

Teaching Communicatively in a (Very) Large Class

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Abstract

Although it is very difficult to teach a large class using Communicative Language Teaching methods, it is not unusual to find classes of 100 students and more in some Asian teaching contexts. This is never an ideal situation, but there are ways for the teacher to teach a fun, interesting and useful class. This article introduces a method of classroom management that was successful in a class of over 100 students. The system is based on awarding points for group and individual work. Students found this to be motivating and participation improved.

Introduction

There are many reasons that a small class is optimal, if not essential, for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Common CLT activities such as role plays or information gaps are very difficult to do if the teacher is not available to help and supervise students. It is difficult for learners to take the more independent role that CLT calls for. Perhaps most importantly, it becomes more of a challenge to create a learner-centered classroom, since the teacher cannot get to know the students well enough to judge their interests or proficiency levels.

In many teaching contexts, however, teachers have no control over how large their English classes are, and large classes tend to be the norm. This is thought to be a major obstacle to effective English teaching (see, for example, Taguchi 2002, Takahashi 2004, Sammin 1998). It should be mentioned that the first two of these concern English teaching in Japan, in which classes consist of about 40 people, not one or two hundred as is common in some countries.

A small class size is, for many reasons, probably the best situation for a teacher. This does not mean, however, that the teacher with many students must give up teaching communicatively. Having spent several years teaching in an institution where my classes ranged from 80 – 120 students, I was able to develop a method that helped me to maintain a fairly personal relationship with my students, encouraged them to be more autonomous, and developed their communicative language skills.

Problems with the large class

The biggest problems with having a large class are related to class participation. First, it is very difficult to encourage students to raise their hands and speak in class. Students are understandably nervous about speaking in front of a large group. In a class of over one hundred students, learning names can be impossible. This means that it is difficult to give class participation grades, so students have little motivation to participate. Not knowing students' names also means that discipline may be a problem.

Students may have a harder time concentrating in a large class, which provides more visual stimulation. They may have problems with being able to see and hear the teacher. Students also

usually feel less constraint about extraneous talking or speaking their native language in class, which poses more challenges for the teacher.

Perhaps the biggest problem is lack of personal contact between the teacher and students. Students may find it harder to get individual help. The teacher may be exhausted by keeping an eye on all the students and projecting her voice, and may lose motivation herself.

A system of classroom management for very large classes

The system that I developed consists of several parts. Although I had a great deal more freedom than teachers in many situations (i.e. I could decide my own text and assessment system), the approach or its component parts can be adapted by teachers in other contexts.

Permanent groups

At the beginning of the semester students made their own groups of no more than six. Although keeping the groups relatively small means many groups in a class, it is important to keep the group at a size where everyone feels that they can and should contribute. Students were told in the first week that they would have to make a group in the third week, which gave them time to try working with different people and make friends. Then in the third week they decide on their group and turn in a list of group members. They understand that this will be their group for the rest of the semester, unless they have serious interpersonal problems.

Students will have varying levels in the group, but this can be seen as a good thing. If the class is conducted in English the students can help each other, which is good for both the good students and the slower ones. The teacher needs to keep an eye out for students who do not pull their weight. When I saw a student sleeping or obviously not engaged, I would tell her that she was now responsible for the group's final answer.

Points

I used a point system to determine my students' grades. Their grade was made up of points earned in the group, individual participation points, and individual assignments (papers and a vocabulary test). Each group got a number, and there was a page in the grade book with each group number listed and the date of each class. When a group got a point, I would record it on the appropriate square. For each day, there was a space for absences as well. Periodically I would total the points for each group, and subtract for each student points obtained when he or she was absent.

Class usually began with a question for students to answer in their groups. This question was usually a discussion or opinion question designed to build schema about the topic of the lesson. Students were allowed to talk about this question in Japanese, but the answer had to be in English. While they were thinking of the answer to this question, I would go to each group, ask if everything was clear, and ask them if anyone in their group was absent. This saved me from having to take attendance, an extremely time-consuming task in a large class.

In order to give students as much autonomy as possible, I made them responsible for their own time management. They were given a time after which I would no longer accept answers, and it was their responsibility to formulate an answer and ask me to listen to it. When they determined that they were ready, I went to their group and listened to their answer, and gave them a point if it was satisfactory. If it was not, they could try again before the time limit. The students were not allowed to choose a “spokesperson,” so theoretically they all had to be ready to answer.

This point system accomplishes a number of things. Since they cannot choose a speaker, all the students in the class were prepared to give an answer, but they did not have the stress of answering in front of a huge group of their peers. In addition, going to each group and speaking with the members gave me and the students the feeling that there was contact between me and them and that I was aware of them as individuals. I was sometimes able to ask a follow-up question to extend the dialogue. The point and the accompanying praise was an immediate reward for them, and they worked very hard for the points and were pleased when they earned them. I eventually started giving two points for an especially good answer and this motivated them more.

Individual points

Because each group finishes at a different rate, I eventually realized that I had to have something for the quicker groups to do. This led to a system of individual points, which were added to group points and assignments for their final grade. This also gives quick students who are in a slow group the chance to get more points, and students who are absent have the chance to make up some of their work. In addition, the instructor can also give a student who is having trouble with a certain aspect of English a chance to work on it. I prepared several types of activities and put them in a box. These activities were worth one, two or three points depending on whether they were easy, intermediate, or challenging. The activities were labelled so that students knew how many points they would be able to obtain. The easy activities were usually short grammar exercises about things we had already covered. Intermediate activities generally used graded readers and asked students to answer questions. These were the most popular. Challenging activities were more difficult readings and writing prompts.

When making these activities, it is necessary to think about ease of grading. Paragraphs were of course the hardest to grade, but they were not popular so I had to do it very rarely. Everything else was multiple choice or short answer so I could look very quickly and determine whether the student had earned the points. I would grade these in class while students were working on other things. I didn't allow the students to take these home, so their time working on them was limited—this prevented anyone from turning in an overwhelming number of activities (or skipping all the classes and making up the points with the individual activities, which was a theoretical possibility). About twice in the semester, I gave them a half an hour or so to work individually and get more points.

Fluency activities

One drawback of group work is of course that it is very hard to keep them from speaking their L1. I found that encouraging students to speak English, or even doing scaffolding exercises to encourage English discussion, did not result in students' attempting to speak English in their groups. I decided to acknowledge that they probably would not be able to use English most of the time, and to start fresh with a new pattern.

For the fluency activities, students were given some time to prepare to speak on a certain topic. Preparation may consist of drawing pictures to aid memory or looking up keywords in a dictionary. I allow them to look up only a certain number of keywords and write them down, in order to prevent them from writing sentences and reading them to the other student. Preparation can also be silent planning. No talking in either language is allowed during the preparation period. After the preparation period, students are told to speak for one minute. I began with this extremely short period because my students were intimidated by the idea of speaking English for any length of time, but more advanced classes can certainly start with a longer time period. I told the students that all the groups started with one point. If I did not hear them speaking Japanese for the minute, they got to keep the point. If they were speaking Japanese when I passed by, I would take the point back. This absolved me of having to listen to all the students at once, which is one of the drawbacks of fluency activities in the large class. If they exhausted the subject, they could either sit silently or talk about something else in English. I increased the time by small increments until they could speak for ten minutes by the end of the semester—longer than most of them had ever spoken English before.

Intensive speaking day

Of course, there are some activities that are difficult or impossible to do in a large class. In order to be able to do these at least occasionally in my class, I instituted an Intensive Speaking Day (ISD) twice a semester. For the ISD, I divided the class into three sections of about 30 – 40 students each, then had each section come for thirty minutes (of a total 90-minute class). It is important to put people who are in the same class group into different sections, so that they get the chance to speak to different people.

During the thirty-minute mini-class, the teacher can do the communicative activities that cannot be done in the larger class. Students are usually motivated by the break in routine and by the fact that they only have to be in class for thirty minutes. They were quite excited by simple information gap exercises or drawing questions out of a hat that they had to answer aloud. Although the activities were not complicated, they were designed so that students were speaking and listening to English for all of the thirty minutes. This, I felt, made the class as good, or better than, the regular ninety minute class in which they were not spending so much time speaking English.

Attitudinal changes

In my years teaching this class, I also was able to make several changes to my attitude that allowed me to maintain a positive attitude and not punish my students for something that was as difficult for them as for me.

I have always used personal essays as a way of judging their written communicative competence, but over the years these also become an important reference for me to be able to think of students as individuals. I made a note for each student, listing not only my assessment of his writing but also the unusual hobbies or experiences that he might have. This provided me with a good mnemonic for learning at least some names, and I was able to see the students more as individuals.

In the course of developing these activities, I had many failures. The only way to deal with them was to be open with the students in telling them that I was trying to find ways to deal with our large class size so that the class would be interesting and effective for them. I sometimes asked them for feedback, or admitted that I didn't think things had gone well. This helped us to develop the attitude that we were all on one team, fighting together against bad circumstances.

Conclusion

Although it does not make a very large class as pedagogically effective, or as easy to teach, as a small class, it is hoped that this system can at least make teachers feel that class is interesting and has some use for students. I found that the system increased student autonomy by giving them control over how they used their group time and how they obtained individual points. It also increased the time spent speaking face to face with individual students, so that they felt I was concerned about them and their progress. It increased student motivation as well, both because they were getting the immediate reward of points and because the classroom activities were more interesting to them than the teacher-fronted class I had been doing before.

It took eight years of trial and error to develop this system. One of the things that was most helpful to me was to read articles and see conference presentations about classroom management, and then try to think of a way to adapt them to my class. I hope that other teachers can be similarly inspired to think of things that work in their own contexts.

Biographical Statement

Anne McLellan Howard has an M.A. in Applied Linguistics from Monterey Institute of International Studies, and is currently working on a doctorate in applied linguistics from Macquarie University. She teaches English, linguistics, and English education at Miyazaki International College.

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