

## Essential Strategies for Teaching Large Classes

by Brock Brady

When does a class become large? It depends on the class. Writing classes become “large” quickly because of the need to give written feedback. A speaking/listening class can seem large, and the same size reading class can seem “small.” Young students make a class “larger” than older students because of shorter attention spans. If your classroom is very small and desks don’t move, a few students can become a large class. Diverse classes become “large” sooner than homogeneous classes. However, in a survey done in 2008 covering more than 30 countries, regardless of how many students the respondents typically taught (anywhere from 20 to 150), most felt that a class became large with about 30 students (Brady, 2011).

Teachers don’t like large classes. But if you have a large class, you have a large class. You can struggle and complain (of course [grin] some people find complaining has a certain therapeutic value), or you can make the commitment to make your large class as effective as a “normal” class. When a class is large, you have to overbuild your classroom management structures. You can do almost everything in large classes that you do in smaller ones; you can make them as student centered as smaller classes, but you have to do it more explicitly and routinely.

### Common Problems in Large Classes

- A. Classroom Management.** When you talk to one group, another group is goofing off. Learning everyone’s name is hard. It’s difficult to get students to pay attention. Cheating can become a problem when you can’t be everywhere at once. In a large class, there’s more chance that making one student happy will make another student unhappy. Everything takes more time. Space and a sufficient amount of materials become classroom management problems: Teachers can’t monitor groups if there’s no space to walk around the room, and if you have 100 students, can you regularly make 100 copies?
- B. Assessment.** Assignments and giving written feedback take much more time. Grading can be more complicated. With oral activities, it may be hard to know who is succeeding in a large class because it may be hard to know what mistakes are being made by whom.
- C. Differentiation.** How do you keep good students occupied if they finish quickly? What about the struggling student who can’t keep up? You can’t spend extra time with that student when you have so many others to pay attention to. How can the student be allowed to participate according to her or his abilities?

### Five Essential Strategies for Successful Large Classes

- 1. Use structured groups consistently.** To learn languages, practice is essential. In large classes, teachers have to create ways for students to practice without continuous, direct teacher monitoring—structured groups are the only way to accomplish this. Using groups allows students to be self-managing and allows more time for practice. Groups can be created in almost any class. Even when desks can’t be moved, having the front students turn back and the back students turn forward can make pairs and quads. Grouping strategies also

occasionally allow better student support for struggling students when the teacher sees the need but lacks the time, because she can pair a stronger student with a struggling student as a provisional “stand in” for her own guidance.

2. **Routines rock.** To do in large classes what you do in small classes, structures must be much more explicit and consistent. If the routines are the same every day, students need less specific guidance and can operate more independently. Classroom management problems can be solved with clear, consistent rules. Some common large class routines include having predictable sequences for every class; emphasizing the goal and steps of instruction at the beginning of every class; establishing patterns for how students move in and out of groups; and having fixed activities appropriate and engaging for each student if a group should finish its task early.

**NOTE:** Teachers may need to use local language in class more (at least initially) to make sure students are clear on all rules and instructions of classroom routines.

3. **Increase student responsibility.** This leads to better learning and more class discipline. Because teachers do not have enough eyes to monitor every group of students, it is important to create routines in which students monitor themselves and students monitor (and support) each other. Assigning regular team leaders who liaise with the teacher, and assigning other team members ongoing roles in carrying out learning activities helps make everyone more accountable.
4. **Emphasize positive behaviors to improve classroom management.** By making abundantly clear to students what good behaviors are, by praising students who practice good behaviors, and by asking students to describe or model good behaviors when questionable behavior occurs, you create a class focused on good behavior. In large classes, building habits of good behavior creates a culture that tends to reduce behavioral disruptions. Too often, students don’t know what good behavior is, or how important it is. Focusing on good behavior also reduces the resentment that comes when the teacher must address problem behavior.
5. **Peer and self-assessment are musts in large classes.** Peer and self-assessment do not ask students to grade each other. They provide checklists to *reinforce* and *implement* practices that the teacher wants students to adopt. This way, when assignments arrive on the teacher’s desk, they have at least been reviewed twice and may have fewer errors to correct.

When approached in this mindful manner, large classes have the potential to become teachers’ most memorable classes. In requiring *transparency* (we have to be clear on rules, expectations and means of assessment), in showing *respect* (students will not take on added responsibility if they are not going to be appreciated for their effort), and in operating in *trust*, (students have to become the teacher’s eyes and ears and the students need to know that the teacher won’t suddenly change the rules), we create a state of balance between autonomy and collaboration where learning and community can flourish.

## References

Brady, B. (2011). Managing assessment in large EFL classes, in C. Coombe et al., *Issues in Assessment* (pp. 291-299). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

## Resources

Fauzia, S., & Smith, R. (2010). *Teaching English in large classes (TELC)* project/network. Retrieved from <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/projects/telc/>  
A useful collection of quite recent research on large EFL classes.

Hess, N. (2001). *Teaching large multilevel classes*. New York: Cambridge.  
A standard reference on large EFL classes, focusing primarily on large class activities.

Popham, W. J. (2008). *Transformative assessment*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.  
An excellent overview of assessment techniques and strategies in U.S. K–12 classes.

Teaching and Educational Development Institute (2002-2006). *Teaching large classes*. Brisbane, AU: University of Queensland. Retrieved from <http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/LargeClasses>.  
An extensive, well-managed, and up-to-date site for research and advice on teaching large classes.

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