

## Teaching Strategies for Large English Classes

Jianling Peng\* *Kunming University of Science & Technology*

**Abstract:** In China, College English classes are usually large. Nowadays, most College English language teachers are confronting the challenge of teaching larger classes than before. This paper analyzes some problems caused by large English classes and suggests some teaching strategies to deal with such problems.

**Key words:** large English classes    problems    teaching strategies

### 1. Introduction

In recent ten years, because of the phenomenal expansion in students' enrollment in Chinese Universities, many teachers find that the main constraint on creating teaching is the size of their classes. Some teachers regularly teach classes of 40 or 50 students, or at most 80. However, nowadays some teachers work with 100 or more students at a time. The teachers become the key factor in reaching each and every student in a class. Hence, it is important for teachers to be aware of the problems resulting from large classes and to decide on techniques and strategies that could be used to solve such problems.

The main problems in large classes are about language learning ability, language knowledge, cultural background, learning style, attitude towards language, mother tongue, intelligence, world knowledge, learning experience, knowledge of other languages, age, gender, personality, confidence, motivation, interests, and/or educational level. However, these variations may occur in different degrees in different classes. Thus, if the teacher wants to ensure that all students perform to their maximum potential, the teacher must identify these problems and deal with them accordingly.

### 2. Some Problems in Large English Classes

#### 2.1 Different levels and different background

The first problem that happens too often in large College English classes is the students' level. As far as English College Entrance Examination is concerned, the scores, in our university (KMUST), generally speaking, range from 45 to more than 120 for each class. The students' levels are so different. Thus, in classes, some students can follow their teacher; others may find it difficult to understand what the teacher says. Some students may find the learning task very easy to deal with, but others can't even make clear the instructions of the task. As teachers, the aim is to reach all the students. Thus problems arise. Besides, learning also depends on what students have brought with them into class. Since each student comes from a different family, a different environment, the "multi-cultural" population of the classroom may be an obstacle for the teachers in reaching the students. Moreover, although it is quite difficult for the teachers to know about each student and to follow what each one does during the lessons, it is important for teachers to monitor each and every student and to meet their needs in a

---

\* Jianling Peng, female, lecturer of the Faculty of College English, Kunming University of Science & Technology; Research fields: English teaching methodology, cross-cultural communication; Address: Faculty of College English, Kunming University of Science & Technology, Kunming, Yunnan Province, P.R.China; Postcode: 650093.

variety of ways to achieve effective teaching. However, it is well known that every student has a different way of learning, and he/she learns and progresses at different speeds, which eventually results in ineffective learning.

### **2.2 The same textbooks**

Since most language textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous classroom environment, teachers always have to deal with the problem that students react to the textbook differently due to their individual differences. First of all, some students may find the textbook boring and very hard, whereas some find it interesting or very easy. In addition, as language teaching materials are currently based on content-based or theme-based syllabi, some students may find the topics dull, strange, or meaningless; whereas others find it enjoyable, familiar or interesting.

### **2.3 Different interests**

Interest problems may arise due to the differences among students in terms of their attitude towards the subject matter or the teacher; their knowledge of language; and their personality. For instance, some students don't like English at all, and some students may find lessons boring, if they find the topics have no familiarity with their own life or their interests. So they might fall asleep in class. Furthermore, some of the students may not be interested in the lesson, unless they do get the chance to express their own ideas since sometimes the teacher talks too much during the lesson or the other students take many turns. Hence, teachers should be aware of the different interests of the students to organize and to arrange activities accordingly.

### **2.4 Different participation**

What happens too often in large classes in College English teaching is that the activities are dominated by a small minority of top students. Since the classroom is the first and only environment for many foreign language learners, they know they should take this chance as much as possible. So they would like to express everything they think or feel by using the new language. However, the poor students might find it difficult to speak in target language for many reasons ranging from interest to confidence, from age to knowledge. As a result, some students may take many turns, while others do not speak for the entire lesson.

### **2.5 Superiority complex and inferiority complex**

Very often, if the quicker students finish the tasks given ahead of the other students, they may have more or less superiority complex while waiting for the others to finish. The poor students, on the other hand, cannot finish the tasks as quickly as the good ones and may lose their confidence and show somewhat inferiority complex. For a variety of reasons related to that. Consequently, this may result in some students' psychological problems.

## **3. Teaching Strategies to Such Problems**

### **3.1 Multimedia technology**

In order to solve the problems of different levels, teaching should appeal to all senses, all learning styles and all intelligences. Moreover, it should be based on a meaningful context for all learners. To exemplify, visuals are always useful for all age and proficiency levels, so multimedia technology, especially Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), can be applied in foreign language teaching. Because CALL combines sounds, pictures and texts together, which offers a vivid and direct study environment. It can help students to get rid of boredom, attract their attention and arouse their interest to the teaching point. It also makes students actively analyze and understand what they have learnt. Hence, teachers can apply CALL to make study interesting, changing the situation of having to learn into that of willing to learn, since even the most passive learners are

often interested in visual ways.

### **3.2 Extra plan**

It is advisable to have extra plan for the early finishers in case they finish the tasks earlier. This plan might be an extra exercise, a handout or a reading passage. Teachers are the ones who should/could know which extra plan works better after which activity in their class.

### **3.3 Open-ended tasks**

Open-ended tasks or questions (such as writing a letter, an ending of a story/book/film, or a response to a picture) have a variety of possible answers instead of a single answer. These tasks allow each learner to perform at his/her own level. Some of the students may be good at understanding but might be weak in expressing themselves orally or in written work; thus, open-ended tasks give them the chance to express themselves without trying to find the one and the only correct answer.

### **3.4 Personalizing the tasks**

It is important for teachers to give students the opportunity to express their ideas, feelings and experiences, though they may lack confidence or enough language knowledge. By personalizing the tasks, all students can participate voluntarily. Knowing students' personalities helps the teacher to prepare and adapt materials easily in order to make them interesting or relevant to students, which adds variety to the classroom environment and establishes a positive atmosphere.

### **3.5 Games, competitions and role-play**

Students love games, competitions and role-play. So these are ways of ensuring their interest in the lesson. Regardless of the differences among the students in terms of language level and learning styles, they are motivated to use the target language while they are playing a game or participating in a competition or acting in a role-play.

### **3.6 Team work**

Divide the large class into smaller "teams" within class. Team work is useful not only for the teacher to observe students but also for the students to cooperate and to learn from each other. When a good student works with poor students, the student can be a source of language/knowledge in the team. The teacher, on the other hand, may form teams of weaker and stronger students separated from each other, and she can give different tasks to these groups. So the better and quicker students work with more complicated tasks, whereas the poor students deal with a simpler task or work with the teacher as a team member.

### **3.7 Portfolios**

Portfolios are efficient way of dealing with large classes. Teachers may ask students to keep all the things they have done during the term including the extra work depending on their ability or needs. As a result, not only the teacher but also each student has a record of his/her progress during the term. This record also shows the needs of the student for further progress.

### **3.8 Class diary**

Design a special notebook for each class (the author names it "Class diary" in her class). Students are supposed to keep this diary every day one by one. This class diary may help students to understand and communicate with each other. Moreover, it may help them reduce their anxiety for College English learning and solve some psychological problems caused by their superiority complex and inferiority complex.

## **4. Applying the Teaching Strategies**

To begin with a lecture in a new semester, when the author faced the freshmen for the first time, she asked each student to write a letter to someone who knew nothing about him/her. This person could be a favorite pop star, a successful soccer player or a new e-pal. The aim of the letters was to introduce himself/herself to that person. Thus, there would be more than one correct answer since all the students could freely talk about themselves and express their ideas, thoughts and feelings. In addition, this was an opportunity for the author, a teacher, to learn about the interests of the students.

At the beginning of the activity, the author explained clearly what they would do and gave them examples. Then, she informed them that they could use their monolingual and/or bilingual dictionaries in order to find the words they wanted to use in their sentences. The author did not put any word limit on the letters, but she told them that the letter should give information on many aspects of themselves from physical appearance to education, from hobbies to dislikes.

When the students started writing, the author tried to monitor all and to help them when it was necessary. While some students started writing right after the author finished the instructions, some others tried to find something to start with. Hence, the author tried to give some ideas by asking “What is your favorite sport?”, “Where do you like to go in your holiday?” or “Do you have a pet?”, “Which subject do you like most?” etc..

Since some students were fast in writing and good at expressing their ideas easily, they finished earlier than most of the other students. Therefore, the author made the early finishers exchange their letters with each other to give suggestions about the content and to correct the mistakes, which gave time to the slow students to finish their letters. When all of the students finished writing their letters, the author divided the whole class into 8 teams. Each team includes 10 students. The author collected all the letters in one team, mixed them up and then chose one of them. Then she asked one student to read the letter without saying who had written it, and the author asked other students in this team to guess the writer of the letter, as each letter gave information about its writer. The student who guessed it correctly came out and chose another letter to read to his team members. At the end of the lesson, when all the letters were finished and all the students had listened to the letters and guessed the writers.

Moreover, the author read all the letters after the lesson on her own for correction and wrote short replies (to give feedback). On another day the author gave the letters back to the students and asked them to revise their letters according to the comments and rewrite it. The students put both the in-class version and rewritten version into their portfolios.

The author believed this activity was effective for all students, as they really liked to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings through a letter as if they had written it to someone, who knew nothing about them. They used the language at their own level, wrote about themselves to make the task personalized, and they were all successful at the end as they finished their letters. Being quicker is not a disadvantage for the early finishers; they enjoyed giving feedback to a piece of work, which is a useful extra plan to improve language.

In the course of College English Intensive Reading, we are supposed to cover 8 units each semester. There are 2 texts (text A, text B) in each unit. One of the author’s classes was a 79-student class, where the students varied in terms of their background, language knowledge, motivation and interest in English. Some students were good at reading and understanding, but some were not. If we used the traditional teaching method, students might feel very dull. So, in 2005, we applied CALL in College English teaching. As for each unit, we made courseware by ourselves to combine sound, pictures and texts together, which really helped the students understand the material and express what they learnt and they thought. Students were interested in such vivid study environment, especially the cultural background knowledge of each unit. Because in pre-teaching of each unit, an English song,

a story of a famous person or a section of a movie which was relevant to this unit could be introduced. In post-teaching process, four or six pictures which were designed according to the content of the text were showed on the screen. Students were supposed to do team work to summarize the text with the help of the pictures. More students than before could do it well and even gave their own comments. Some poor learners said they learned more to express their ideas from the good ones in their team.

What's more, in each of the classes, the author bought a thick notebook for them, and asked them to write "class diary" from the first semester. The author wrote the first piece and told them that keeping diary was helpful, because "clear writing leads to clear thinking; clear thinking is the basis of clear writing". In fact, this special diary is proved very useful. It offers the students an opportunity to sit peacefully and reflecting on what they have done; what they saw; what they feel and what they are about to do. Gradually, it becomes a record of their colorful college life. The most important is that the students make it as a means of communication with their classmates, which help them solve some psychological problems both in their English learning and in their lives. It is also a means to improve their language ability. One of my students wrote in her class diary that she was so thankful that the teacher offered her such opportunity to write such special diary. She was a timid girl and very poor in English before entering this university. After communicating with other students, she saw "the sunshine" in her English learning under their help.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the author just emphasizes some teaching methods, highlights some easy-neglected teaching elements and gives some examples here. You can see from the introduction of the problems which are really existed in large English classes. From the author's point of view, these teaching strategies can not only help teachers to deal with problems effectively in large English classes, but also arouse the learners' interests in College English learning. The advice is that if you stick to these methods, they will definitely work, because these teaching methods have been proven effective in the practical teaching. However, even the best technique will not work without a responsible teacher. The teacher's responsibility plays a very important role in large classes. Accordingly, the above teaching strategies may produce quite different effects if employed by different teachers.

### References:

1. Cooper, James M.. *Classroom Teaching Skills*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1999.
2. Lawrie, Anne. *Try It: It Works!* England: SATEEL, Po Box 23374, Edinburgh. 2000.
3. Scrivener, Jim. *Learning Teaching*. England: Macmillan. 2005.
4. Silberman, M. *Active Learning*. Boston. Allyn & Bacon. 1996.
5. Ur, Penny. & Wright, Andrew. *Five-minute Activities*. United Kingdom. Cambridge University Press. 2003.
6. Xue, Jing. *Teaching Reading Comprehension in Large Classes*. Sino-US English Teaching. USA-China Entrepreneur Associates, Inc. USA. 2005(9).

(Edited by Linxia Peng, Ashley, Nizee and Iris)