaching activities, directly impacting the quality of student learning and the achievement of teaching objectives. Teachers continuously adjust and optimize teaching content based on student feedback and difficulties. Interviewed teachers described how they ensure students' effective absorption and mastery of knowledge through content management and how they enhance teaching effectiveness through imitation and innovative teaching methods.

The management of course content and progress is a dynamic process that requires constant adjustment to meet the evolving needs of students. Teacher C adjusts the teaching pace to suit students' needs after understanding their foundation, emphasizing content management and adjusting teaching content based on student responses to ensure effective learning. Teacher E adjusts teaching content and direction to the demands of enterprises and markets. He says: "As teachers, we cannot work in isolation from the market. We must know market trends and policies and adjust teaching content when needed." Teacher I adapts teaching content to students' learning abilities by lowering the difficulty of teaching and setting simple tasks.

## 4. Conclusion

This phenomenological study delves into teachers' perceptions of classroom management in higher vocational colleges in China. Although the interviewed teachers have different emphases on understanding and implementing classroom management strategies, they unanimously agree on the crucial importance of classroom management for teaching success. The findings highlight five core practices experienced by these teachers.

Teachers generally agree that the fundamental task of classroom management is to construct a conducive learning environment, stimulating students' interest in learning, encouraging their active participation, enhancing learning outcomes, and promoting personal growth and psychological well-being. They particularly emphasize the maintenance of discipline, ensuring classroom order through establishing rules and disciplinary measures, which include establishing reward-punishment mechanisms, assisting students in developing self-discipline, avoiding conflicts between teachers and students, and ensuring smooth teaching processes. Additionally, interviewed teachers generally believe that consideration should be given to student diversity in managing classrooms, and each student's unique background and needs should be respected. Furthermore, classroom management should aim to cultivate students' social abilities, enabling them to accumulate valuable social experiences through participation in real projects and fostering a strong sense of social responsibility. Some teachers believe

classroom management should include feedback and evaluation of student's learning processes, helping students understand their progress and areas needing improvement.

In conclusion, by holistically considering these themes, teachers try to conduct classroom management to create a learning environment. It can be seen that the strategies employed by the teachers reflect their personal understanding of educational psychology, classroom management, and the importance of nurturing the whole student. This kind of understanding mainly comes from their experience as students, teachers, staff of their colleges or companies, and even their selves. They learn from their own practice and communication with their colleagues. Moreover, the practice also reflects and affects their selves. Effective classroom management requires teachers to be continuously sensitive to students' needs within the context of the classroom environment, respond to student disruptions and distractions in proactive ways that promote and maintain a discipline order in the class, and, at the same time, consider students' social-emotional development (Cunningham et al., 2023). Most teachers are trying, but they are inclined to pursue the required classroom discipline and finish the course because of the failure; inevitably, the effectiveness is unstable and even ignored.

## 5. Recommendations

It was found that the teachers who participated in this study applied a more traditional approach to classroom management in vocational colleges. There is no significant difference in classroom management from the other types of schools. Although they generally believe that the role of a teacher extends far beyond simply conveying knowledge, encompassing the roles of guide in the learning process, maintainer of students' psychological health, and facilitator of personalized growth and development. Nevertheless, It's found from the interview that conveying knowledge is still the most critical role in their practice. One might deduce that a teacher adhering to conventional teaching methods may assume a presumptive role as the ultimate authority within the classroom setting. Such a teacher unilaterally dictates the structure and progression of classroom activities and employs a system of rewards and punishments as a strategic measure when deemed necessary to maintain order and enforce discipline. This approach often positions the teacher as the sole arbiter of learning dynamics, leveraging a behavioral management strategy that hinges on the principles of reinforcement and consequence to shape student conduct.

Vocational education is a different type of education; what varies in classroom management besides considering the difference between students and the teaching contents? Teachers D and H talked about the difficulty of managing a big class (a class with more than 80 students). Teacher D also talked about the trouble of having to take his own computer to the classroom, and Teacher K mentioned that the seating layout in computer rooms prevents her from managing students' behaviours. Strangely, so few teachers talked about the speciality of vocational classrooms, the classroom's physical arrangement, or the classroom environment's structure. Many teachers employ teamwork but encounter many difficulties, because they may not know clearly how to plan or design activities effective. Planning or designing activities and space needs to be carefully considered (Franklin & Harrington, 2019). Teachers mentioned the reward and punishment mechanisms they use; however, they are not clear that this is for improving students' motivation. Two indicators are associated with the improvement, namely, student perseverance in learning and their interest in participating in the learning process, and both of these aspects can be enhanced through the forms of rewards provided by the teacher (Kasrina, 2023).

It seems that most teachers are inclined to learn from their practice and their practice is based on their perspectives regarding their beliefs concerning particular classroom context features. They lack a clear and systematic understanding of rules, routines, procedures, strategies and

consequences related to vocational classroom management. It reveals teachers' in-service training needs on vocational education and vocational teachers' roles. Teachers need to be aware of their own core beliefs and assumptions about themselves in their role as vocational teachers and how they, in turn, view the role of vocational students. Moreover, they should realize that students provide teachers with ongoing opportunities for self-reflection and self-improvement, opportunities to question how they approached a topic or activity and how effectively they interacted with their students (Hosenfeld, 1976; Franklin & Harrington, 2019). Furthermore, to improve teachers' professional lives, training in classroom management and similar courses that take into account their current conditions, encourage their creativity, and ensure that they develop efficient classroom management are needed. All individuals in all colleges and levels under a school structure need to communicate with each other.

This study sheds light on some work that needs to be done. First, observational assessments have been considered the gold standard for objective measures of classroom management (Chow et al., 2024). Future studies should analyze the inter-observer agreement properties between the observational and interviewed measures to assess their reliability more substantively. Second, researchers could study the different perspectives between the teachers and students, and even among the administrative leaders and instructional supervisors in vocational teachers. As such, researchers could conduct this study in more vocational colleges and schools, focusing on teachers within one demographic feature, like teachers from enterprises, part-time teachers, teachers with different titles or working experience or science backgrounds. It could also be conducted on students from various grade levels or majors. Last, many countries have taken advantage of virtual platforms to maximise student engagement, as evidenced by the reports in the existing literature (Mutambik, 2024). Using online learning tools and applications is also a crucial strategy for harnessing the potential of technology in classroom management (Djamila Lasaiba, 2024). More research on online and mixed classroom management is required.

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