LARGE CLASSES

Practical ways to make every learner count in a large class

AT A GLANCE

What it is	teaching classes that feel too big for the space, the resources or the teacher to manage in the usual way
Main challenges	being seen and heard, organising interaction, monitoring, giving feedback, providing materials and maintaining discipline
Key message	large classes need clear routines, simple materials and plenty of pair and group work; they also offer real benefits
See also	the **Mixed-Ability Classes** and **Using the Learners' L1** handouts

THINK ABOUT

- How large is a large class in your context?
- Some teachers say that good teaching is good teaching whatever the size of the class: a class of 15 isn't easier than a class of 50, just different. Do you agree?

What is a large class?

There is no agreed number. In some private language schools, 15 learners feels large; in many state schools around the world, classes of 30, 40 or more are normal. Hayes (1997) suggests that a class is "large" when the teacher **feels** it is too big to teach in the way they would like. What counts is the relationship between the number of learners, the space, the resources and the teacher's experience.

This matters because most teacher-training materials assume small classes. Many teachers have to adapt techniques that were designed for 12 learners sitting in a horseshoe.

Benefits and challenges

Large classes are often seen only as a problem, but they also have real advantages (Hess 2001).

Benefits	Challenges
more people to interact with, and more varied interaction	control and organisation
a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, ideas and needs	classroom management: setting up tasks, monitoring and feedback
more opportunities for cooperation and peer teaching	administration and marking
a rich variety of intellectual and emotional input	personalising tasks and meeting individual needs

Benefits	Challenges
a push for teachers to be creative and develop professionally	balancing outgoing and quieter learners

Adapted from Hess (2001)

Problems and solutions

The table brings together common problems and practical ways teachers deal with them.

Teaching and learning

Problem	Possible solutions
Developing speaking and writing	task-based and task-supported lessons; pair and group work; short, frequent writing tasks
Developing reading and listening	teaching strategies learners can use on their own; collaborative tasks; extensive reading and listening outside class
Making lessons learner-centred	discovery tasks; pair and group work; independent work
Developing learner autonomy	teaching strategies; giving choices; self-assessment
Personalising tasks	open tasks that learners complete with their own ideas; a choice of tasks
Monitoring	moving around the room systematically; group leaders who report problems; peer checking
Giving feedback	open-class feedback with answers on the board; feedback on common errors; peer feedback; technology such as polls
Assessing learners	self- and peer assessment; portfolios and projects; computer-based quizzes

Management

Problem	Possible solutions
Setting up tasks	short, clear instructions; demonstrations; gestures; instructions written on the board
Providing materials	materials-light lessons; content written on the board; materials learners make or share
Making sure everyone can see and hear	voice projection; clear, large gestures; good board work; technology such as a projector or microphone
Organising pair and group work	routines; working with neighbours (side by side, or turning to the row behind); group leaders
Managing space	using the furniture as it is; varying seating where possible
Discipline and noise	routines; rules agreed with learners; a clear signal for silence
Use of the L1	routines and agreed rules about when the L1 is and isn't useful (see **Using the Learners' L1**)

Relationships and motivation

Problem	Possible solutions
Building rapport	being well prepared; using names; showing interest in learners' personalities and abilities; chatting before and after class
Remembering names	name cards on desks; a seating plan
Finding out about interests and moods	short questionnaires; informal chats
Supporting weaker learners	monitoring them regularly; seating them near supportive peers; peer helpers
Getting and keeping attention	visuals and gestures; variety of topics and activities; changes of pace; short breaks

Adapted from LoCastro (2001) and Watson Todd (2006)

Large-class techniques in action

These simple techniques help you reach every learner in a large class. Small changes in what you do can make a big difference.

Challenge	What the teacher did
Keeping eye contact with everyone	Stand where all learners can see you. Move around the room so that you regularly reach learners at the back.
Being heard	Speak slightly louder and project your voice to the back of the room, without shouting.
Making gestures visible	Use slightly bigger gestures, repeat them consistently, and stand where everyone can see you.
Remembering names	Use name cards on the desks.
Putting learners into pairs and groups	Give short, clear instructions. Group learners with their neighbours to the side, front or back, and avoid moving furniture.
Having contact with all learners	Use names, speak to learners in different parts of the room, and monitor evenly.
Pronunciation practice	Use choral drilling, with occasional individual drilling to help individuals and keep everyone alert.
Handouts	Write the content on the board for learners to copy, and allow time for them to take notes.
Distributing materials	Give copies to the front of each row to pass back.
Making individual learners heard	Ask learners to stand up and face the class, or to repeat what they said. Ask the class to listen carefully.
Giving instructions	Keep them short. Use examples, demonstrations and gestures.
Getting attention after a noisy activity	Use a clear signal, such as clapping your hands, and raise your voice slightly.

Challenge	What the teacher did
Using the board	Write in large letters, use drawings, and keep different sections of the board for different purposes.
Supporting a listening task	Replay the parts you expect to be difficult, and pause the recording so learners can take notes.

Making it work

Establish routines early

Routines for getting into pairs, handing out materials, getting attention and giving feedback save time and reduce noise. Practise them until learners know them automatically.

Agree the rules together

Rules that learners help to create are easier to keep. Display them and refer to them.

Get learners talking

In a class of 60, whole-class speaking gives each learner a few seconds. Pair work gives every learner minutes. Short, well-structured pair tasks are the most efficient way to increase speaking time.

Make feedback efficient

Show answers on the board, focus on common errors you noted while monitoring, and ask groups to collect their questions so you answer them once.

Use learners as a resource

Group leaders can distribute materials, report problems and help classmates. Changing leaders regularly builds responsibility across the class.

> **TEACHING TIP**
> Before the lesson, plan how learners will get into pairs or groups without moving: side by side, or turning to the row behind. Tell them exactly who to work with.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Avoiding pair and group work because of noise.	Use short, structured tasks with clear routines and a signal for silence.
Giving long instructions to the whole class.	Keep instructions short, demonstrate, and write key steps on the board.
Monitoring only the front rows.	Plan a route around the room, and reach the back regularly.
Trying to correct every learner individually.	Focus on common errors and use peer feedback.
Relying on handouts you can't copy.	Use the board, the coursebook and materials-light activities.

ONLINE CLASSES

Large online classes share many of the same challenges. Use breakout rooms for pair and group work, polls and the chat for quick checks and feedback, and clear routines for using microphones and cameras.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A class is “large” when it feels too big to teach in the usual way; the number depends on the context.
- Large classes bring challenges, but also benefits: variety, cooperation and peer teaching.
- Routines, clear instructions and good board work make large classes manageable.
- Pair and group work are the most effective way to increase every learner’s speaking time.
- Efficient feedback focuses on common errors and uses peers and the board.

WHERE NEXT

Classroom Management instructions, grouping and monitoring in detail

Mixed-Ability Classes differentiating tasks and supporting different levels

Using the Learners’ L1 when and how the shared language can help

Practice Activities activities that work in pairs and groups

Further reading

Hess, N. (2001). *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shamim, F., Negash, N., Chuku, C. & Demewoz, N. (2007). *Maximizing Learning in Large Classes: Issues and Options*. Addis Ababa: British Council.

References

Hayes, D. (1997). Helping teachers to cope with large classes. *ELT Journal*, 51(2), 106–116.

LoCastro, V. (2001). Large classes and student learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(3), 493–496.

Watson Todd, R. (2006). Why investigate large classes? *rEFLections*, 9, 1–12.