

Making Large Classes Work

by [Anne McLellan Howard](#)

As I walked to the first class I would teach in my first job after finishing my master's, I felt confident in the fun activities I had prepared. That all changed the minute I opened the door to find 120 students in a classroom that was intended to seat 80. My lesson plan included a lot of groupwork and moving around the room, as well as individual self-introductions—which we would now have no time for. Literally, nothing that I had planned would work in a class that size, and I had no idea what to do.

This was 20 years ago, and although I eventually found a way to handle my super-large class, it took a great deal of trial and error. At that time, it was quite difficult to find any resources for choosing or adapting activities, or dealing with the classroom management challenges. It was frustrating to attend conferences and not find any new activities or lesson plans that would fit my class. Even basic exercises can seem impossible in a large class. For example, one of the most widely used tasks in a foreign language class is an information gap done in groups. In a class of 120, this immediately brings up challenges. How can the teacher move the students into groups without it taking too long or throwing the class into chaos? How can he or she ensure that students are speaking in English when some of them are out of earshot and the whole class will be noisy? How can the teacher find and help students who are having problems? How can the teacher assess the activity, when he or she probably was not able to learn all students' names?

A smaller class will almost always be optimal, for many reasons. The teacher of a small class probably knows his or her students better, which makes classroom management a much easier chore. Even more significantly, this avoids the impersonal feeling that a very large class can have when students do not have the chance to talk to the teacher or to more than a few of their classmates. However, classes of even more than 100 students are a fact of life in many parts of the world. Although the circumstances of large classes are so different that there can be no single solution to the problems, here are some general ideas that can help you to get the most out of your class.

Make Groupwork Work for You

Groups are an obvious step if you want to teach communicatively in a large class, but you have to think about how to use them effectively. Putting students into groups can take a great deal of time, particularly with younger learners, and in some contexts you may be dealing with auditorium seating and immovable desks as well.

In many cases, permanent or long-term groups are the best way to handle not only language activities but also classroom management. In permanent groups, students can take roll and collect homework for you, and the group can make students feel less lost in a big class. My strategy was to begin class by giving a task that students could work on independently in their groups. While they were doing this, I would go to each group to talk to them for a minute, to check who was absent and make sure everyone understood the task. This also gave me the chance to check with students individually to make sure they were not having problems.

Remember: You and the Students Are on the Same Side

We generally do not like to complain about the circumstances of the class to the students, as this can seem unprofessional. However, by being honest with students about the difficulties, you can make a classroom atmosphere in which you and the students are uniting against a challenging circumstance. It may be easier to enlist the students' help if you show them the ways in which you are trying to mitigate the drawbacks of the class. Let them know when you are trying a new technique, get their opinions, and acknowledge your failures if you have any. This makes your students your allies instead of an obstacle to teaching.

Think Outside the Box

When I walked into my huge class for the first time, one of the more discouraging things was that it was immediately apparent that English was not a priority at that school. As time passed, I came to see the benefit of this: I could do whatever I wanted, as long as students got a grade at the end of the semester. This led me to a few classes that were very fun but might not have been allowed in another context.

Self-Access Centers: I brought in boxes of textbooks, CD players, games, and graded readers and turned my classroom into a self-access center for a day. Each activity had a point value according to how difficult I thought it was, and each student had to get a certain number of points per semester.

Divide and Conquer: A couple of times a semester I had what I called a Special Speaking Class. For this, I divided the class into thirds and had each third come for only 30 minutes of our 90-minute class. During those 30 minutes, we did a lot of speaking activities and games that are usually only possible for a smaller class.

Be Flexible: I also had to rethink a lot of ideas I had about teaching. I found that requiring English to be spoken all of the time was fighting a losing battle, and instead set aside small blocks of "English only" time. Each group started with five points, and they would lose one point each time I heard a Japanese word. (I acknowledged that this was partly a matter of luck, as I could not be near enough to hear all students at the same time).

Not every teacher will be able to do such things, but large classes are quite different from what we are used to, and we should think of exceptional measures to address them.

There Is Help!

Unlike when I started 20 years ago, there is now more recognition of the challenges and ubiquity of large-class learning situations. One of the most helpful resources is the [Teaching English in Large Classes Research and Teacher Development Network](#), which maintains a webpage with a large number of teaching and research resources. The group also has a [Facebook page](#), so that teachers of large classes can connect with colleagues in similar situations all over the world.

Facing a large class can leave a teacher feeling helpless. Even if unsuccessful, trying different strategies in the classroom might lead to a sense of more control and greater flexibility. It can also give students the idea that you are proactively trying to challenge the circumstances you share. This alone may be able to change the classroom into a happier, more productive space.

***Anne McLellan Howard** teaches linguistics and English teaching methodologies at Miyazaki International College in Miyazaki, Japan. She has a PhD from Macquarie University. She has presented workshops on handling large classes in Japan, Bangladesh, and the United States. Her other research interests include evaluation in academic spoken discourse and pragmatics.*