



Group work and other Techniques to manage large ESL Classes

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Any class of over 25 learners demands special teaching techniques and would present the teacher with numerous problems. The main problem is that the individual learner in a large class is in serious danger of being denied sufficient time for speech and, consequently, of spending a great deal of time listening to teacher talk. A secondary problem related to this lack of time that there teachers lose sense of the community. Learning can become boring and over-formal. In other words, the teacher is encouraged to use ‘transmission’ type of teaching and adopts a ‘teaching role to control the class.

Hubbard et al. emphasize that the difficulties of teaching and learning in large classes should first be carefully identified, and then appropriate teaching techniques should be selected and adapted for effective teaching. They suggest dividing the class into two halves and assigning one half some practical exercise, and the other half can be engaged by the teacher. Next the authors stress the need of effective group-work. Students should sit together in small groups with their group leaders around a table. The leaders should be the most competent in the class and should be able to form a demonstration group with the teacher must prepare worksheets for the group and organise the groups properly.

However, the authors note that increased group work may cause a certain loss of the sense of community. Therefore, they suggest that there must be ample time for handling the class as a single unit and groups must be allowed to interact with one another.

The authors also suggest ‘team teaching’ as a useful device for handling large classes. Two teachers working together can demonstrate language functions very effectively and can then share the normal teaching responsibilities.

Hubbard et al. (ibid.) make two important points in their discussion (i) Intensive group work can lead to the feeling of loss of community and (ii) that there is no separate methodology for large classes, i.e. the usual pedagogic techniques can be employed according to the demands of situation. With regard to the second point of Hubbard et al. We would like to add that a teacher cannot tentatively extend the usual classroom techniques to a large language class. Some of the usual procedures may simply prove ineffective. Therefore, a teacher must observe the typical psychodynamics of the classroom and accordingly manipulate his instruction to achieve maximum effectiveness.

Ghosh et al. (1977:65) feel that although it is very difficult for the teacher to pay individual attention to every student in a large class while teaching language skills, yet, they say that ‘purposeful directed practice, especially, in the skills of listening and reading, can be helpful. By purposeful practice they mean that the teacher should systematically plan the learning task so as to elicit complete responses from the students. The learning task should include adequate number of cues for the learners to arrive at the correct response. Secondly, they suggest that the learning tasks should be varied so that they could expose the learner to variety of English registers, styles etc. and sustain his interest by exposing him to new materials. They propose that for a learner-centered teaching the teacher should-

- (1) Prepare and distribute hand-outs (preferably cyclostyled) containing brief introductions, glosses, summaries etc. as an aid but not to substitute for independent study of the text by the student (outside the classroom)
- (2) insist on students reading assigned portions of the text before coming to class,
- (3) confine his teaching of the text in classroom to those passages which are particularly difficult (linguistically or intellectually) or particularly teachable (i.e. lent themselves easily to stimulating classroom discussions etc.). The teacher would however, have to provide the links between different parts of the text as well as some critical commentary; but his burden would certainly be greatly reduced.

In addition, they briefly discuss that teacher should provide more practice in purposive listening and reading by reducing his own talk to the minimum, he should prepare a stock of

materials, in addition to the prescribed texts. Materials such as passages culled from books, newspapers, periodicals etc. should be used in the class to improve language skills.

The authors disapprove of the seating arrangements (rows of benches screwed to floor) provided in most of the colleges. They suggest that lecture theatre should be replaced by a less formal (and forbidding) kind of classroom arrangement, possibly with students free to arrange themselves in small groups for discussion or joint participation in some task. Group methods as proposed by Jean Forrester have been strongly supported by the authors. They note that in a group learners will be more alert, possibly because of the element of competition, and among the peers, ideas will flow readily with less shyness and inhibition.

The authors believe that practice of the active skills-speaking and writing - can certainly be done more effectively in groups. The teacher can, for example, ask a group to jointly prepare a topic for a debate. Each member should contribute to the discussion, which must be in English, the teacher interfering only when necessary; it is better to get students to talk freely in English before one attempts to correct pronunciation and grammar. Some of this correction can come from the group itself, and teacher can also later explain and demonstrate the principles of speech: phonetic accuracy, grammatical accuracy and contextual accuracy. The authors realise that the skill of speaking in English is the most difficult to inculcate since it needs the greatest amount of interaction between teacher and pupil. The best strategy according to them, may be to introduce optional courses in spoken English for those who need this skill. Finally, the authors suggest the inclusion of programmed materials as supplementary instructional aid to the classroom instructional process. These materials would lead the students towards independent mastery learning.

Ghosh et al. have suggested an excellent outline of the 'workable' solution to the problems of large classes. It is unfortunate that they did not elaborate on it in any detail. They have suggested the maximum utilization of the traditional lecture method and the innovative language learning techniques through their integration. However, they have not pointed out how this integration should take place. Moreover, some of the proposed changes in the seating arrangements in the classroom may not be applicable in the typical Indian Colleges where the classroom has fixed furniture. Secondly, they have placed much emphasis on the classroom teacher for efficiently managing and organising learning activities.

However, Ghosh et al.'s study is perhaps the first of its kind in that it approaches the problem of large classes at the college level in the typical Indian ESL context. This study however, is not based on an experimental research, rather it is the result of the concerned teachers of ELT who have

evaluated the problem in terms of their sound experience of teaching ESL in the Indian conditions. Moreover, the suggested measures have general educational perspective with some bearing on the effective teaching and learning of a second language. It is important to note here that Ghosh et al. do not suggest the above measures on large classes from within a theoretical framework, but rather they propose solutions which they developed through their practical insights into the problem is teacher-trainers, and as teachers of ESL in India.

McGreal (1989:17) recognises the importance of team teaching, peer teaching and organising learning centres and grouping for reducing the negative effects of large classes. He thinks that by concentrating on teaching the language system as opposed to fostering language acquisition, more traditional methods can be used to provide students with a base in English upon which they can build when they have the opportunity for more communicative interactions.

McGreal places special emphasis on group work. He says by dividing a large class into small groups the class can possibly take on the characteristics of a smaller class. Smaller groups can be used to overcome the disparity of students' aims and their varying levels of fluency in English. Students can participate more freely in discussions without fear of ridicule from the class or chastisement from the teacher. EFL teachers can actively encourage the exchange of ideas as communicative activity in English and small groups are most appropriate for personal interactions. However, he points out that groups should be organised very carefully and the teacher must be efficient in the facilitation techniques of group learning. Further he says, that a group of 4 to 7 students is efficient in maximizing the communicative use of English. These groups can be organized according to a wheel pattern, where all groups communicate through a group leader; or through a circle pattern where information is exchanged around the table in a circular flow; in an interchange format etc. The teacher should ensure that group work is conducted in English. The group task must be kept simple, filled with 'information gap activities' and must contain interesting subject matter. All these elements help to ensure that discipline problems or long embarrassed silences do not occur because of tasks that are inappropriate to the student's interests, capabilities or desires. For mature students problem solving activities in the group are suggested. These activities must have overt goals and these goals must be presented by the teacher in such a way that they can be properly achieved only by using or understanding the linguistic structures being studied. The author is however aware that if students are not mature or motivated enough to see the value of cooperative work, group activities often fall flat and their effect is more to heighten the decibel level of the classroom. Therefore he suggests some of the other ways which can be supplemented with group work, a few of these are described below:

1. A section of a large class can be pulled out for different activities such as listening which can be effectively used to engage large numbers of students while the smaller groups can go to the conversation classes.
2. Teaching teams can be organized and students rotated so that all students get the benefit from the personal attention of small class teaching, at least for some lessons.
3. Lectures in the class should be supplemented with individualised learning modules which may allow learners to proceed at their own pace.

Although Mcgreal does not address to any particular level, he emphasizes on making the best use of the available educational techniques such as lectures, group work, pair - work etc. by integrating them for the effective teaching and learning in a large class. Some of the techniques (such as organising listening tasks etc.) suggested by him can be utilized in the Indian undergraduate classrooms.

Nalasco and Arthur (1988) in their book-length study (first on large classes:) have attempted to apply the ideas of communicative language teaching to large classes. They point out that the 'largeness' of a class depends on an individual teacher's perception. For example, teachers who are used to groups of 12-14 students might find a group of 20 rather threatening. Others may be relieved only when they have 40. However, the authors look at a large class in terms of its associated difficulties such as the resistance to innovative approaches, the problem of discipline, the increased noise level of the classroom, the examination-based learning habits of students and the crowd behaviour psychology of the class. They point out that the general physical setting (in which benches are screwed to the floor in a 'deep room') of the classroom does not provide a teacher easy control over the noise level, managing and setting up group activities or monitoring students' ontask behaviour.

Owing to these above-mentioned constraints many teachers get discouraged and they hesitate to introduce communicative activities in their classrooms. However, the authors urge the teachers to take the constraints as challenge and face them with confidence and conviction. They suggest the following techniques to overcome some of the large class problems and teach effectively.

1. The teachers must make themselves familiar with the teaching-learning system within a particular educational setting, the socio psychological environment of the classroom, students' expectations, their names, their language learning objectives, their interest in particular types of

language activities etc. To get an overall profile of the learners some techniques such as personal interviews, questionnaires, different types of tests for the learners are suggested.

2. The teachers must set a routine of a positive learning environment because the key to discipline is the creation of an atmosphere with breeds motivation and cooperation. For setting up such a routine the teacher must organise the classroom efficiently. Developing responsibilities among the students towards particular classroom organisation activities, giving clear instructions (sometimes using learners' mother varying the question patterns, and repeating and reviewing techniques have been suggested.

3. In a large class since students have usually been together for their learning, they are quite familiar with the patterns of conventions governing behaviour in their learning situation. A teacher who comes in with new ideas or presenting an image which is contrary to the expected norm will inevitably provoke a reaction from the students. In some cases this may well manifest itself in indiscipline and chaos. Therefore, the authors suggest that a teacher should take care of the students' expectations, Most students in large classes are used to a style of teaching known as 'lockstep' in which the teacher wholly controls the content, stages and the pace of lesson. This is also sometimes referred to the 'transmission model' of education (Barnes 1975). However, observers like Barnes argue that students learn better when they get a chance to talk about the experience they are learning. This is a view which can be expressed simply as follows:

'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand'.

Although 'lockstep' is a valid style of teaching which is useful for certain language learning activities such as drilling and controlled practice, yet taking part in controlled question and answer practice does not necessarily help students to use English outside the classroom. The authors therefore propose group-work and pair - work in which a teacher acts as a consultant and facilitator more than a questioner and instructor (Kerry and Sands 1982). However, some students who are used to the role of the teacher in 'lockstep' may question the value of group work. They expect the teacher to teach by which they mean ask questions, explain and evaluate. They are therefore confused when the teacher appears to be doing very little while they are working. This may be one reason why the sudden introduction of 'free group activities' may be met with apparent disinterest, lack of participation and in some classes downright hostility. Another reason may be that students do not know how to make use of the opportunities afforded by free activities because they quite simply do not know what they are expected to do. If the learners have never experienced group work activities before, familiar controlled activities in pairs should be introduced gradually and

systematically. These activities should proceed from the ‘open pair work’ to ‘the adjacent pair work’.

The authors also suggest that if group work is to succeed, teachers must make sure that they have established the norms of the group tasks. To prevent students making use of their mother tongue in the group activities, they should train them to accept the responsibility of maintaining ‘English only’ rule in the classroom. The use of mother tongue to check understanding and provide explanations can be very productive and many students would be very frustrated if they were told not to. They suggest that simple controlled activities such as a dialogue-repetition can help students get over the barrier of having to suddenly speak English to a peer without the additional burden of having to think of something to say. Further the authors recognize the importance of English in the classroom communication for managing and organising group activities. It can develop spontaneous comprehension and production of English in the learners.

4. The materials used for the group tasks should be reasonably challenging and they must encourage genuine communicative activities among the learners. The authors have identified the following major characteristics of genuinely communicative activities.

- They involve using language for a purpose.

- They create a desire to communicate. This means there must be some kind of gap which may be information, opinion, affect, or reason which students seek to bridge.

- They encourage students to be creative and contribute their ideas.

- They focus on the message and students concentrate on ‘what’ they are saying rather than how they are saying it.

- The students work independently of the teacher.

- The students determine what they want to say or write.

The authors suggest that keeping this criteria in mind the teachers can either adapt the available commercial materials or prepare some interesting materials themselves.

5. Finally, the authors suggest various measures to improve communicative language teaching, alongside the traditional teaching of English in the classroom. In particular, they urge the teachers to reflect on their teaching behaviour in the class, to develop one’s own teaching resources, to collaborate with colleagues, to start a programme of self-development. For the learners the teachers

must manipulate the instruction in such a way that it caters for different learning styles, interests and needs. To achieve this purpose he should provide a variety of learning experiences such as project work, individualised work, group work etc.

Nolasco and Arthur thus suggest how teachers can organise communicative language learning activities in large classes. The book addresses to the general audience and is aimed at the intermediate level. Although the authors claim that the book can be used in any setting - native or non-native, yet the activities suggested seem more favourable to the native setting. In general the communicative activities suggested by the authors conform to the criteria outlined by them for genuine communicative activities. However, these activities make heavy demand on the classroom teacher - who may not have ready typing facilities, cyclostyling facilities etc. The teacher is supposed to prepare worksheets to be used in the classroom. It may be very difficult for an Indian college teacher who has to meet at least 3-4 large classes. Moreover, for the pair-work, group work and role play activities, neither our teachers are familiar and trained nor the learners have any experience.

However, the authors' work should be appreciated because they have clearly understood some of the major problems faced by the teachers and learners of English in large classes. To improve the socio and psychological dynamics of the class they have singled out teacher as a crucial factor. They argue that with his pragmatic understanding of the classroom teaching and learning processes, a teacher can organise the communicative tasks in such manner as would produce maximum language learning. It will be important to note here that the authors do not suggest any integrated language learning model in the classroom, rather they propose variety of communicative tasks to be used in the large classes.

The Joint Leeds-Lancaster Project on Language Learning in Large Classes

In his key note address presented on the occasion of the SPELT annual seminar held in October 1989 on 'Teaching English with limited Resources - Focus on Large Classes' Hywel Coleman provide the back ground and the on-going activities in the joint Leeds-Lancaster project on Language Learning in Large classes. Coleman informed the audience that the Lancaster-Leeds Research project began towards the end of 1986, in a very informal way. The project has four major activities : Creating a bibliography on language learning in large classes, networking, organising Colloquia, and promoting and undertaking research. He pointed out that the research process so far has been dominated by the trial and use of two questionnaires, the first of which investigates

teachers' perception of class size and the second of which looks at teachers perception of difficulties involved in teaching large classes. (Coleman 1990 :10).

In the studies undertaken by the researchers on the project it was found that teaching in large classes is uncomfortable for various reasons. There is also some Coleman (ibid.: 11) identifies five major difficulties faced by teachers in large classes. These difficulties relate to teacher's discomfort, his inability to have full control of the class and evaluate student's language performance and his inability to pay individual attention to the learning problems of the learners. To minimise these difficulties Coleman suggests that we should change our perceptions about our traditional role of being the controller and transmitter of knowledge and attitudes and assign the learners some responsibilities towards their learning. He suggests collaborative activities such as pair work, group work etc. as means to minimise large class problems.

We notice that although most of the studies proposed group work, pair work, individual language learning activities, self-study techniques etc. as possible solutions to the problem of large classes, none tried to integrate them in some coherent model. Almost all the studies place heavy responsibility on the teacher for organising and individualising ESL learning by preparing, administering and supervising the classroom activities. In the Indian Context, recognising the facts of teachers' unions and political interference in the teachers' recruitment, we can say that teachers are likely to vary considerably in their managerial and linguistic abilities. Therefore, we cannot expect too much from the teachers. Even some of the resourceful teachers cannot organise innovative language learning activities four periods a day, every day. Obviously, the responsibility of organising should be shouldered by the learners. This can be done, as Nolasco and Arthur have rightly pointed out, by training the learners in organising activities.

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