

# Teaching English to Large Classes: 3

JEAN FORRESTER

IN THE FIRST TWO articles in this series two methods of teaching English to large classes were described, methods which provide the pupils with more opportunities for practising the spoken language than are often found in the ordinary classroom. The first of these methods was chorus answering; the second, short individual drills and sentence by sentence individual reading. This article will describe the use of group methods, particularly with pupils in the first two years of English.

The class is divided into groups with not more than eight pupils in each group. All the groups work at the same time, but within each group the pupils speak and read individually. Each group forms a cross-section of the class, with bright, average, and slow pupils in each. These groups are carefully selected so that they are, as far as possible, equal in ability. As will be realized when a class in action is described, this helps the smooth running of the lesson and avoids waste of time. These groups are, therefore, not the same as the sections mentioned in the first article, which were based on the usual seating arrangements of the classroom. A description of a typical class at work in groups during a forty-minute period will illustrate the essence of this method.

This class was a second-year one of forty-two boys divided into six groups of seven boys each. The average age was between eleven and twelve. The desks had been pushed back and the groups were sitting on the floor in small circles. The teacher handed the leader of each group an exercise which he had written out on a small sheet of paper. The exercise for each group was different. One had seven questions based on the subject matter of the last lesson read from the class reader. They were simple questions — ‘Where does the sun rise?’ ‘When does the sun set?’ and so on. Another was a simple vocabulary exercise asking for the ‘opposites’ of twelve to sixteen words. Another was a transformation exercise, changing positive sentences into negative ones; another, filling blanks with suitable prepositions, and other similar exercises.

The procedure in each group was approximately the same. The leader read out the first question and asked a boy for the answer. If the answer was accepted by the

rest of the group as correct, each boy in turn repeated the answer and then they all wrote it down, helping one another, if necessary, with spelling. If, however, the answer was not accepted by other boys in the group, suggestions were made until an answer was agreed upon, and this answer was repeated by each boy and written down in his rough notebook. When the first answer had been written the leader read out the second question, which was treated in the same way as the first. This was continued until all the answers had been completed. The teacher, meanwhile, went from group to group helping where necessary, and explaining mistakes. As soon as a group finished the leader stood up as a sign to the teacher, who came to the group and checked the work from one boy’s notebook. If there were any mistakes he pointed them out and asked if anyone could correct them. If a boy was able to do this, the teacher made the group repeat the correct answer and himself wrote in the correct form in the boy’s notebook. If no one could put a mistake right, the teacher explained what should have been written, made the group repeat the right answer, sometimes giving a short drill, and making sure that the right answer was written in every boy’s book. For example, if the group had written ‘The sun does not shine in the night’ instead of ‘at night’, the teacher pointed out the mistake and then reinforced the correct response by asking ‘When do the stars shine?’, ‘When do we sleep?’ and perhaps, to point the contrast, ‘When do we wake up?’, ‘When do we play games?’. When the teacher left the group, the leader and his assistant checked the rest of the books in the group to see that no mistake was left uncorrected. The group then exchanged exercises with another group and set to work on that in the same way. That class usually did at least three exercises in a class period, and made fair copies of those indicated by the teacher. At the end of the period the teacher took away the fair notebooks to check. As all the work had been carefully checked before it was copied out, he found that he could look through the set of books in a very short time.

Now for a few comments on this procedure. It is sometimes difficult to find room for the groups to get together, especially in a room crowded with heavy desks. Where the class is furnished with long desks

holding four boys it is often possible for the boys in one desk to turn round and sit with their legs through the back of the seat, facing the four boys in the desk behind them. The ingenious teacher will find ways of getting the boys into groups. It is well worth spending some time at the beginning of the school year organizing the groups so that the pupils can move into them as quickly as possible. When a satisfactory arrangement has been made it should be kept. When pupils know exactly what they have to do they can get into their groups in a few moments.

The great advantage of the group method is the amount of supervised practice that each individual pupil has. In the case that I have just described, assuming that each group did three exercises, every boy in the class repeated at least twenty-one sentences during the course of the lesson, and he repeated them alone, so that any mistake would be corrected. This count excludes anything he said in the discussion on the answers. Of course, sometimes answers accepted by the group and repeated by every boy were wrong. But such mistakes were always corrected when the teacher came to the group, so that there was no chance of the wrong form remaining for long in the boys' minds. The repetition of an occasional wrong sentence is a small price to pay for the opportunity for every boy to speak alone twenty-one times during a lesson. I know of no other method where this is possible in a large class.

Every boy also had a turn at giving the answer first. If he was one of the slower brethren and could not manage it, he was helped by one of the quicker boys, but sometimes he produced a correct answer himself and had had his chance of contributing to the group. The slow learner profits greatly by this method because, instead of being obliged to produce something when he is still uncertain, he is helped, so that what he says, and what he will then probably remember, is correct. He is prevented by the other members of the group from repeating mistakes again and again. Work in a group, with its constantly supervised repetition, provided just that drill that is so essential for these slower learners.

It is important that every boy should write the answers, especially these slower boys. When only one boy writes them down, as is sometimes done, he benefits by the reinforcement of the correct form that writing provides, but the others do not. Teachers often avoid giving much written work in large classes because they cannot cope with all the correction work involved. But unless the pupils get sufficient practice

in written work in the junior classes, their handwriting does not develop in either speed or legibility and they are in difficulties later when they have to be prepared for written examinations.

What was the purpose of the teacher's writing out six different exercises for the groups? Why not have all the groups doing the same exercises at the same time, and write them up on the board? Where the class textbook has a good supply of exercises it is possible for all the groups to work at the same exercise at the same time, but where the teacher has to supplement the exercises, or when he prefers to make up his own, he saves considerable time by doing it in the way I have described. A little calculation makes this clear. It takes time to write an exercise on the board, and while the teacher is doing this the class is usually idle. Even if the start work directly he has written the first question, the teacher is not free to move round the class until he has finished writing up the work. He is not really making the best use of his time. If he decides to write out exercises for each group, when they are going to do the same exercises at the same time, he has to write a copy for each group, and with six groups doing three exercises that means that he has to write out eighteen exercises. In this class the teacher had written out only six exercises and had enough material for two periods. Writing six exercises instead of thirty-six is quite a consideration for the busy teacher! This teacher kept all his exercise material carefully filed, adding to those which he found too short and cutting down those that were too long and using them year after year. If the exercises are equal in length and the groups equal in ability, then the exchange system works smoothly.

When reading is done in groups, the teacher first takes a reading lesson in the usual way, dealing with new words and drilling in the correct pronunciation of any words that cause difficulty. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss methods of teaching reading, so it is unnecessary to go into detail. But when it comes to reading practice, the teacher uses the leaders or other good readers from each group of the class, if he wants individual reading. By doing this he makes sure that these leaders can read the passage correctly. By using them as a group he shows them how to divide up the passage into small portions for individual readers. When the leaders take reading in the groups they do not read themselves, and they use the same division of material that the teacher has used with them. While the groups are reading the teacher moves from group to group, giving help where necessary. It is possible for the teacher to give a demonstration with the leaders, and for every boy in the group to read a short paragraph, all

within fifteen minutes. If there are two of these reading practices in a week, each boy will read alone twice in the week, which is far more often than he does when reading is carried on by the traditional methods.

Sometimes in a reading practice the teacher gathers together the weakest readers from each group, and takes them himself, while the rest of the class practise with their leaders. When he does this, he sometimes ends the reading session by asking one boy from each group to read a few sentences. This is a way of checking the work done in groups.

The question must now be considered of purely oral work in groups. Here again I would like to describe an actual class that I have watched. The work was very simple, as the class was only in its fifth or sixth week of English. The teacher was teaching the sentence pattern 'She is walking to the door' and 'She is walking from the door'. The pupils had already learnt to use the Present Continuous Tense. The new element was 'to' and 'from'. The class was in a room furnished with only a blackboard and the teacher's table and chair. The teacher demonstrated the sentence with the help of the leaders. 'I am walking to Martha.' 'I am walking to my table.' 'I am walking to the door.' She used only sentences with 'to'. The leaders imitated her, then made up their own sentences. Then she taught the second and third persons, allowing the leaders to decide on where they were walking, and matching her sentences to their actions. Then she let them fit sentences to one another's actions and use other verbs of movement that they knew: running, jumping, hopping, etc. She then sent them to their groups to practise. There were five groups, one in each corner of the room and one half-way down one side. The leaders set their groups to practise in the same way that the teacher had drilled them, using one another as 'posts' or making posts by putting something on the floor: 'I am walking to my bag.' The teacher herself went to the middle of the room where she could overhear every group, and went to the help of any

leader who was getting into difficulties. After the groups had practised she taught 'from' in the same way.

Granted that some of these sentences were artificial and that it would have been better if there had been pictures of places, such as a bus-stop or a post office, yet the important thing is that the class was very active, the pupils were getting a lot of individual practice, they were saying their sentences with a swing and rhythm, and they were enjoying themselves. They were able to apply this practice; for a little girl said as they left the room at the end of the lesson, 'I am walking to my classroom.' (The lesson had not been held in their own room.)

All the sentence structures taught in the early years can be practised in groups — tenses, prepositions, comparison of adjectives, etc. — after a demonstration by the teacher with the leaders. In the early stages classroom objects and simple things that the teacher can provide can be used. There is sometimes a little difficulty in supplying six groups with material to talk about. Pictures can be useful. Sometimes all the groups can use the same picture, if it is large enough, but if the teacher demonstrates with a picture that all the class can see, the groups can work with a smaller picture each. Pictures are very useful, for example, for practising sentences with 'There is ...' and 'There are'. Both questions and answers can be practised in the groups. The leader asks one boy a question, 'How many boys are there in the picture?' The boy answers, 'There are two boys in the picture.' The answer is repeated by the rest of the boys, then the second boy asks a question which is answered by the third boy, and so on. After the practice in the groups the teacher can ask a boy from one group to ask a question and a boy from another group to answer it. This shows the teacher how effective the practice has been.

These are only a few examples of ways in which groups can be used with junior classes. The next article will deal with group work in the higher classes.