

As an ESL teacher at a school or university, there are times when you will have to teach large classes. Many teachers think that because the class size is so big, they are limited in what they can do. However, by following the advice below, you will find your large classes a lot more enjoyable and manageable.

What are some advantages of teaching large classes?

There are many advantages to teaching large ESL classes. For example, when you teach a large class time goes a lot quicker. Activities take a longer time to set up and run. Rarely will you find yourself using all the activities you have planned. This means you can use them in the next class, which saves time on preparation. In a large class, you will constantly have a variety of personalities to contend with. There will always be students keen to ask and respond to questions. There will also be students who are funny and bring laughter to the class, so large classes are never dull.

What are some disadvantages of teaching large classes?

It is more difficult for teachers to work with students in classes larger than 25 or 30 students. Large classrooms make discussion and group work more difficult. Research has found that in larger classes, students engagement tends to be less than optimal. Added to this is the alarming fact that students who disengage the most are struggling students. To make matters worse, teachers in larger classes have more negative behaviours to deal with especially from those students finding the class a challenge. Therefore, it is useful to consider how and why there is less student engagement in large classes and what can be done to boost participation.

What causes students to not participate?

Attaining optimal student participation can be a challenge in a small class let alone a large one. To effectively raise participation in large classes, it helps to be aware of some factors that discourage student involvement. First, how students perceive their teacher develops through interactions in and outside of the class and can impact significantly on student participation. Secondly, many students choose not to participate fully in class because of fears of peer judgment.

How to build rapport with a large class of students

Cultivating a perception of the teacher that makes students more comfortable to participate actively in class can be a challenge in large classes. This is because it is more difficult to have meaningful interactions with each student. However, by deliberately working to project a certain demeanour, teachers can have a positive impact on student participation.

Teachers need to make it a priority to learn and use students' names from the first lesson. One effective approach is to use cards that have students' pictures and names. The teacher simply picks a card at random to call on students to answer a question or share an idea. By doing this, the teacher ensures that they are always using students' names, and it helps guarantee that all students are being called on to contribute, which makes them less likely to disengage during class. This is also an effective tool for learning students' names.



Teachers should also think of creative ways to establish a rapport between themselves and the class. At the beginning of each course, ask students to complete note cards that describe some of their interests. By reviewing the note cards and memorizing student names, you can get to know your students and attempt to greet them by name and speak with them as they enter the classroom. Approaches like this help build a better rapport between the instructor and students, which results in a more engaged class.

Be patient and positive when interacting with students in and out of class. By doing this, you show the students they are a welcome and valued member of the class, which can boost student confidence, and more confident students are much more likely to participate in class. Some students can shut down in a class if they perceive the teacher as being harsh or unapproachable.

If your situation allows it, think of ways to encourage students to visit you during office hours to discuss feedback, assignments, projects, etc. To make this more efficient in large classes, students don't need to meet you individually. Students can meet with you in groups of four over the duration of the course. When meeting your students, try to project your willingness to talk with them and answer questions. This provides an opportunity for brief social interaction between the teacher and students that helps build rapport. Meeting students in small groups also minimizes the number of times you have to answer the same questions.

If you don't have an office and are not able to set up office hours, set up a group chat in WhatsApp Line or WeChat so that if students need to ask you something or you need to pass on some important information quickly, contact is made easy. Students can also use the online group to practice their English by interacting with one another, so make the group chat English only.

How can peer judgment be discouraged in class?

Fear of peer judgment is a source of anxiety for many students that is more pronounced in large classes where students fear potential embarrassment in front of dozens of their peers. To best deal with the fear associated with peer judgment, it is crucial to encourage an environment of trust and mutual respect from the very first lesson. In this environment, students are more likely to feel secure enough to participate more freely in class. Using pair work and group activities is a good way to build personal connections as they help individuals become better acquainted. This helps build



a sense of community where students are supportive and encouraging of one another. Finally, try to ensure that all students feel that they have a voice in class by not allowing some students to dominate discussions and making it clear that interrupting other students is not tolerated.

How to promote an active learning environment

It can be easy for teachers to fall into a more traditional and teacher-centred approach when teaching large classes as it seems easier to manage. However, it is worth making the effort to incorporate a variety of teaching methods such as student-led seminars or team assignments into your lessons as a way of boosting motivation, engagement, and participation. It also pays to plan activities and tasks in such a way that discourages students from becoming easily distracted.

Incorporate intermittent energy shifts into the lesson. This relates to the fact that learners of different ages having varying optimal attention spans. For example, the average attention span of a 6-year-old averages between 12 and 24 minutes whereas the attention span of a 12-year-old tends to be from 24 to 60 minutes. Therefore, consider how you might switch gears in the lesson to help maintain student attention and focus. This can be done in a few ways such as simply changing from direct instruction to pair work, or from individual writing to sharing work completed so far within a small group. For activities with a duration beyond the average attention span of your class, it is helpful to plan them in such a way that asks students to complete a series of steps that require different types of thinking or learning.

In certain lessons, teachers may be required to give mini-lectures to explain an important concept, process, or procedure. Rather than delivering an extended monologue, try to make these tasks more interactive. For example, you could try a think-pair-share activity that poses a question to students that they must consider alone and then discuss with a partner before deciding on a final answer. This can motivate students and promote higher-level thinking. A think-pair-share activity does not need to last more than three minutes and helps students remain attentive.

How to promote increased participation in large classes

As it is easier for students to fade into the background in larger classes, always seek opportunities to elicit more participation. Some simple ways of doing this include asking questions that require a show of hands or asking a direct question to an individual student. Rather than just checking the register by calling out each name, tell the students you will check attendance and participation by asking each student a question or by getting them to speak English. Make sure you tell the students you will do this in a random order. So, as you teach the class, the students are always paying attention, because they don't know whose name is going to be called next. This helps to keep the students on their toes. By speaking to every student in the class, you will soon remember their names. Asking each student to contribute is easy, as within a lesson you have things like book exercises, activities, eliciting, modelling, concept checking, role-plays, readings, etc.

Additionally, when possible, try to have students work in pairs or small groups. When working in groups, each member should be assigned a role so that activities are more productive and communicative. For example, assign one student the role of leader whose responsibility is to ensure that the group stays on task and meets their objectives. Another could be nominated as a secretary to take notes and summarise the group's efforts. There could also be a presenter who reports the group's findings to the rest of the class.

When a class is split up into teams or groups encouraging competition is easy. This creates a fun atmosphere within the class. For younger students, you can assign team points or small rewards throughout the lesson. You'll find that doing this helps increase the students' motivation quite dramatically.

Another important reason for having teams or groups in a large class is that the students can help each other learn. Stronger students and weaker students can work together. The students can build friendships and help each other understand what they are learning.

Some general advice for teaching large classes

Think about the practicalities of how you will perform formative assessment and provide feedback to students. You don't want to be constantly bogged down marking pages of homework each week. When reviewing students' work, don't correct everything, but simply return it to them with personalized comments, suggestions, or general feedback on how they can improve or correct some of the more serious errors they have made. You can do a lot of informal assessments in class through monitoring participation in such things as activities and presentations.

Stick to your rules! If you have rules about lateness or behaviour, enforce them. This is very important in the first few weeks of class. Show the students you are strict about your rules, and they will conform. Once the students know what they can and cannot get away with, the class runs a lot smoother.

Make sure you have something to drink handy. You will find even with a microphone that you naturally speak louder, which takes a toll on your throat.

Always have a backup activity in case the class doesn't go as planned.

Final thoughts

For teaching a language, having a large class is generally considered a major disadvantage. Although large classes can often lend themselves to making a fun and dynamic learning atmosphere, this is not always the case, particularly if the teacher is under-prepared or the group struggles to gel. The main trap to avoid in large classes is for student participation to wain as this not only impacts learning but can also lead to behaviours that are unfavourable for both the teacher and the students. However, by reading this article, it is hoped that you not only have some awareness of how to better meet some of the key challenges of large classroom teaching but also how it is possible to establish and maintain an enjoyable and effective teaching and learning environment.