

TESOL Symposium, Yaoundé, Cameroon, 12 August 2013

Teaching English in difficult circumstances, revisited

Richard Smith, University of Warwick, UK

Below are some strategies which have been proposed for addressing common challenges in large class English teaching. For more information, see the TELC (Teaching English in Large Classes) network website: bit.ly/telcnet-home. You are warmly invited to join the network's Facebook group.

Peer feedback to reduce the burden of marking homework

"I have too much homework to mark. It becomes almost impossible to give effective feedback for everyone."

Engaging students in peer feedback, in other words getting them to comment on / mark one another's work might reduce the marking burden for the teacher significantly. At the same time, it might encourage students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

You could try coming up with clear assessment criteria together with your students. These criteria can form the basis on which students review one another's work and comment on it. For example, if students have written an essay:

1. They could share their work and give each other feedback based on the assessment criteria;
2. During this, the teacher can visit the different groups and give comments and suggestions when needed;
3. The teacher can highlight particular aspects on the board so that students can engage in further peer feedback.

Source: Shamim, F., Negash, N., Chuku, C. and Demewoz, N. 2007. *Maximizing Learning in Large Classes: Issues and Options*. Addis Abbaba: The British Council. Available online: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/ELT-16-screen.pdf>

Introducing/Increasing pair work and/or group work to enhance participation

"Not all students participate, due to being in a large class."

Pair and group work might reduce anxiety and also allow more students to speak for a longer time than would be possible in a whole class situation.

You could try setting a task that requires group members to interact and work collaboratively in order to complete the task, for example the following type of 'jigsaw picture' activity:

1. Provide each student in a group with a different picture;
2. Give students a couple of minutes to understand their picture without showing it to their fellow group members;
3. Collect the pictures and ask groups to construct a short narrative using the information from all the pictures.

This kind of 'information gap' activity requires everyone in the group to speak in order to construct a coherently sequenced story.

Source: Renaud, S., Tannenbaum, E. and Stantial, P. 2007. 'Student-centered teaching in large classes with limited resource'. *English Teaching Forum* 2007/3: 12-17, 34. Available online: http://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/07-45-3-c.pdf

Raising your hand - and training students to do the same - to get students to stop work on a task

"It is difficult to get students' attention to stop them working on a pair or group task."

When students are working on a pair or group task, teachers can find it difficult to draw this to a close, in other words to get students' attention to move the lesson on, without wasting time, taking up a lot of the teacher's energy and interrupting students abruptly who are still on task.

One effective way of drawing pair or group work to a close smoothly might be to train students in the following procedure:

1. The teacher raises his/her arm when s/he wants to get students' attention, without saying anything.
2. As soon as a student sees this, the teacher too raises his/her arm and brings talking to a close.
3. Neighbouring students will see this and themselves raise their arms, and soon the whole class will be giving the teacher their attention, with no need for shouting, clapping hands etc.

It might also help to tell students explicitly how long they have for a particular task, so that they look out for the signal that the activity is over, at the appropriate time.

Source: Ajjan, M. and Smith, R. Forthcoming. In *53 Problems with Large Classes*. Ely, Cambs: The Professional and Higher Partnership.

Establishing a code of behaviour to reduce noise level

"The noise level in my class is too high."

One way to reduce the noise level in the classroom might be to establish a code of behaviour that is created by teachers and learners together. The idea is that if students are involved in the writing of ground rules, they are more likely to observe them.

1. Ask students to suggest ground rules for reducing noise level, for example:
 - if you finish your lesson task, read a book;
 - talk softly without disturbing others during group work;
 - raise your hand before sharing something with the class;
2. You can also decide on sanctions if the rules are broken together with your students.
3. You might want to display the rules and sanctions on the classroom wall and remind students of them from time to time.

Source: Hasan, M.F. n.d. 'Effective teaching in large classes'.

Online: <http://www.uobabylon.edu.iq/uobcoleges/filesshare/articles/large%20classes.pdf>

Getting written feedback from students to cater for mixed abilities

“Students in a large class often have mixed abilities. It is difficult to cater for students with such different levels and needs.”

One way to address this problem might be by asking students for written feedback on lessons. This could enable all students, including those who are shy, to give expression to their difficulties and enables you to take necessary actions in following classes. For example, you could:

1. Ask your students to take out a sheet of paper and just for a couple of minutes summarize main points of the class or note down any points that are unclear to them regarding the lesson;
2. Collect these notes and use them to learn how far your students have understood the lesson and their possible weak areas.

Source: Hasan, M.F. n.d. 'Effective teaching in large classes'.

Online: <http://www.uobabylon.edu.iq/uobcoleges/files/Articles/large%20classes.pdf>

Increasing availability to enhance rapport

“It is difficult to achieve rapport with the students.”

Rapport might be improved when teachers make themselves more 'available' and find ways to be more accessible to students on a personal level. For instance, teachers can:

1. Come early to class and chat with students who are already there or greet students as they enter the classroom;
2. Conduct a lesson from different points of the classroom and thus give all students the feeling of being in the 'middle of the action';
3. Stay a few minutes after class to answer individual questions.

Source: Hasan, M.F. n.d. 'Effective teaching in large classes'.

Online: <http://www.uobabylon.edu.iq/uobcoleges/files/Articles/large%20classes.pdf>

Asking other students to repeat or paraphrase to make students' contributions heard

“Students' individual responses are difficult to hear.”

Asking a student to repeat her/his contribution until it is heard clearly by the whole class can disrupt the flow of the lesson. Instead of this, it might be useful to get a student seated elsewhere in the classroom to repeat or paraphrase their classmate's contribution.

If you do this on a regular basis, students who are contributing might speak more loudly so that other students can hear. It could also encourage students generally to pay more attention so that they are not caught off guard when asked to repeat or paraphrase a fellow student's contribution.

Online: Shamim, F., Negash, N., Chuku, C. and Demewoz, N. 2007. *Maximizing Learning in Large Classes: Issues and Options*. Addis Abbaba: The British Council. Available online: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/ELT-16-screen.pdf>

Enlisting students' help in gathering materials to overcome a lack of resources

“It is difficult to promote active learning in large classes when resources such as text books, story books, flash cards, audio and video tapes are limited.”

If you don't have enough learning resources, it might be good to ask your students to bring materials, e.g. authentic materials, from home. Not only might this help to solve a practical problem but also students may feel more responsible for the teaching and learning process. This could also encourage them to use learning opportunities in their environment.

You could, for example,

1. Encourage students to find written or audio materials in English and bring it to class. Examples of written materials might include adverts, news articles from newspapers, poems, short stories;
2. Ask them to explain why they thought the material might be useful for the English class.
3. Taking account of students' suggestions, organize different activities around the materials they have brought in.

Source: Kuchah, K. and Smith, R. 2011. 'Pedagogy of autonomy for difficult circumstances: Principles from practice'. *International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 5/2: 119-139. Online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17501229.2011.577529>

Having students make 'profile cards' to know/use students' names

“It is difficult to know/use students' names in a large class.”

Knowing/using students' names in a large class can seem impossible.

One useful technique might be to have students create profile cards for you. For example:

1. Points worth knowing about anyone can be brainstormed with the class and listed on the board;
2. These points are then categorized and put in an order acceptable to everyone;
3. Students are asked to prepare their own profile card for the teacher, with a photograph;
4. Prizes can be given for the best-presented cards.

Source: Smith, R. 2008. 'Taking the bull by its horns: Zakia Sarwar's pro-autonomy approach to large classes in Pakistan (Part I)'. *Independence* 44: 7-13. Also available online: <http://www.learnerautonomy.org/zakiapart1.pdf>

Discussing more with other teachers to overcome feelings of despair

“I am sometimes in despair at my inability to manage a large class”

Perhaps it might be useful to communicate, discuss and share your problems and your classroom management techniques more frequently with other teachers who are involved in large class teaching. Sharing and reflecting upon classroom experiences with other teachers could become a rich source of support and comfort.

Source: Hasan, M.F. n.d. 'Effective teaching in large classes'.

Online: <http://www.uobabylon.edu.iq/uobcoleges/filesshare/articles/large%20classes.pdf>