

Coping with EFL Teaching in Large Classes with a Group-Centered Learning

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Recent years has witnessed a gradual increase of enrollment in most Chinese schools. Such an increase of enrollment has provided opportunities for more Chinese students to get good education, but it has also brought about many unprecedented challenges for EFL teachers in China. One such challenge is the emergence of an increasingly larger class for EFL teachers. To solve the problems in large EFL classes, I intend to offer a gradual, broad-based approach to innovation in the English classroom, namely, coping with large EFL classes with group-centered learning. I plan to argue that small-group learning experience in large language classes will tend to be more successful when viewed as part of a carefully orchestrated shift in the direction of a truly student-centered system of learning management. First, I will pinpoint the benefits of group-centered learning in large classes, and justify the use of group work in organizing classroom teaching. Next, I will make some suggestions as to how to organize group activities in EFL teaching. Finally, I will analyze some problems of group-centered learning, and then present some solutions to these problems.

■ Introduction

With a gradual increase of enrollment in many Chinese schools in recent years, EFL teachers in China are confronted with many unprecedented problems and challenges in their classroom teaching. Many of them are worried by the physical constraints imposed by large numbers in confined classrooms. They feel unable to promote student interaction, since there is no room to move about. Meanwhile, teachers are worried by the discipline aspects of large classes. They feel they are unable to control what is happening, and the classes become too noisy. In addition, large size of class also makes them unable to give individual attention to their students and check all of their students' work. Therefore, they are understandably worried if they don't know who is learning what.

What is mentioned above indicates that many of the English teachers are unhappy with the large size of classes, and for a number of reasons. However, given the fact that class size is most unlikely to be reduced in the foreseeable future in most Chinese schools, teachers need to be helped to come to terms with their problems. My purpose in this article is, therefore, to argue for a gradual, broad-based approach to innovation in the English classroom. In particular, I plan to argue that small-group learning experience in large language classes will tend to be more successful when viewed as part of a carefully orchestrated shift in the direction of a truly student-centered system of learning management. The paper is organized in three sections. First, I will pinpoint the benefits of group-centered learning in large classes,

then I will demonstrate how to organize group work in practical EFL teaching, and finally I will present some solutions to the problems related to group work for EFL teaching. Although this paper deals with how to organize group activities in large English classes in China, the suggestions for helping English teachers improve their EFL teaching may apply to those who are engaged in or preparing to be engaged in EFL teaching in other similar contexts.

■ Potential benefits of group-centered learning in large classes

Recent EFL/ESL teaching has been undergoing a rapid change worldwide, the most noticeable being a gradual shift from teacher-centered classroom teaching to student-centered classroom teaching. As a key teaching activity in facilitating such a change, group work has been drawing more and more attention. Classroom experience and empirical research has demonstrated many educational benefits of frequent use of group work in a large class.

Group work benefits a majority of language learners

For a number of reasons, teacher-centered classroom will probably tend to produce a small number of successful learners and a relatively large number of failures in a large class. As central communicators, this minority of successful learners speak relatively frequently with the teacher. Spurred on by higher expectation of success, they apply themselves more diligently to the difficult process of learning a language, and as a result they come out on

top. Their success, however, is achieved at the cost of failure for the majority. The average student has relatively few chances to interact with the teacher.

Group-centered classrooms, on the other hand, offer at least the potential for avoiding some of the built-in disadvantages of the teacher-centered classroom. As the teacher gradually relinquishes his or her position as the focal point for classroom communication, opportunities for active, meaningful, and varied use of the target language substantially increase for the average student (Long, 1977). Also, as many have pointed out (e.g., La Forge, 1977; Long, 1977), the small learning group, once it has grown to maturity, can provide a potentially more supportive environment than the large, teacher-dominated language class, and one in which all the students are more likely to take the kinds of risks necessary for successful language acquisition.

Group work creates more interaction opportunities

Carefully designed interactions between students provide a classroom forum for extended, meaningful exploration of ideas, which promotes communicative language competence (Christison, 1990; Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987) as well as literacy development (Enright & McCloskey, 1988). Working with peers to explore an issue or solve a problem requires that students articulate and justify their own points of view; it also exposes students to new ideas, perspectives, and specific approaches. This process of discussing questions, and organizing and applying course material facilitates comprehension and retention of critical lesson concepts and academic language (Bejarano, 1987; McGroarty, 1992). In addition to promoting cognitive learning and interaction skills, group work affects students' attitudes and interpersonal relationships.

Group work facilitates cooperation among students

Another benefit in group-centered classrooms is that new linguistic input need not be channeled solely through the teacher. Packages of learning materials can be provided which are designed to feed new input directly into the learning group. It may also encourage more helping behavior, thus spreading the burden of teaching more evenly around the classroom. As the learning group eventually becomes the focus of classroom management, students may come to have a greater stake in the success of learning experience and many therefore try harder to make it work. For example, jigsaw listening exercises and other communication games which require sharing of information in order to accomplish some group task can at the same time (a) introduce new language; (b) build on language that has already been learnt; (c) require individual learners to share what they have already learnt with each other; and (d) introduce a pattern of language use which is spontaneous, unpredictable, and involves relatively long stretches of discourse.

Group work enables students to evaluate their learning

As the peer group gradually becomes the central focus of classroom learning, it can also come to serve as a forum for planning and evaluation. Because a large amount of class time is already being devoted to small-group communication activities, it may become logical and natural that some of these activities will focus on discussion of the group aims, and of ways of best achieving these aims. Also, because learning is a group experience, the participants themselves will be in a good position to evaluate the success of these activities. Numerous teaching experiences tell us that students working together in groups can also be given a role in evaluating each other's performance. This may also lead to the possibility of making the reward structure at least partially cooperative, with individual students being rewarded and held accountable for the success of group activities.

■ Organizing group work

We should note that the group, made up of perhaps six to eight students under the direction of a group leader (one of the students themselves), whose function is to co-ordinate the activities of the group and to serve as required as a link with the teacher, is a largely autonomous practice unit. The activities that the students are asked to undertake in their group are defined by the teacher and discussed first with the class as a whole, but once this has been done, the students should be allowed to work to a large extent on their own. Divided into groups, the students are now able to sit together, facing one another in a small and intimate circle (rather like a club meeting) and talk freely. The teacher is still present and has an important and demanding role to play in helping and advising the students as required. But rather than assuming the traditional role of a lecturer or information giver, the teacher adopts the role of a guide or a consultant. Here are some key points in organizing a group work.

Structuring the group

The size of the groups has to be worked out in relation to the number of the students in the class, but as a general rule there should be between five and eight students in each group and not more than five or six groups in the class. The group should be formed by the teacher and should include students of mixed abilities, on the principle that they will help one another in various ways. Later on, the students may be allowed to change groups. Each group should have a position in the classroom to work in so that, when the students are asked to do group work, they can begin with a minimum of fuss and delay. Usually group work will involve some re-arrangement of the classroom furniture.

Group leader

Each group should have its own "leader" (or coordinator). Initially, a leader may have to be appointed by the teacher,

but since the group leader may be changed from time to time, the students can later be allowed to choose their own. The function of the group leader is not to dominate the group but to coordinate their activities and to serve as a link with the teacher.

The role of the teacher

The teacher's main task is to prepare the students (sometimes by briefing the group leaders) for the activities they are asked to undertake. Having done this, he or she should, to a large extent, leave the students to get on with their own work. However, this does not mean that the teacher can sit back and relax. The students should be encouraged to consult him or her as the need arises and, depending on the type of activity and on the level of the students, the teacher should visit the groups and listen to the students involved in the group activities. If the teacher participates in an activity, he or she should try to do so as if he or she were a member of the group. The teacher's job is no longer to control or correct the students, but to observe the students' individual and general difficulties and mistakes. In this way, the teacher will be able to better conduct class teaching and group activities in future lessons.

Duration and frequency

Many factors are involved here (the number of lessons per week, the level of the class etc.), but once the students have enough language for communication activities, some group work should be carried out about once a week for perhaps half a class period. Longer sessions may sometimes be needed (to complete the project, for example, in which the students are especially involved) and in general it is inadvisable to interrupt an activity that is going on well.

■ Problems with group work

Having discussed the potential benefits of group-centered learning and illustrated how to organize group work in large classes, it is now necessary to discuss some of the problems that are likely to arise when a teacher suddenly attempts to alter the customary interaction network without making accompanying changes in other components of the management system.

Problems confronted in group work

In this section, I will summarize some common problems EFL teachers often encounter when they ask their students to be engaged in group work in their classroom teaching. I obtained these data from a recent questionnaire I sent to selected English teachers in Jiangxi Province, China. These problems can be divided into five areas: too much use of native language, dominance of one or two students in one group, a poor source of language input, loss of interest in working with others, and noise and chaos. This classification is supported by comments made by the teachers who completed the research questionnaire.

1. *Too much use of native language:* Many teachers are worried by their students' overuse of mother

tongue in their group work. They find it impossible to prevent the students from speaking Chinese, simply because there are too many students in one classroom.

- As it is much easier for our students to convey their ideas in their mother tongue, some students tend to speak Chinese in group work.
 - It's hard for us teachers to ensure that the students are communicating in English when they are engaged in group work.
2. *Dominance of one or two students in group work:* In group-centered learning, students may sometimes be unclear about how to go through an activity. In such cases, the group work can easily be dominated by one or two high-level or extroverted students.
 - In a group work, it is often those who are good at English that talk much, whereas the low-level students are always very quiet.
 - I often find that activities performed in different learning groups in the classroom teaching are controlled by those extroverted students.
 3. *A poor source of language input:* Many teachers are concerned that the English language used by the students during group work is mistake-ridden and therefore a poor source of input.
 - Some of my students always complain that the English they use in the group is full of mistakes. They attribute much of their displeasure in group work to dissatisfaction with other students' performance during the group tasks.
 - I don't think it is appropriate to let students communicate by using incorrect English.
 4. *Loss of interest in working with others in groups:* Teachers feel a responsibility for ensuring that everyone is involved in group activities, and are worried if they find some of their students lack interest in working with others in groups.
 - Some of my students are loner types. They show no interest at all in participating in the group work.
 - I am not sure whether all my students can benefit from group work.
 5. *Noise and chaos:* Teachers are often worried by the discipline aspects when their students are engaged in their group work. They complain that the class becomes very noisy with so many people speaking at the same time, and that the class seems to be in a state of chaos.
 - When students do activity in a group, they make a lot of noise. Then the teacher cannot control the class.
 - It is noisy. With so much activity going on at the same time, it will be difficult for group members to concentrate on solving their problems at hand.

The comments from the teachers I have cited indicate that many of them are suspicious of the benefits of organizing group work in EFL classroom teaching. However, all these obstacles are not insurmountable. What follows will show teachers that solutions are

possible to alleviate the genuine distress some feel at their self-perceived inability to teach effectively in crowded classrooms.

■ Solutions to the problems in group-centered learning

Below are some teaching techniques that can be used to solve the problem areas described above.

1. *The learners will speak their native language if you let them.* To avoid too much use of students' native language, teachers should act as the "English police". Their job is, of course, to "cruise" the class looking for offenders. This should be done light-heartedly, and teachers sometimes can charge a "fine" of a few cents for those who do not speak English, using the money later for a party or game prize. In any case, the more teachers circulate among the learners and remind them to speak English, the easier the learners will find it to comply.
2. *Assign roles.* Several measures can be taken to ensure that group activities are not dominated by one or two students. First, teachers should explain explicitly to their students the group activities they are expected to perform so that all group members are aware of their roles in the group activity. In many cases, just a few seconds for reflection or a moment for students to ask questions concerning a group activity mean difference between a successful and an unsuccessful activity. In addition, teachers can also assign roles to each of the members of a group: a "secretary" notes down what the group members say; a "leader" governs role taking as different members speak; and a "presenter" reports on the final conclusions reached by the group. Even if the teacher does not follow up on each member's task after the activity is finished, the assignment of roles is often enough to act as a catalyst to get the group speaking. For example, let the usually taciturn learner be the presenter, the noisy one be the secretary, and the sheepish one be the leader.
3. *Learners do not seem to learn errors from their peers.* In fact, using English to communicate in a group does not necessarily mean that the students will learn errors from their peers. No matter how much perfect native-speaker English students hear, making errors is an inevitable part of the learning process. One of the main points of having learners speak with each other is to help them increase their confidence and reduce the anxiety that is often found in a purely teacher-centered classroom. Group-work activities are often (but not exclusively) geared to fluency enhancement rather than accuracy practice.
4. *Many people are independent types and prefer working alone.* However, given the reality of life, there are not many professions today that allow one to work in pure isolation. Cooperation is a fact of life, and having learners work together in the classroom teaches them a very important life skill. Teaching learners how to work with others and not just rely on

the teacher for everything is an integral part of EFL teaching. If some students really insist on working alone, teachers should design activities that are motivating enough that these students will find it difficult to stop when the class hour is up.

5. *The noise and chaos factors usually are more troublesome to the teacher than they are to the learners.* Participants in a group-work activity are normally unaware of what other groups are doing. If the activity is organized well and learners are all actively speaking, then teachers should let them make noise, because it is productive noise. For the same reason, in a focused "party" activity, if all the learners are on their feet and talking, such as in a "Find the person who ..." activity, the resulting chaos is, in fact, productive interaction among information-seeking learners of English. On the other hand, if learners are wondering around the class not knowing what to do, or if they are asked to participate in an activity that lacks clear goals or aims, then this can be described as real chaos.

■ Conclusion

Teaching an oversized EFL class may not be as easy as teaching a small class. Nor will the students in such a large class be able to progress as rapidly as those in smaller classes. However, this does not mean we can do nothing to improve EFL teaching in a large class. In this article, I have justified the use of group work in organizing classroom teaching in a large class and attempted to make some suggestions as to how to organize this group activity in EFL teaching. I have also analyzed the problems EFL teachers may encounter in their classroom teaching and provided some solutions to each of them. It should be emphasized that the teacher's skill in classroom management is the primary ingredient for success with group work in large classes, and that students should be fully aware of what is expected of them and be ready to work to achieve the objectives set by the teacher. Only in this way can we benefit most from group work in EFL teaching.

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