

Teaching Large Multilevel Classes

NATALIE HESS

Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers Series Editor
CUP 2001

REVIEWED BY HANS KLAR

Any teacher faced with the daunting challenge of teaching large, mixed-ability classes needs to be equipped with a great deal of confidence, a positive approach and not a few teaching techniques at hand to make the experience successful for both the teacher and the students. *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes* will go a long way to meeting these needs and should be considered a must read for any teacher likely to teach in this context, regardless of his or her level of experience.

Teaching Large Multilevel Classes is part of the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers series. It is an excellent resource for teachers of large ESL classes where

students have a wide variety of English language competence. *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes* contains a very readable introduction to the methodology for teaching this type of class, and is followed by eight chapters full of communicative activities described in a very accessible format.

While the terms ‘large’ and ‘multilevel’ are relative to their particular settings and are culturally based, the author defines large classes as those of ‘thirty or more students in elementary, secondary, adult, and tertiary settings.’ The author further classifies them as those that have been ‘roughly arranged according to ability, or simply classes that have been arranged by age-group with no thought to language ability.’ More importantly, the author points out that ‘These are classes in which students vary considerably in their language and literacy skills and are in need of a great deal of personal attention and encouragement to make progress.’

The author takes the view that, when compared to small classes of a homogenous nature, teaching large, multilevel classes is ‘more arduous, more exhausting and infinitely more demanding. However, her belief is that they can also be ‘infinitely more challenging and more interesting.’ The author supports this position by enthusiastically describing the benefits of teaching large classes.

For those of you who have taught large classes, and are wondering what the advantages could possibly be, the author suggests that large classes should be seen in the context of providing more opportunities for student interaction.

While, the author does concede that there are some challenges to teaching classes of this nature, primarily related to classroom management, marking written work, accommodating individual learning styles and monitoring individual student progress, her passion for teaching large classes is transmitted quite clearly through her 11 principles for coping in such classes.

One of these principles relates to ‘enlarging the circle’ of student influence and participation during lessons. The author suggests that this can be accomplished by:

- Learning students’ names as quickly as possible.
- Waiting until several students have raised their hand in response to a question before calling on someone, rather than giving in to the temptation of calling on the first person to raise a hand.
- Standing away from students who are speaking in class to encourage them to project their voice for other students to hear.

The eight chapters which follow the introduction are full of practical tips for teaching all age and ability levels. They include ideas for getting to know students’ names, managing group work, motivating classes and even dealing with written assignments.

For example, one of the author's ideas for encouraging communication between students or the students and teacher is to up forums such as chat rooms or web logs.

In Chapter 4, the author explores ways of teaching writing in these classes. While it is acknowledged that teaching writing to large classes can be challenging, due in part to the large amount of marking involved, she points out that it need not always be the teacher who reads and marks written work.

For instance, the author suggests training students to become peer editors. In her experience, the author has found that 'Students who have been properly been trained make excellent peer editors.' She suggests that all written assignments go through a process of self and peer-editing before they are submitted to the teacher.

Teaching Large Multilevel Classes emphasises the benefits which can be found in large ESL classes of mixed ability, and provides numerous practical activities for turning them into friendly, communicative, learning environments. While this book has something for everyone, it is particularly relevant for those teachers planning to teach large, mixed-ability classes, and comes highly recommended by this former teacher of large, multi-level classes.

Hans Klar is the ELT Program Manager at Insearch, UTS.