

## АКТУАЛЬНЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ

### THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS TEACHERS FACE

**Summary.** The paper answers the questions: What is students are all at different levels? What if the class is very big? What if students keep using their own language?

**Аннотация.** В статье даны ответы на вопросы что делать, если студенты в группе с различными уровнями владения языком, если группы многочисленны, и, если студенты используют больше родной язык на занятиях.

One of the biggest problems teachers face is a lesson where the students are at different levels – some with quite competent English, some whose English isn't very good, and some whose English is only just getting started. As with many other classroom subjects, teachers face this problem every day unless the most rigorous selection has taken place. What then are the possible ways of dealing with the situation?

Use different materials: when teachers know who the good and less good students are, they can form different groups. While one group is working on a piece of language study (e.g. the past continuous), the other group might be reading a story or doing a more advanced grammar exercise. Later, while the better group or groups are discussing a topic, the weaker group or groups might be doing a parallel writing exercise, or sitting round a tape recorder listening to a tape.

In schools where there are self-study facilities (a study centre, or separate rooms), the teacher can send one group of students off to work there in order to concentrate on another. Provided the self-study task is purposeful, the students who go out of the classroom will not feel cheated.

If the self-study area is big enough, of course, it is an ideal place for different-level learning. While one group is working on a grammar activity in one corner, two other students can be listening to a tape and another group again will be consulting an encyclopedia while a different set of colleagues is working at a computer screen.

Do different tasks with the same material: where teachers use the same material with the whole class, they can encourage students to do different tasks depending on their abilities. A reading text can have questions at three different levels, for example. The teacher tells the students to see how far they can get: the better ones will quickly finish the first two and have to work hard on the third. The weakest students may not get past the first task.

In a language study exercise, the teacher can ask for simple repetition from some students, but ask others to use the new language in more complex sentences. If the teacher is getting students to give answers or opinions, she can make it clear that one word will do for some students whereas longer and more complex contributions are expected from others. Lastly, in role-plays and other speaking or group activities, she can ensure that students have roles or functions which are appropriate to their level.

Ignore the problem: it is perfectly feasible to hold the belief that, within a heterogeneous group, students will find their own level. In speaking and writing activities, for example, the better students will probably be more daring, in reading and listening, they will understand more completely and more quickly. However, the danger of this position is that students will either be bored by the slowness of their colleagues or frustrated by their inability to keep up.

Use the students: some teachers adopt a strategy of peer help and teaching so that better students can help weaker ones. They can work with them in pairs or groups, explaining things, or providing good models of language performance in speaking and writing. Thus, when teachers put students in groups, they can ensure that weak and strong students are put together. However, this has to be done with great sensitivity so that students don't get alienated by their over-knowledgeable peers or oppressed by their obligatory teaching role.

Many teachers, faced with students at different levels, adopt a mixture of solutions like the ones we have suggested here.

In big classes, it is difficult for the teacher to make contact with the students at the back and it is difficult for the students to ask for and receive individual attention. It may seem impossible to organise dynamic and creative teaching and learning sessions. Frequently, big classes mean that it is not easy to have students walking around or changing pairs etc. Most importantly, big classes can be quite intimidating for inexperienced teachers.

Despite the problems of big classes, there are things which teachers can do.

Use worksheets: one solution is for teachers to hand out worksheets for many of the tasks which they would normally do with the whole class – if the class was smaller. When the feedback stage is reached, teachers can go through the worksheets with the whole group – and all the students will get the benefit.

Use pairwork and groupwork: in large classes, pairwork and groupwork play an important part since they maximise student participation. Even where chairs and desks cannot be moved, there are ways of doing this: first rows turn to face second rows, third rows to face fourth rows etc. When using pairwork and groupwork with large groups, it is important to make instructions especially clear, to agree how to stop the activity (many teachers just raise their hands until students notice them and gradually quieten down) and to give good feedback.

Use chorus reaction: since it becomes difficult to use a lot of individual repetition and controlled practice in a big group, it may be more appropriate to use students in chorus. The class can be divided into two halves - the front five rows and the back five rows, for example, or the left-hand and right-hand sides of the classroom. Each row/half can then speak a part in a dialogue, ask or answer a question, repeat sentences or words. This is especially useful at lower levels.

Use group leaders: teachers can enlist the help of a few group leaders. They can be used to hand out copies, check that everyone in their group (or row or half) has understood a task, collect work and give feedback.

Think about vision and acoustics: big classes often are (but not always) in big rooms. Teachers have to make sure that what they show or write can be seen and that what they say or play to the whole group can be heard.

Use the size of the group to your advantage: big groups have disadvantages of course, but they also have one main advantage – they are bigger, so that humour, for example, is funnier, drama is more dramatic, a good class feeling is warmer and more enveloping. Experienced teachers use this potential to organise exciting and involving classes.

No-one chooses to have a large group: it makes the job of teaching even more challenging than it already is. However, teachers do find themselves, in various teaching situations around the world, dealing with groups of thirty, or fifty, or even sometimes above and beyond a hundred students. Some of the suggestions above will help to turn a potential disaster into some kind of a success.

One of the problems that teachers sometimes face with students who all share the same native language is that they use their native language rather than English to perform classroom tasks. This may be because they want to communicate something important, and so they use language in the best way they know! They will almost certainly find speaking in their language a lot easier than struggling with English.

But, however much teachers might sympathise with their students, the need to have them practising English (rather than their own language) remains paramount. There are a number of things that can be done in this situation.

Talk to them about the issues: teachers can discuss with students how they should all feel about using English and/or their own language in the class. Teachers should try to get their students' agreement that overuse of their own language means that they will have less chance to learn English; that using their own language during speaking activities denies them chances for rehearsal and feedback.

Encourage them to use English appropriately: teachers should make it clear that there is not a total ban on their own language - it depends on what is happening. In other words, a little bit of the students' native language when they're working on a reading text is not too much of a problem, but a speaking Activate exercise will lose its purpose if not done in English.

Only respond to English use: teachers can make it clear by their behaviour that they want to hear English. They can ignore what students say in their own language.

Create an English environment: teachers themselves should speak English for the majority of the time, so that, together with the use of listening material and video, the students are constantly exposed to how English sounds, and what it feels like. Some teachers anglicise their students' names too.

Keep reminding them: teachers should be prepared to go round the class during a speaking exercise encouraging, cajoling, even pleading with them to use English - and offering help if necessary. This technique, often repeated, will gradually change most students' behaviour over a period of time.