Teaching Large Classes

I. Preparing to teach a large class

1. What is a 'large' class

Teaching large volumes of students at any one time is always a challenge, and so it is particularly important for the teacher to be well prepared. This module can help you overcome the difficulties generated from a large class, but it will also help you make the most of the benefits that it can provide.

When we say 'large' we generally mean a class of 30-60 students, in some instances up to 100. The educational system of some countries precludes the formation of language groups that are so large, however in other countries, for instance India, China or South Korea, such classes are quite common.

School administrations may choose to split students into smaller groups for the following two reasons.

1. Overpopulation and a lack of teachers.
2. The traditional belief that still prevails in some parts of the world where the aim of a language course is to prepare students for an examination (usually a formal, written, grammar-based one) rather than teach them to communicate in English. A lesson is therefore viewed as a lecture where a certain amount of knowledge is to be passed on to the students.

2. The challenges and benefits of teaching a large class

Let's take a look at some of the challenges a teacher meets when teaching a large class of students.

Catering for individual learning styles
Each student needs to be allowed to learn at their own pace and find their best learning style.

Catering for different levels
In a large class, you are likely to have students of different levels. Some students may feel they are not challenged enough by your lesson whereas others may find the same lesson too difficult.

Catering for different interests
Students in your class may be of different ages with a variety of hobbies, interests and backgrounds. You will need to think of topics that will interest them all.

Controlling the class
Unless you are able to control the class from the start, discipline can be a problem and a large class can turn into an unruly mob.

Monitoring all students and providing feedback
Even as you walk around, you may not have time to listen in on each pair or group of students and provide help. Monitoring individual work is even harder.

Activating the quieter students
It's easy to work with active students, but it's also easy to 'lose' some students who remain in the shadow of their more vocal partners. In a small class such quiet students can be quickly spotted, however in a large class you may simply forget about them.

Assessing students' performance
You don't always have time to collect sufficient evidence of each student meriting a certain grade by the end of the course. Checking written work of every student will take too long.

It's not all bad! Large classes of students provide benefits too.

Draw on the rich variety of human resources
Your students will most likely come from different backgrounds. They will have huge combined experience and will represent different sets of values and beliefs. You are more likely to get an animated response from them during discussions, something that is less guaranteed in a smaller class.

Rising to the challenge stimulates professional growth
A lesson with a large class is less predictable; you have a great variety of characters and learning styles, so you have a constant challenge which helps you grow fast professionally. It puts your management techniques, flexibility and creative skills to the ultimate test.

You are not the only teacher in class
Because there are different levels of ability in your class, it's only natural that some of the students will soon become your assistants.

There is more flexibility in terms of group size
In a small group you have to choose between individual work, whole-class work and work in pairs or very small groups. In a large class, along with all the above, you can form groups of almost any size, depending on how many participants you need for each activity.

3. Getting ready for your first class

Your first encounter with a class of 50 or 100 students can be a rather daunting experience, but with careful preparation you should be fine.

Bear in mind that the fundamental principles of teaching a large class are the same as those of teaching a small class. The only difference is that there's more chance of losing control if you do not implement certain key principles.

To maximise your success, therefore, make sure you:
- are well prepared
- have a clear understanding of what you intend to teach. A lesson plan is a must, and it should include the aim of the lesson and the target language
- grab attention at the start of the lesson
- make the lesson fun and varied
- get everyone participating
- cater for visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners
- show interest in all your students
- give useful feedback.

A carefully thought out lesson plan is a must in any lesson, but it is especially important in your first lesson with a new group. Not everything will go exactly according to plan, but your plan will give your lesson some structure and it will give you confidence to improvise if necessary.

Think of a creative way to grab students' attention from the start of the lesson. Try to arouse their interest as soon as you enter the class. As opposed to telling students about yourself in a lecture style find an entertaining way to do so.

Use expressive body language (without being over-emotional) and attractive visuals. For example, display large pictures of your native country and explain each picture in very simple language (you can use an OHP if available). You can also show photos of your family and friends.

Because this is likely to be a multilevel class, keep your speech as simple as possible. Don't be the only speaker for too long. Whatever the size of your class, your lesson has to be interactive so get students involved by asking questions. Interrupt your story and link your own experience with that of your students.

Since you may not know everyone's name and how they feel about speaking in front of the class, the best strategy is to ask who-questions to the class. For example, after saying that you have two older brothers ask who in the class has two older brothers. When several students have answered, ask 'Who can tell me more about your brothers? How old are they? What do they do? etc.' Then you can tell the students about your own brothers. That way you will start to build rapport, keep everyone engaged, and identify the chatty vs introverted students.

4. How to learn all the names

It is important to get to know your student's names as quickly as possible. Learning names is essential to make your students feel that each of them is noticed and valued. One method you can use is giving each student a paper badge and asking the students to write their names on them in large letters and pin them to their clothes. Help those who find it difficult.

Use stronger students' help to transliterate local names into English ones. Apologise for your bad pronunciation and encourage them to correct you if you say it wrong. Write down 'problem names' in your notebook with the correct pronunciation in phonetic symbols next to each name.

Some people learn names quickly, and others do not. To improve your memory of names, think what triggers help you remember people or place names.

Do you learn names by association?
If so, look at your students as you do the roll call, and see if something strikes you. What does the name sound like? Do you know any celebrity with the same name?

Do you learn better visually?
Write down the students' names on pieces of paper. Arrange them in seating patterns while you are eating your dinner. Or, alphabetise them by first name.

Try to picture each student in your mind as you read their name.

Do you learn aurally?
Have a friend read your class list aloud while you try to picture each student in your mind.

After several lessons, it will be ideal if your students can remove their badges and you can still remember their names, although in real life it usually takes longer, especially if you are teaching several large classes.

5. Establishing rules

Maintaining discipline in a large class requires consistency and a clear set of rules. Take a look at the following structures you can employ in order to establish some rules in your class.

Getting started
You can announce some rules from the start and at the same time allow the students to add any rules they deem important.
Here are some examples:

- introduce a penalty for coming late or missing classes
- ban the use of cell phones during lessons
- announce that your class is an area of tolerance; everyone's opinion is respected; no one is allowed to humiliate or degrade their classmates
- set a procedure for submitting homework; introduce a penalty for not completing homework in time.

Consistency

Always keep your procedures consistent. This will avoid chaos and create a comfortable learning environment for your students. Make sure you have established the following routines:

- the way attendance is checked and lateness is handled
- the way you check students' progress
- the way students check their own progress
- the way students are notified of test dates, deadlines and special events
- the way students move from a group or pair work strategy to a whole-class framework or vice versa
- the way students sign up for special projects.

Traditions

It is also a good idea to establish classroom traditions, for example:

- at the beginning of every lesson one or two students tell the class about the most interesting event that has happened to them since your last class
- in every third lesson you learn and sing an English song together
- every week an information sheet is published in English telling about the life of your school or your town; the editorial board rotates.

While establishing these routines and following them is very helpful, it is also important to keep in mind that no routine is carved in stone. If something doesn't work, you can always re-examine the procedure, adjust it, change it, or just get rid of it.

In the classroom where there is a climate of trust, students appreciate a teacher who experiments with new ideas and who is willing to reject ideas that don't work. Setting up routines helps us to avoid many of the problems of management.

6. Managing your time outside class

Understandably, before teachers begin teaching their first large class, they tend to think about the challenges inside the classroom. However, after a few days, it becomes clear that responsibilities outside class are equally challenging

Planning

As there will be more correction and administration, it is important to make planning efficient.

It is essential to be organised. File materials by topic so they are easy to access. Use a folder for each class, with copies of handouts and activities in order. Laminate any cards to avoid needing to create new sets every time you use them.

Get the most from the coursebook to minimise the amount of supplementary material you use. You can apply some fundamental principles to bring a coursebook to life. In particular, get students to share a book and work together; and personalise all coursebook activities, by having students change exercises so they relate to themselves.

Homework

Choose the type of homework you set to reduce your workload. Where possible, set exercises with right and wrong answers, which you can correct in class. If you do set writing, consider quality over quantity; tell students you will only correct the target language you have looked at in class, rather than every error.

We will look more closely at giving feedback to students in Section VI.

Be prepared to manage parents' expectations for a lot of set homework; there is little evidence to suggest that more written homework results in better English. Rather, the most useful thing you can do for your students' English is to encourage them to read and listen to things they enjoy.

Class administration

Teachers are likely to be judged on meeting administrative requirements – submitting attendance, results, lesson plans etc – above the actual quality of their teaching. Therefore, put this at the top of your priorities.

Ask a teacher who is familiar with the system about the most efficient way to deal with paperwork.

1. Identifying proficiency levels

It is a good idea to identify the level of each student in your class as early in the course as possible, so that you can tailor your classes accordingly.

Consider the following issues:
Have your students already been classified?
It may be that the school administration has already put your students through a test to identify their skill levels. Check this first (if you are not automatically informed).

Create a mini questionnaire
You may like to end your first day or begin your second day with a mini-questionnaire and a placement test designed to determine your students' proficiency level.

Ask open questions
To check students' writing skills, think of open-ended questions for your questionnaire, for example 'Why do you need to know English?' Students' answers to such questions will help you assess their written level, whereas the results of the test will demonstrate their grammar and vocabulary awareness.

Writing vs. grammar
Bear in mind that someone's writing and grammar skills do not always correspond to their speaking skills. As you hear them speak you may well change your assessment of their level. When you place students in single-level groups based on your initial placement test and have them do a spoken activity, you may notice that some students stand out from the rest of the group because their oral skills are more advanced. The actual level of those students will therefore be somewhat higher than your initial test-based assessment. Make a note and put them in a different level group next time.

2. Several classifications of levels

Between 1998 and 2000, the Council of Europe's language policy division developed its Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF). The aim of this framework was to have a common system for foreign language testing and certification, to cover all European languages and countries.
The Common European Framework (CEF) divides language learners into three levels:
- A. Basic User
- B. Independent User
- C. Proficient User

Each of these levels is divided into two sections, resulting in a total of six levels for testing (A1, A2, B1, etc).

The following table describes the levels that your students may have achieved:

Level	University of Cambridge ESOL Exams (Main Suite)	Common European Framework Level	Description
Advanced	Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)	C2 Mastery	Able to communicate for extended periods on a wide range of topics. Make very few errors of accuracy, have a wide & idiomatic vocabulary
Upper Intermediate	Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)	C1 Effective Operational Proficiency	Can communicate well though still make minor accuracy mistakes. Still have some problems understanding idiomatic vocabulary.
Intermediate	First Certificate in English (FCE)	B2 Vantage	Able to communicate in English, though still with lots of errors. Aware of all main tenses and grammar structures. Quite high level of vocabulary. Many students have reached a learning plateau and get stuck at this level.
Pre-Intermediate (Lower Intermediate)	Preliminary English Test (PET)	B1 Threshold	Can communicate with partial success. Able to use basic grammar structures, still rapidly learning new vocabulary.
Elementary	Key English Test (KET)	A2 Waystage	Able to use simple tenses and everyday vocabulary items. Difficulty communicating any more than general topics. Steep learning curve at this stage.
Beginners		A1 Breakthrough	

The following table compares several other exams according to the CEF levels:

CEF Level	ALTE Level	UBELT Exam	IELTS Exam	BEC & CELS Exams	Pitman ESOL	TOEIC	TOEFL
C2	Level 5	4.0 – 5.0	7.5+	n/a	Advanced	910+	276+
C1	Level 4	3.0 – 3-5	6.5 – 7.0	Higher	Higher Intermediate	701 – 910	236 – 275
B2	Level 3	2.0 – 2.5	5.0 – 6.0	Vantage	Intermediate	541 – 700	176 – 235
B1	Level 2	1.5	3.5 – 4.5	Preliminary	n/a	381 – 540	126 – 175
A2	Level 1	1.0	3.0	n/a	Elementary	246 – 380	96 – 125
A1	Breakthrough	>1.0	1.0 – 2.0	n/a	Basic	n/a	n/a

3. Writing samples by students of different levels

As follows are examples of writing by students of three different levels. They had to answer the following questionnaire:
1. Why do you need to learn English?
2. What part of studying English is the most difficult for you, e.g. grammar, vocabulary, speaking?
3. What do you enjoy most about studying English?
4. What are your hobbies and interests?

Student 1:
1. I wont to go USA. I lived in USA in 1998-99 y. and learned English, after that I foget English
2. Grammar is the most difficult for me in studying English. I makes very many mistekes. I have bad speling.
3. My most enjoy about studying English is speaking and vocabulary. In USA I toked with frends and enjoyed it. I speak more good than rite.
4. I interesting phcihology, I like to go and I like to reared interesting books, I like whoch TV

Analysis:
This student is probably A2 (elementary). She is familiar with the past simple form of regular verbs and the basic sentence structure, however there are lots of basic spelling errors (she seems to write things the way she hears them pronounced). There are also incorrect verb endings, omitted verbs and wrong forms of adjectives. Her speaking might be at a higher level as she has had some practice in the USA.

Student 2:
1. As a student, graduating the university, I do need English to be able to communicate with PCs, as lots of software has English interface, as well as most of to-date computer documentation is issued on English.
2. I'd subdivide English on 4 main parts: written translation from and to English, plus oral translation from English and to. While two first parts run rather smoothly for me, oral translation from English is another challenge, as it assumes a certain level of volabulary and grammar, accumulated by the time. But it is oral translation into English, that creates the topmost difficulties: above all, it requires the construction of sentences on a foreign language in real time.
3. The results, of course! When I feel, that I can understand what I'm being told, and can express my own thoughts on a foreing language (double pleasure - if I can do it flawless).
4. Aside of computers, that are both job and strongest interest, I enjoy ballroom dancing and, sometimes, skydiving (I wish, I could spend more time on it). But the main hobby, no doubt, is English. I guess, I wouldn't make English my job, but it'll remain my all-time strongest hobby.

Analysis:
This student would be upper intermediate (C1). His vocabulary is fairly advanced, and the sentence structures are complex. Note the correct use of high-level grammatical structures such as 'I wish I could' and 'I'm being told'. Most of the problems lie with the idiomatic language and collocations ('accumulated by the time', etc.). The preposition 'on' is used instead of 'in', before 'English' and 'language', which must be caused by mother-tongue interference.

Student 3:
1. I mast know English for my professional activities and for the tourist communication. I'm going to make busness trips to England in the future.
2. The most difficult for me are grammar and understanding English speech. I don't understand fast speaking of English or Americans.
3. I enjoy to read articles from the scientical and nature magazines.
4. There are many interests I have: arts, history, scients, sport and so on. I like to read the books, to swim, to play ping-pong, to play at computer games, to traveling.

Analysis:
This student is probably pre-intermediate (B1). The passage is easily understandable and there aren't many grammar mistakes; however, she takes care to use only very simple structures, and the vocabulary is not too impressive. There are spelling errors such as 'busness' and 'scients'.

4. Adapting lesson tasks to different levels

It is always important to use a variety of activities and techniques in your learning situations, but this is particularly relevant in a large multilevel class because the different varieties can accommodate different levels within the class.

For example, during a lesson on the present perfect tense, elementary students can be occupied with transformation exercises, pre-intermediate learners with cloze exercises, a group of intermediate students may be busy devising present perfect sentences of their own, while an upper-intermediate group may be creating short dialogues using the present perfect.

Sometimes you will want to assign the same task to different levels by preparing several variants of the same task worksheet – one for each level. The goal is to make it reasonably challenging for each level but not too demanding or too easy.

The worksheets would be different both in the level of the structures and vocabulary provided and in the amount of language support students are given. The higher level students are capable of free speaking with minimal language support, whereas students at lower levels need to be provided with a range of vocabulary and speech patterns to guide them.

Take a look at the following similarity vs difference activities ideas for different levels of learner. Consider the kind of vocabulary students are expected to produce as they compare the things/concepts in each pair. Notice that the more abstract and complex the things/concepts are, the higher is the level.

Upper intermediate or advanced learners can be asked to choose among the following pairs:
- Love vs. hate
- Life 10 years ago vs. life today
- A sober person vs. a drunk person (if culturally appropriate)
- Cinema vs. theatre

Pre-intermediate or intermediate learners could look at the following options:
- Living in the city vs. living in the country
- Travelling by plane vs. travelling by train
- Tom Cruise vs. Brad Pitt
- A roller-coaster vs. a Ferris wheel

Elementary learners could work with the following pairs:
- January vs. July
- Cats vs. dogs
- A 5-year-old boy vs. a 70-year-old man
- A dollar bill vs. a local banknote (lend them a dollar to compare)

Underneath these pairs on each worksheet you may wish to put some phrases/vocabulary which will facilitate the task for your students and challenge them to use the language appropriate for their level.

C1/C2 (Upper-intermediate/advanced):

Love is similar to hate in that both ….The most noticeable similarity between love and hate is that …

What love and hate have in common is that they both …

In stark contrast to love, hate…

Love (+ verb phrase), whereas hate (+ verb phrase)

Love (+ verb phrase). On the other hand, hate (+ verb phrase)

Love is different from hate in that …

Love can be distinguished from hate by its (+ a characteristic)

B1/B2 (Pre-Intermediate/intermediate):

Both Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt …

Just like Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt …

Tom Cruise is exactly/nearly as (+adjective, for example 'tall') as Brad Pitt

Tom Cruise has the same (+ characteristic) as Brad Pitt

Unlike Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt …

Tom Cruise (+verb phrase) . On the other hand, Brad Pitt (+ verb phrase)

Tom Cruise (+verb phrase), while/whereas Brad Pitt (+verb phrase)

Tom Cruise is a little/slightly/much/a lot/far (short adjective)-er than Brad Pitt.

Tom Cruise is a little/slightly/much/a lot/far more (long adjective) than Brad Pitt.

A2 (Elementary)

Cats are as nice as dogs.

Cats are not as smart as dogs.

Cats are nicer than dogs (short adjectives).

Cats are more beautiful than dogs (long adjectives).

Cats have …. but dogs have …

III. Collaboration and grouping students

1. What is collaboration

Student collaboration means working together and helping one another during lessons. This is an absolute must in large multi-level classes because you can't be everywhere at once, or cater for the immediate needs of all your students. They must learn to use each other as language resources.

Teaching a large class involves a mixture of:
- teacher-fronted activities
- students' independent work in pairs or groups.

Collaborating is the best way to stay on top of the large amount of written work your students will give you. This is because it allows students to be more:
- involved in the teaching/learning process
- helpful, through peer and self-correction.

Collaborating also helps students to be:
- better risk-takers
- more efficient self-monitors and self-evaluators.

Pairing or grouping students promotes learner independence, and encourages student collaboration. This makes it easier for you to manage the class.

Working together allows more able students to learn by helping less able students. This help can take the form of explaining something, or listening patiently while other students make their contributions.

Taking a slice of the teacher's responsibility helps students in several ways, such as:
- increasing students' self-esteem
- encouraging active participation
- improving general discipline.

2. Whole-class, pair and group work

The traditional way to present a new topic to a class is to address the group of students as a whole.

Imagine you are teaching a grammatical structure. You may decide to explain it to the whole class first.

As you do so, ask concept questions to the class or to individual students at random. This helps you to check their understanding and keeps everyone alert. It can be helpful to elicit examples from the students, rather than prepare them in advance and then dictate them. Students can practise the structure individually as they complete exercises, and later, as they use it in pair work or group work.

Whole-class activities can include drilling, singing, tests and games.

Ideas for these activities can either be brainstormed:
- as a class, or
- in groups before being elicited in a class session.

In every lesson you will inevitably spend some time interacting with the class as a whole. But you should try not to do so for long periods of time.

Pair/group work helps to promote student-to-student interaction. It also decreases student reliance on you, their teacher, as the sole source of knowledge.

Students can correct each other and usually interact with less anxiety, in a pair or small group environment.
Dividing the class into pairs or groups offers a great opportunity for students to practise their oral skills.
The main advantage of pair work is that it gets every student in the class involved in the lesson either as a speaker or as an active listener.

Students can be asked to share ideas on a certain subject in pairs or act out role-plays. Pre-teach grammar patterns, brainstorm content ideas and then give them 10 minutes to practise a role-play with their partner. You can then ask volunteers to perform their dialogues in front of the class or select several pairs yourself.

Pair work can also include quizzes or games where each student is provided with half of the information and the objective is to elicit the other half from their partner. For example, doing a crossword puzzle in which one student has all 'across' words and the other has all 'down' words. The two students give each other clues to complete the puzzle.

Another example is a lesson on asking for and giving directions where one student in each pair has a town map with half of all landmarks on it and the other one has a map with the other half of the landmarks. Underneath each map there is a list of locations which are found on the other map. By asking each other for directions to those locations from an agreed point on the map, both students are to complete their respective maps. They will then compare their final maps to make sure they are identical.

An original type of pair work, which takes place outside class, is buddy journals through which students write on possibly assigned topics to a classmate or a student in another class or school and periodically exchange and react to each other's journals. The same could be done via email.

Unlike pairs, the group arrangement makes it easier for a shy student to hide behind his or her more advanced or more active partners and avoid participation. That is why it is important to monitor group work very closely and encourage weaker students to get involved.

It is easier to monitor a group than a pair, as there are fewer conversations going on at the same time. Also, group participants tend to speak louder, so you don't necessarily have to bend down and turn your ear toward them to overhear their conversations, which you often have to do while monitoring pairs.

Along with discussions and role-plays there are the following examples of group work, all of which may extend beyond a single lesson.

Jigsaw activities
In jigsaw activities, students each contribute different aspects of knowledge to create a whole.

The jigsaw is often used for collaborative reading, during which a reading passage is divided into four sections.
Individual students are responsible for studying one section, talking about their section with those who have read the same, and then in groups of four, teaching their section to the entire group, thus re-creating the entire reading passage.

Collaborative writing
Collaborative writing is where a group of students collaborate to create a piece of writing, such as a letter of advice.

Collaborative community projects
Collaborative community projects are where groups of students investigate an aspect of the community and later report on it.

Group poster presentations
Group poster presentations involve groups of students creating a poster that demonstrates a topic, an issue or a problem.

3. Ways of grouping students

There are various ways you can group students to make your lesson more effective - and achieve your set objectives.

Chance grouping

One way to group your students is by chance. This is by far the easiest way of doing things since it requires little pre-planning. If you choose this method of grouping, students who sit next to and near each other will work in groups.

Problems occur though if students always sit in the same place, as obviously they will always end up in the same pairs or groups. This can get boring for them after a while.

'Same level' groups

If you need to get students of different levels within a class to do different tasks, you can create same level groups. This gives you the opportunity to give specific help to the different groups. This arrangement is (arguably) more productive than mixed level groups, although some of the value of cooperative work – such as students helping each other regardless of their level – can be lost.

The assignments you give to students in each group can either be completely different or they can be variants of the same assignment adapted for their level. Adapting a task to the level of the group will allow the whole class to move in the same direction while everyone is kept challenged according to their ability.

'Mixed level' groups

Mixed level groups are comprised of strong and weaker students. In such groups the more able students can help their less fluent or knowledgeable classmates.

The benefits of such activity go both ways, because when you have explained something to others you usually understand it better yourself. The disadvantage is that it's easy for the stronger students to dominate and the weaker ones are often too shy to participate. As you monitor group work, make sure that all students are given equal chance and that the stronger students assist their weaker partners as well as encourage and praise them.

Grouping by participation

You can split the class into groups on the basis of participation. If we see that some students participate less than others, we might make a group of weak participators. Now they will find it less easy to hide behind their more talkative colleagues. Likewise, we can make a group of talkative students. They can now compete with each other to the best of their ability and not worry about dominating quieter students.

Other ways of grouping students

Depending on the theme for group discussion, you can also group the students by gender, age or nationality.

For instance, if you want to discuss how teenagers spent their free time 20 years ago and how they spend it now, you can form several groups, each group made up of students of the same generation. The older students would reminisce about the way they spent their free time when they were young. The teenagers would tell their partners how they spend their free time these days. Each group would come up with a list of activities they did or do, respectively. Then the lists would be compared as a class in order to see how many activities are the same and how many are different. The class would then discuss whether or not the way teenagers spend their free time has changed a lot over the years.

Alternatively, join a teenage group and an older group together and make them compare the lists themselves and inform the class of their conclusions.

4. Dealing with troublemakers

If a student or a group of students misbehave in class, there are two ways of dealing with them.

If a group of troublemakers are stealing everyone's attention and disrupting the class, you can try putting them in different groups making sure there's a strong leader in each group who will oppose the troublemakers' disruptive behaviour.

A slightly riskier but potentially more effective method would be to put all the troublemakers together in one group, so it's easier to control them by standing next to them.

If they are spread around the class, you'll have to deal with them one by one, and while you are dealing with one, the others are likely to be playing up behind your back!

5. An easy way of forming groups

For various reasons, separating your class into groups can end up being a chaotic experience. One way to bring order to the process is to use slips of paper of different colours. Here's how:
1. As you prepare for the lesson, plan your group activities and decide how you will group the students.
2. Take some coloured paper and cut it into squares.
3. On the red pieces write the names of the students who are to work together in one group, on the yellow pieces write the names of members of another group, and so on. Use team names or letters rather than colours if you prefer (E.g. Team A, Team B).

4. As students enter the class, ask each of them to take the piece of paper with their name on it. Then whenever you want to put them into groups all you need to do is tell them to look for partners who have the same colour. They could form groups either from the start of the lesson or at any point during the lesson.

6. Roles within a group

Members of a single group can be equal participants in a discussion or equal contributors to a presentation. However, if you assign roles to each student, they are less likely to hide behind someone else.

Consider allocating your students with the following roles:
*   Group recorder. Writes down the group's ideas or responses
*   Materials collector. Gathers necessary materials from the teacher or students, collects the work produced by the students at the end of an activity
*   Reporter. Spokesperson for the group in reporting progress or giving oral responses
*   Final copy scribe. Writes up the final version that will be handed in
*   Illustrator. Draws accompanying diagrams, pictures, and so on
*   Timekeeper. Watches the time and paces the group through the task
*   Cheerleader/facilitator. Encourages the group, keeping it on task
*   Monitor. Checks for errors, proof-reads
*   Messenger. Seeks or shares information with the teacher or another group.

IV. Classroom management

1. Instructing effectively

Sloppy instructions in a large class will be your own worst enemy, as you will exhaust yourself running around the classroom reinstructing confused students.

1. Use a consistent signal to get students' attention. This could be a word ('Thanks!', 'Everyone!'), a sound (e.g. clapping or tapping the board), or even a gesture such as raising your arm.

2. Establish eye contact with all students. If some are looking away, use their name ('Li, look here please'). Literally all students must be looking at you, or some will not hear your instruction.

3. Instruct succinctly, using a command ('Stand up, please'). Importantly, then stop talking, as you need to give students processing time.

4. Back up your spoken instruction. You can write a prompt on the board, use a gesture, demonstrate, give an example, or ask a question to check students understand.

5. Tell students to start ('Go!').

If students enjoy a particular activity, use it regularly, so there will be no need to instruct in detail each time.

2. Large class management techniques

There are some other techniques crucial for maintaining control of the group.

Talk to everyone
Talk to – and maintain eye contact with – everyone, not just students at the front or one side. Direct questions to the back as well as the front. Choose students at random, not just the few who always know the answers.

Act counterintuitively
If the class is loud, it seems natural to speak loudly to compete. However, you'll lose your voice, and it won't work! Do the opposite. If you want attention, speak softly and wait. You'll see a ripple effect as students stop talking to see what's happening.

Also, if a student is quiet, it seems natural to walk up to them. Again, do the opposite: walk

away from them. Gesture you want the student to speak to the whole class, and say, 'A bit louder?'

Use your stance to convey authority
Your body language conveys more about your authority than anything you say. When you want students' attention, always walk to the centre front. Stand straight and with confidence. Wait – show that no-one is going to rush you.

Ask students to help you
Your students know it is a big class. They will not think it is strange if you ask for help; in fact they are likely to find it an honour. Have students help you hand out or collect papers, move desks, and operate equipment.

V. Student engagement and motivation

Making your lessons interesting and relevant to learners is one of the key teaching principles, but in a large class it is absolutely crucial. Teaching a large class that is bored and reluctant to participate is about as difficult as trying to roll a heavy piece of rock uphill. After a while you get exhausted and the rock rolls back on you pushing you down. If you manage to make your lessons dynamic and interesting, however, the class itself will be the driving force of the lesson while your main function will be to steer them in the right direction.

There are a few techniques you can apply that will help you get all your students actively involved in the lesson.

1. Open-ended questions

In a large class, more than in any other setting, it is important to opt for open-ended questions and exercises. Unlike closed-ended tasks, which call for specific answers (such as multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank exercises which ask for a specific word), open-ended tasks allow students a range of possibilities for choosing appropriate language items and gearing the exercise to their own level of proficiency.

Open ended tasks are invaluable in large multilevel classes as they generate more active response, encourage students of all levels to use the target language, and keep them occupied for longer periods than close-ended tasks do.

Take a look at the following ways to create open-ended tasks:
* Give students the beginnings of sentences and allow them to finish these in a way that is true for them. For example, "What I can't stand about holidays is ...."
* Give students a set of questions and allow them to answer a specific number of their choice
* Brainstorm
* Write their own definitions of words
* Match answers in which several of the matches provide the 'right' answer. They could then justify why they prefer a particular match
* Ask 'why' questions
* Request clarification and elaboration and begin with "could you please explain that?" or "could you clarify what you mean?"

Bear in mind that you are likely to generate more feedback if you ask questions to which you don't know the answer, as opposed to asking about something you know about in order to test students' knowledge.

Another effective technique is to turn questions initiated by the students themselves back to the class. If someone asks your opinion of a certain problem or event, ask them what they think about it and then tell them your opinion. If someone asks what a word means, ask if anyone else knows and could explain.

2. Enlarging the circle of attention

During the teacher-led stages of your lessons, you can never be sure whether those quiet listeners are passive participants or daydreamers who may soon exhibit behavioural problems. There are several techniques which can help you enlarge the circle of active attention in your classes.

Hands up
Instead of calling on the first student whose hand goes up, wait for more students to raise their hands. Encourage participation by saying " I see four hands up, aren't there more? Oh, I see four and a half … oh good, now there are five. I'm waiting for more…"

Walk away
When a student is talking, we have the tendency to walk closer to him/her. It is better if we walk farther away and allow his/her voice to carry across the room to reach more students.

Listen to students
It is good to listen carefully to our students and allow student initiated topics to interrupt our lesson. A student's personal question may well be more interesting to students than what the teacher originally planned.

Keep attention
Ask a question before naming a student to answer it. If you do it the other way around, many students will stop paying attention before the question is asked. Don't call on students in a predictable order. If we always move from left to right or from A to Z, students will not concentrate until their turn is near. Being asked in a random order will keep them alert.

Give students time to think
Having asked a question, do not be afraid to pause for some thinking time. Since we ourselves know the answer so well, we may not realize that thinking time is needed before students will volunteer to answer.

Help shy students

It is helpful to let shy students know before the lesson that you plan to call on them during the lesson. It works best if you can arrange a signal that will warn the student that they will soon be called on.

Be flexible

Flexibility is important if you see that the students are tired of a certain type of activity and have stopped concentrating. Be prepared to adapt your lesson plan if you need to. For example, you may have planned to sing a song at the end of the lesson, but you can do it in the middle of the lesson if you feel that the students have lost concentration and interest after doing difficult exercises.

Remember, you're there to teach language, not necessarily to cover specific material. When you enlarge the circle of students participating in the lesson, you avoid many of the problems connected to classroom control and interest.

3. Variety and pace

In large classes, a lack of attention can prove disastrous, so make sure you bring variety to your teaching. Monitor the class closely, and as soon as you detect traces of boredom, consider changing the activity even if you planned to carry on for a longer period. Such flexibility comes with practice. The principle of variety will help you to activate the quiet student and to maintain control.

Here are some ways to add variety:
- Change the subject or open up a new area of the same subject
- Change the type of work from teacher-fronted to pairs or groups or vice versa
- Change from loud and active work to quiet and reflective activities and vice versa
- Alternate between activities which use students' receptive skills and those which use students' productive skills
- Change from formal practice such as substitution exercises or drills to freer and more creative practice such as dialogues or role-plays
- Get students to act either as themselves or as fictional characters/movie stars, etc
- Switch between challenging activities and lighter ones.

Correct pacing means that we should handle each activity and phase of activity at the tempo suitable to it. As a rule, drills should proceed briskly; discussions that involve thought, reflection, and introspection must move at a more leisurely pace.

During teacher-fronted activities, observe the class's reaction - never assume that because some of the class understands, the whole class understands.

If some of your students complete the basic set of exercises quickly, don't yield to the temptation to skip to the next stage of the lesson immediately as the weaker students should not fall behind.

After checking the answers to the first set of exercises as a class, give a more advanced task to those who had finished quickly (e.g. ask them to describe their weekend using at least three examples of the past continuous). Give additional exercises to those who had difficulty with the first set.

Then go around the class helping the weaker students while the stronger students are preparing their weekend stories. Make sure the pace isn't too fast or too slow to keep everyone busy. It's important to make provisions for the students who finish early as well as for those who need more time and help.

4. Interesting topics and personalisation

The topics you choose for your lessons must be relevant to students and stimulate their interest. Since you are going to deal with a variety of levels, ages and possibly nationalities you need to think about the themes that are fairly universal and touch everyone's life.

Think about the aspects of people's lives that are significant to anyone regardless of their age, background or origin. Avoid sensitive topics where some students' opinions and beliefs may be offensive to others, for example religion or politics.

Almost any reading text, listening passage, and speaking activity can be adapted in such a way that you can tailor it to suit your students. Try the following:
- After reading about a controversial topic, ask your students to write letters to the editor.
- After discussing personal or family problems, get your students to write letters to the advice page telling about their own problems. These letters can be answered by other students.
- Ask your students to deliver mini-presentations about their hobbies, interests or dreams for the future.
- Ask them to investigate the professional requirements of their hoped-for profession.
- Get them to create posters of a place they have visited or would like to visit. They could make mini-presentations based on the posters.
- Ask them to talk or write about a person they admire.
- Ask them to complete open-ended sentences in a way that is true for them.

1. Evaluating the four skills

The art of getting and giving feedback gets harder the more students you have, but it is important your students feel their efforts are recognised, valued and fairly assessed. With large classes you need to take a more active role in the lesson - even when students are practising group or pair activities.

Here are some ways you can evaluate individual students in large classes.

How well can they communicate orally?
To find out how your students communicate orally, you will need to listen to each one individually. With large classes, you can conduct oral assessments with groups of six to ten students (while the rest of the class is occupied with other tasks). You could also walk around the class during group discussions and rate as many students as you can. Eventually, over several lessons everyone will have a grade.

Students often like to show their role-plays, report on the outcome of their discussions, or make creative presentations in front of the class. This can even motivate them to try harder while they work in pairs or groups. Consider asking one or more groups to perform to the whole class, trying to ensure that everybody has had a chance to perform at least once during a series of lessons. You can then comment on, or grade performance.

How good are they at reading?
When you are trying to determine how well your students can read, you can have them take quick reading comprehension tests including cloze tests and sentence completion exercises. Cloze tests are described in more detail later on.

How good are they at listening?
To check students' listening comprehension skills, you can use multiple choice tasks and sentence completion tasks. In a business-oriented course it is common to use a chart or graph with some information missing, which students have to complete as they listen to a talk or a conversation.

How good are they at writing?
To find out how well students can write, you may conduct an activity to get writing samples from the whole class at one sitting, but these samples must be scored individually. To speed up the scoring process, you might want to score only five to ten each night.

The task of checking written work can be overwhelming, and this is where you can draw on the knowledge and skills of the more advanced students in your class. Let those students review the work of their less advanced classmates. You may want to look through the corrections and

comments later on and add some of your own, but generally it will take less time than correcting from scratch.

2. Some types of evaluation

For some tasks, you can decide to give a group grade. For example, you conduct a whole class discussion on a certain topic, but ask students to work in groups to complete a worksheet or write a summary of what they have learned. In this case, you may assign one grade to the group, and all students will have that grade recorded next to their names.
Not every activity must be graded, however. It can be evaluated in a more informal way as you comment orally or in writing on students' work and praise their specific achievements.

You may also want to consider group self-evaluations. Prepare a form with statements like these: Everyone in the group participated. Everyone encouraged other group members. Everyone contributed to the final product. Everyone listened while other members spoke. Everyone followed his or her assigned role. Then ask students to choose a response on an evaluation scale, such as Always, Usually, Sometimes and Never.
Cloze tests are reading passages containing missing words, which students must fill in. This is a good way to measure reading comprehension, since if they understand the meaning of the passage, they should have no trouble suggesting appropriate words to fill in the blanks.

To construct a cloze test, select a reading passage appropriate for the age of your students. This passage can be taken from books that students will be asked to read in your class. Check the passage for cultural bias. Write the reading passage on paper or on the board. Leave the first two sentences intact. Beginning with the third sentence, delete every fifth, seventh, or ninth word, making all blanks the same size. Number the blanks. The more frequent the deletions, the more difficult the cloze test becomes.

Practise using the cloze technique many times with your students before giving the cloze as a test. Students not familiar with cloze format need practice at using the technique. Tell students that they should read the passage completely through before filling in any blanks. They should fill in each blank with the most appropriate word. They should also skip over any blanks which they find too difficult and come back to these later. If the reading passage is on the board, students can simply write the number of each missing word on their paper and turn in a list with their answers. Cloze tests are not strictly timed, so you can be flexible with time limits.

If the text is on handouts, it is easier to adapt it to different levels. For example, delete every fifteenth word for elementary learners, every tenth word for intermediate learners and every fifth word for advanced learners (the passage itself should be closer to elementary than advanced so that all the students can understand its main idea). Put students of different levels in separate groups to discourage cheating.

Ideally, though, you will have different texts for different levels.

3. Other forms of feedback

Even with large classes, it is important that your students can approach you with their problems and needs. It can be hard to deal with individuals personally when you have a class of 50 or 100, but there are ways around this.

Class book
The class book is a large notebook that is left open to the students for public viewing. It might contain basic attendance notes and participation records.

Devote a section to 'Comments and Suggestions' and encourage your students to write their thoughts. Tell them you will use the book to write your responses. If the students seem hesitant at first, begin the process by writing an interesting observation about the class in the book. The students will want to write their responses and follow up with questions.

Email
You may not want to give everyone your personal email, however you may open a special email account for communicating with your students. Tell them they can write you directly if they have any questions, problems or concerns.

This opportunity of direct communication with the teacher can boost their motivation and relieve the tension caused by studying in a large class.

Suggestion box
Ask your class to evaluate an activity that you have introduced during the day, asking them to write one positive thing and one thing they would change to make it better. Students do not need to sign their names, but simply put their comments into the suggestion box.

Comment on suggestions in your next class, thank your students and encourage further comments.

Avoid using the suggestion box from lesson one as students need time to get to know you and your teaching. Once you've established your reputation and built rapport with the class on the whole, then ask for individual suggestions.

4. Monitoring progress of individual students

Remembering the names of your students is an important first step; you now need to get to know their individual strengths and weaknesses, monitor their progress, and give feedback.

Students are used to being anonymous in a large class, and will find it very motivating if you take a personal interest in them.

The easiest way to do this in a large group is to keep a file for each student. (A photo will also help your memory; you can ask each student to write something about themselves and supply a photo.) Use the file to make notes as you monitor in class. You can use the notes to give feedback to the student later, or to inform your assessment.

VII. Examples of activities for a large class

Here are some examples of activities you can use for large classes.

Survivor
Survivor is a popular television show in the US based on descriptive language. Teams must take turns to describe the words written on random cards, with descriptions ranging from weather conditions to advising someone suffering with the flu. Two teams of contestants compete over a period of several weeks, with a member from one of the two teams being removed from competition each week. The final person in the competition is the ultimate winner. This game is easily adapted from television to the classroom.

Creating stories
This activity helps activate new vocabulary and improve narrative techniques. After reading a text, ask groups of students to select certain words from the text. When they have finished, go around the class and swap the lists of words produced by groups sitting next to each other. Individual groups must then create a story containing the words from the list, either orally, or in writing. Winners can be selected by vote.

Class surveys
Class surveys are a good way to get larger groups to circulate. Allow your students to create questionnaires based on class material. Students must then interview X number of people in the class and record their answers. Afterwards you can talk as a class about the questions they made and some of the answers they received. This gives a little bit of structure to students who are intimidated by 'free-talking', and relieves the pressure of speaking in front of a large class.

Consequences
This game practises the formulation of sentences. You will need pens and paper. Players must begin by writing a male name at the top of the paper, then folding it down so the next player cannot see it. The paper is passed on, and the next player will write a female name. The paper is passed around again until a story unfolds. The classic pattern is as follows:

A boy (name 1) met a girl (name 2) in/at (place).
He said to her (sentence 1) so she said to him (sentence 2).
So he (action 1) and she (action 2).
The consequence was (consequence).

On completing the game, the unfolded papers are read out by the students in turn. Resulting stories are invariably funny, and students enjoy this activity.

Cartoon captions
Cartoon captions are a fun way to promote free writing. Hand out a cartoon (use newspapers, magazines or the internet for sources) with the caption removed. Have the class discuss the

scene portrayed. Then ask your students to think up a funny caption for the cartoon (they can work in groups, pairs or individually for this one). Once everyone is finished (allow about 3-5 minutes) collect all the captions and write them on the board. Work as a class to correct any mistakes and discuss the choices. Then show the original caption. Everyone can then vote on which captions are the funniest. Prizes for the funniest caption make it more interesting.

Chinese whispers
For low level students line them up in teams of 6 or 7. Give the last student in each row the same word, and have them whisper it up to the front. The first team to either write the word correctly on the board or tell it to the teacher wins. It forces students to both speak clearly and listen carefully, as well as pay attention to that day's key phrases.

For higher levels you can do a relay with a sentence. Gradually feed them the words and have the student at the front take the place at the back after they have written their word, that way each student plays each role.

You can vary this game again by giving them a word to spell. Each student has to write one letter from the word in question, and they keep rotating until the word is spelled correctly. This can take quite a while if they are poor spellers.