

Student-Centered Teaching in Large Classes with Limited Resources

“We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.” (Peace Corps 1992, 11)

Josue enters his classroom where his secondary school students—all 78 of them—are waiting, squeezed together on sagging wooden benches. The small room is so crowded that Josue cannot move from the narrow space left for him between the front wall—where the polished cement has been painted black to serve as a blackboard—and the first row of benches. His students have no books. There is no electricity, it is hot, and Josue has only a piece of chalk and his imagination to help him teach his students English.

This scenario is repeated every day in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, but it could just as well be in thousands of schools in hundreds of developing countries throughout the Caribbean, Africa, South America, and Asia. According to Cross (1992), in some situations “teachers have no copying facilities, no home base, no supplies of any kind. Under such conditions, much of what is written about language

teaching in journals and books is irrelevant, even laughable.”

We began to work with Haitian pre-service teachers at the State Teacher Training College and with groups of in-service teachers throughout the country in 1998. At that time, we did not fully grasp the realities of teaching English, or any subject, in a country like Haiti. We soon realized that much of what we were presenting to the teachers could not possibly be applied in the Haitian classroom. Many of our techniques did indeed seem “irrelevant and laughable,” yet we had teachers who wanted to teach effectively, and they had students who wanted to learn.

What is a large class?

Josue’s class of 78 students, described above, is not at all unusual in Haiti. A few teachers have reported having classes of up to 200 students. At a recent TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages)

conference workshop, participants were asked how many students would make up a “large class” in their teaching environment. The most common answer was 25. According to a study cited by Ur (1996), the average perception of a large class is around 50 students; however, she suggests that “the exact number does not really matter: what matters is how you, the teacher see the class size in your own specific situation” (302). Baker and Westrup (2000) echo this thought when they say: “A large class can be any number of students, if the teacher feels there are too many students for them all to make progress” (2).

Our experience in Haiti has shown that there is a limit to the size of a class in which student-centered methods can be used without creating chaos. We have observed and presented to classes of up to 80 students where communicative activities were successfully used. As one teacher pointed out, a class with more than 80 students becomes a congregation rather than a class, and the teacher must become a preacher: lecturing, writing notes on the board for students to copy, and hoping that at least some of the students will learn something. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, we are going to define a large class as having between 50 and 80 students, and we will discuss some successful techniques for teachers who teach large classes with limited resources.

Advantages of large classes

Hess (2001) points out that in a large class there are always enough students for interaction, and there is a rich variety of human resources. The teacher is not the only pedagogue, and since a large class is usually heterogeneous, more proficient students can be used to help lower level ones. She also states that the teacher is never bored and that professional development occurs naturally as the teacher tries to find new ways of coping with the large number of students. In addition to these advantages, Ur (1996) explains that because the teacher is less able to attend to every individual, the students must develop strategies for helping themselves and their classmates through peer-teaching and collaboration, thus fostering an atmosphere of cooperation.

Challenges of large classes

Despite these advantages, the challenges involved in teaching large classes can be daunting. The ideas we present for dealing with these challenges have been developed over a period of several years and are the result of both our research of the literature on teaching large classes and our work with Haitian English teachers. These teachers brainstormed with us, conducted action research while trying out these ideas (and many others, not always successful) in their classrooms, and then reported back to us on what worked best.

The major challenges of teaching large classes presented below are grouped into four categories: (1) managing the classroom, (2) using pair and group work to encourage cooperative learning, (3) teaching with limited resources, and (4) motivating students in heterogeneous classes.

1. Managing the classroom

The idea of trying to manage a classroom full of noisy, often hungry, teenagers who may or may not be interested in learning English is daunting at best. Two of the most serious challenges are how to maintain discipline and how to correct large amounts of written work.

Maintaining discipline

Most discipline problems are the result of boredom or alienation. If students are interested in the class, many discipline problems disappear. Students who are paying attention, who are involved in activities that appeal to their interests and needs, do not act up and often help control more rambunctious classmates. Some techniques that can help maintain discipline are described below.

- Set classroom rules. At the beginning of the year, ask students to work in small groups to write down rules they think are reasonable regarding classroom behavior and the consequences for breaking the rules. Collect and write up a summary of the ideas on a large sheet of paper. In the next class, ask students to consider the rules and make any suggestions for changes. Ask students to vote to accept the rules and make a final copy to be hung in the classroom for the year. If the rules

come from the students, and they consider them to be fair, they will be more willing to follow them.

- Plan a variety of activities that appeal to students with different learning styles and interests. This will usually keep the attention of the majority of students. Often the students themselves are effective in maintaining discipline. If many students want to hear what the teacher or their classmates are saying, they will ask their neighbors to be quiet and pay attention, too.
- Establish routines. Starting the class with the class agenda on the board can help students to focus and prepare for the day's class. Set up signals that the students understand—for quiet, for silence, and so on—using hand signals, a bell, or some other method.
- So as not to waste time calling the roll, give the students a sign-in sheet to pass around at the beginning of the class. When it comes back to the front of the room, draw a line under the last name. Any names that are written below the line are those of late-comers. Another strategy is to have students make name cards to display on their desks (folded so that the teacher can see them easily). Collect the name cards at the end of class. At the beginning of each subsequent class, as the students enter the room, have them take their name cards. Those cards that aren't collected belong to students who are absent. This takes care of attendance and helps the teacher learn names, too.
- Create a seating chart (and require students to sit in their assigned seats.) This can help in learning students' names. When the teacher knows and uses students' names, they feel more like individuals and are less likely to act up.
- Give the more advanced students responsibility for helping others, as group leaders, monitors, or teaching assistants.
- Teach students to show their respect for others by listening to what they have to say in group work or when they are reporting to the whole class.

Correcting large amounts of written work

Large classes mean lots of written work to correct, which is often too much for a teacher who has to plan lessons, teach classes, and meet with many students. Two techniques can help alleviate the workload of correcting written work.

- Have students work in groups to produce one piece of writing for each group or to complete grammar exercises together. This encourages communication and also cuts down on the number of papers the teacher must correct. Tell students that students within a group will all receive the same grade so that they will all take an interest in producing something good.
- For all written work, have each student go through the process of self-editing and one or two rounds of peer editing before turning in the paper. This decreases the amount of written assessment that the teacher needs to provide. (Students need to be trained to do peer editing in a collaborative, uncritical way. They may be resistant to the idea of peer editing at first.)

2. Using pair and group work to encourage cooperative learning

In Haiti, where the educational system is traditionally based almost solely on rote learning, and where the classroom is a highly competitive place, convincing students of the necessity of working cooperatively with their peers is not an easy task. The techniques described below suggest some ways to get students to work together and remain interested.

- Spend some time at the beginning of the school year talking about language learning and looking at the learning process itself. If you can convince students of the necessity of using the language to communicate in order to learn it well, they will be more willing to try working in pairs or small groups.
- When you introduce pair and group work for the first time, plan simple activities for very short periods of time. At first, having students ask the person next to them a pre-set question

may be enough. The time spent on an activity and the complexity of activities can gradually be increased as students become used to the routines.

- To limit the time it takes for students to get into groups, have students work with those next to them, or immediately behind them. Seats can be changed weekly or monthly in order to allow students to work with different classmates.
- Set up groups in advance and have them stay together for several class periods, which will avoid the time-consuming daily reorganization of groups. Assign roles to group members so that everyone in the group feels involved in some way. For each activity, roles should rotate among group members, with different students acting as the facilitator, secretary, recorder, time keeper, and so on.
- Establish quiet signals to show students when to start and stop activities. Students must be trained to stop working on a task when the teacher gives a signal by doing something such as raising her/his arms, ringing a bell, or holding up a stop sign. The teacher should never try to out-shout 40 pairs of students who are all speaking at once.
- Make one copy of handouts per group or pair of students. This obliges students to share and to work together, and fewer copies are needed.
- If students are using too much L1 during pair or group work, ask them to set a goal for L2 language use during activities. At the end of the pair or group work, ask students to evaluate if they met their goal or ask group members to evaluate each other. In most cases, some use of the L1 in pair or group work might be tolerated as long as the students are on task and must talk about and produce something in English at the end of the activity.
- Teach students rules for polite communication and make it clear that this is what is expected when students are working together in groups. One member of the group can be put in charge of monitoring correct forms of

address, turn-taking, and so on. Students who do not follow the rules can be expelled from the group and made to stand at the back of the room.

- Give instructions clearly and carefully, and check comprehension before the pair or group work begins. Write instructions on the board so groups can refer to them as they progress. Model the activity with a student.

3. Teaching with limited resources

Many students in developing countries do not have textbooks. The only materials they bring to class are a notebook and, sometimes, a pen or pencil. The teacher usually has a blackboard and chalk supplied by the school, but no access to photocopies, no electricity, and often little access to books. Many teachers do not even have an English dictionary or an English grammar book available. The suggestions that follow can help overcome the scarcity of resources.

- Rather than always writing notes on the board for students to copy, try some more interesting ways of getting the necessary information into their notebooks. For example, dictate the information using a dictogloss, which is a method where the students listen twice to a passage read at normal speed, taking notes during the second reading. They then work with a partner to try to reconstruct the text. When a pair thinks they have it, they write the passage on the board and the class works together to make it as close to the original as possible. The teacher makes final corrections, and the students correct their work (Wajnryb 1990).
- Ask students to bring an item from home to use as a talking or writing point for the class. This can help build community in the classroom and encourage student responsibility and participation in the activity.
- To save time during class, write texts or questions on large sheets of newsprint or brown paper before class rather than writing on the board. In a very large classroom, make two or three copies that can be posted on the side or back wall so everyone can see.

- Use pictures from magazines, or learn to draw simple pictures to illustrate vocabulary or to generate interest in reading, speaking, or writing activities, or as a basis for discussion. (*1000+ Pictures for Teachers To Copy* by Andrew Wright is an excellent resource.)
- Bring realia—actual objects that language learners can see, hear, and touch—into the classroom. A teacher can generate a great deal of interest when he or she pulls surprising things out of a bag!
- Use what the students themselves say as input. For example, to practice changing direct to indirect speech, a student can be asked a question, and another student asked to report what was said either orally or in writing. This can be done in groups after a few examples have been given to the whole class. Or a topic can be given (for example, “Food”) and the teacher can ask a few students to make a statement about it. The rest of the class then writes down the sentences in a student-generated dictation.
- To ensure that students speak up loudly in class when answering questions or making comments, the teacher should move away from the student who is speaking, rather than coming closer to hear him or her better. In this way, everyone should be able to hear and remain involved.
- Adapt the material according to the language level, age, and needs of students. In multi-age, multi-level classes, plan a variety of activities to appeal to as many students as possible.
- Develop sequential activities with several steps so that higher level students complete more while lower level students work at their own pace. When preparing worksheets, add some optional sections for more advanced students.
- Use higher level students as assistant teachers or monitors who can help and support the lower level students.
- Prepare activities that allow students to show their different skills and interests.
- As much as possible, be available to students before and after class to establish personal relationships, so that they feel that they are individuals in the eyes of the teacher, not merely part of the herd.
- Make students aware of the goals of each learning activity. If they understand why they are doing it, they will participate more willingly.
- Make all activities success-oriented. Students will participate willingly in tasks that seem achievable. When they have confidence in their success, they will be motivated to try.

4. Motivating students in heterogeneous classes

In a large class, it is easy for students to feel alienated. If they feel that the teacher does not know them or care whether or not they learn, they will usually put very little effort into participating actively in the learning process. Some ways to motivate students of different language levels and ages in a large class are described below.

- At the beginning of the year, include some information about the importance of English as a world language, either as a listening or a reading activity. Encourage students to brainstorm reasons for learning English and the advantages of being able to speak another language.
- To keep more advanced students challenged, prepare an activity resource notebook to keep in the classroom. Students who finish activities quickly can work on the supplementary activities while waiting for the rest of the class to finish.

Below are descriptions of two large classes we observed in Haiti, where teachers were able to lead their students towards specific learning outcomes while integrating some student-centered activities and maintaining discipline and interest.

Fanfan’s class

Fanfan walks into the classroom, a tall unassuming man of about 35 with a bright welcoming smile but a presence that says he is in control. The students fill all of the approximately 100 desks of the classroom, which is about the size of a U.S. living room. They

go immediately to their assigned numbered chairs, take their seats and turn toward the cracked, peeling chalkboard. There isn't any of the fooling around that you would expect among a group of American high school students. These students know how lucky they are to be at a public lycee (high school) in Cap Haitian, Haiti. Only a small percentage of teenagers attend any high school, and these students are among the luckiest since they have gotten one of the prize places in the public schools, which means no tuition payment. These students are all in their next to last year and they will soon face the grueling final exams that will determine if they pass secondary school. (Only a few do.)

Fanfan gets the students ready to study with a short song in English that he has taught before and that the students love to sing. He conducts the class, first all together, then one half of the room, then the other half, and then all together again. With the class warmed up and ready for English, he writes on the board five sentences using the simple past, all with mistakes. The students' task is to find the mistakes in these sentences. There is a comfortable buzz in the room as students work alone and together. Then Fanfan, calling on students from throughout the room by name, has the students tell each other the correct form. Students then copy down the sentences and Fanfan tells a story using the simple past, followed by comprehension questions and then a written assignment. The 50 minutes pass quickly.

Emmanuel's class

Emmanuel has squished himself into one of the benches already filled with five seventh grade students. He and the class of 50 students are watching a group of six students in the front of the class respond to commands from another student. They have just finished learning body parts and basic commands. Emmanuel first worked with a group in a fast paced drill of "Touch your head, arm, nose, etc.," and now he has turned over to a student the task of giving commands. Several groups and leaders get a chance to perform, and Emmanuel selects them as they quietly raise their hands. Some call out "Me, teacher," a great improvement, Emmanuel notes, from the previous cries of

"Moi." Emmanuel has encouraged them to use English to communicate, and not just for grammar exercises.

The students observing must listen carefully to help disqualify any student who touches the wrong body part based on the command. The student who wins each round gets a small star or heart sticker from Emmanuel's collection. Unlike Fanfan's classroom, where there is no possible way for the teacher to move around the room, Emmanuel can squeeze down the aisles and monitor students' work as they take out their copybooks to work on a group story they began the day before. Students turn to face the bench behind them to make groups of four. Emmanuel calls students by name, remembering the stories they have worked on before and encouraging the shyer ones to participate.

One wall of Emmanuel's classroom is partially open to the courtyard of the school so noise from other classes comes in. In the middle of class, the electricity goes off, but the students just continue their work in the semi-darkness of the concrete walled room. As the bell rings for the class to end, the students cluster around Emmanuel to say goodbye in English as he leaves to go on to another class and another English lesson.

Conclusion

It is obvious that, given a choice, all teachers would choose to teach in a classroom that is bright and well equipped and is limited to 20 students who all have books and materials to support their learning. That is not the situation in many classrooms in the world today, and it will probably not be the situation for years to come. In the meantime, as we have tried to show, there are ways to make learning better, more fun, and easier for both the teacher and the students. We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails!

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ANSWERS TO *THE LIGHTER SIDE* FAIR FINDS

1. pig
2. cow
3. duck
4. goat
5. cake
6. corn
7. horse
8. potato
9. lettuce
10. apricot
11. pumpkin
12. squash
13. apple pie
14. cherry pie
15. cotton candy
16. watermelon