

Teaching in big classes

For every language teacher big class means a different number of learners: for one it is ten, for another thirty learners, but there are teachers who will laugh at these numbers as they have taught in classes of over one hundred language learners.

To find the activities which give the learners a chance to be creative, which allow for the improvising, self-correction and unpredictability, this as such can be difficult to manage. But teachers in big classes can be discouraged to use more communicative activities because of these specific problems:

1. discipline problems
2. physical constraints
3. not using English when working in pairs / groups
4. wide ability range (Nolasco and Arthur, 1988)

Ad 1.

Regarding the discipline, an approach RAP (Rapport, Attitude, Presence) is suggested by Prodromou and Clandfield (2006).

Firstly, immediate rapport is recommended to establish between the teacher and the learners, and between the learners.

Secondly, it is the teacher's moral duty to treat the learners with respect and thus contribute to building their confidence and self-esteem. Linking the classroom world with the world outside, e.g. by adapting textbook materials, is a vital condition if the learners are to become more positive about their learning.

Thirdly, presence, a typical quality of an outstanding teacher, is essential.

Ad 2.

Nolasco and Arthur (1988) believe that when the learners are asked to move the furniture in order to form groups, noise is likely to occur. They advise the teachers to state clearly what and how it is to be moved and to make it clear when they can start re-arranging the furniture.

But Mary Underwood (1991: 49) gives much simpler advice: "Moving people around is much easier than moving desks."

Ad 3.

David Atkinson (1993: 49-50) looks at the most common problems with the mother tongue and some ways of dealing with them.

To start with, the students often think they do not learn in pairs / groups and speak in Czech about anything they want. Therefore the teacher should start with short, simple activities and move slowly towards longer and more complicated activities. Thus they will get used to this kind of work.

Furthermore, the students use the mother tongue to speak about the activity or they start in English and swap into Czech after a few minutes. In this case, what the teacher can do is to stop the activity and make sure the students know what to do. It is also possible that they got too much time for the task or it is too difficult for them. A good solution can be giving and taking points for using Czech / English.

Moreover, the problem can be caused by the fact that the students feel embarrassed or resentful when asked to work in pairs /groups. To deal with this problem, the teacher explains why the activity is important, speaks English from the very beginning and sets activities which are interesting for the students.

Ad 4.

The teacher needs to develop the strategies to prevent clever students from boredom and weaker ones from the feeling of being left behind, how to monitor the work of individuals within the class, how to provide the involvement and build responsibility off all the students in the class. Nolasco and Arthur (1988) also suggest that the students can work on different tasks according to their level, needs and interests, they can work on different aspects of the same task or they can work on tasks that can be carried out at a variety of levels. Easy questions can be prepared for less able or confident students and more difficult ones for strong students, but they should cooperate in the same group.

Conclusion

Although big classes bring problems for the teachers, these can be overcome by their effort, fresh approach, variety of learning styles, feedback, fun, respect, good organization of the lessons and using English naturally.

References:

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