

# Teaching English to Large Classes: 4

JEAN FORRESTER

PREVIOUS ARTICLE in this series described ways of using group work in the teaching of English to the class in the junior school. In this last article I want to describe how I have seen group-work techniques used in senior classes, including those preparing pupils for the examinations.

I want to start by describing a lesson I observed on the top class. Most teachers will agree that many pupils find precis difficult, and often produce something better than a mosaic of sentences and half sentences from the set passage. Not so these boys! Their teacher was the headmaster, an enthusiast for group work. He told me that before he started using this method he had always had to devote two periods to the precis exercise. In the first of these periods the boys wrote the precis individually after a certain amount of preparation. He then took the exercise books away to correct. He spent the next period returning the books, pointing over the mistakes, and often getting the precis rewritten. With group work he needed only one period for a passage, got better results, and gave himself far less homework.

The teacher asked me to select a passage for precis from the book used for rapid reading. There was, therefore, no question of the boys having prepared the passage before the lesson. He started the lesson by telling them the passage, 'Page 34, last paragraph to the middle of page 35. Get into groups and make a list of the chief points.' In the groups each leader appointed a boy to read the passage aloud, then asked for the first point. As the points were decided each boy wrote them down in his rough note book. While the group were doing this the teacher went round the groups pointing out mistakes, for example, 'There is one more point, look for it.' At the end of ten minutes, he went to the blackboard and asked one of the groups for the first point, another group for the second point, the third group for the next, and so on, making sure that the group that had missed a point understood. The work in groups took ten minutes, the summarizing on the board a little more than five. The group then wrote up the precis from the summary. As each sentence was suggested it was written down by each boy in his book, as in the lower classes, but the sentence was not repeated orally by every boy. Practice in spoken English was

provided by the discussion in the group. While the groups were working the teacher as usual went round the groups helping and correcting. The first group finished after fifteen minutes. Their precis had no mistakes in grammar. The second had two small mistakes in tense which were quickly corrected when they were pointed out. As soon as a group had finished its work the teacher checked one boy's book, the others corrected their books from this corrected copy and then made a fair copy in their composition books. In the 45-minute lesson more than half the class finished making their fair copies, the remaining boys agreed to finish copying out in the lunch hour. The teacher told me that it would take very little time to look through the fair copies. I was very agreeably surprised by the high quality of the work produced.

One can easily see how this method can be used in the writing of compositions. Points for a composition can be collected and arranged in groups. The teacher can then make one common outline for the whole class or else check each group's outline separately and let each group write its composition according to its own outline. The value of group work at this stage is that ideas are quickly collected and thus more time is available for the more important problem of expressing the ideas in correct English. Every teacher knows how the slower pupil faced with writing a composition in a foreign language seems suddenly completely bereft of ideas. It is true that sometimes he does lack ideas, but it is even more true that his real difficulty is his inability to express the idea he has. Working with a group he can often make a contribution and learn from the other boys how to express. A boy may be unwilling to make a suggestion in front of the whole class for fear of making mistakes, and slow to express himself in writing for the same reason, but in the more intimate circle of the group he is less afraid of his own limited English. When he has grown used to group work he will know how he can be helped. When there are six, or at the most eight, groups in a class it is possible for the teacher to correct the work of each group during the lesson, correcting one copy from each group. This has other advantages in addition to that of lightening considerably the burden of corrections. Mistakes are corrected immediately they are made, so there is more



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chance of the correct form being remembered. This is reinforced by the copying out of the corrected material.

Interesting and somewhat ambitious schemes of composition work can be carried out with groups. For example, a story known to the class from their study of the mother tongue, or from history, can be the basis of a co-operative story-writing effort. The story can be broken up into sections and each group made responsible for writing up one section of the story. Or the groups can work at dramatizing one of the books set for rapid reading, each group taking a different scene. Both the story-writing and the play-writing need some planning beforehand on the part of the teacher, but the fact that the material is familiar makes these much easier than compositions which involve the collecting of ideas.

Groups can work on answers to questions on books set for detailed study and rapid reading, grammar questions of all kinds, analysis, transformations, translations, etc. In each case the teacher walks round helping the groups where necessary and correcting answers when they are finished. The great advantage is that the amount of written work that the pupils can do is greatly increased and at the same time the teacher's burden of corrections is lessened. When the pupils work together in groups many of the elementary mistakes, such as plural verbs with single subjects, wrong sequence of tenses, wrong spelling, and omission of articles are corrected by other pupils in the group.

I would now like to describe an experiment in group work on the book set for detailed study that I watched in a class where the teacher had had considerable experience with group work. The teacher divided the passage into sections and allocated each section to a different group. He then read the passage aloud to the class without comment or explanation. He told the groups to make a list of the words they did not understand in the section he had allocated to them. This took about five minutes. The teacher asked the first group for its list and wrote the words across the board, five words to a line. He did the same for each group until he had all the words written up, omitting any words that he had been given already by another group. He ended with five columns of words with about six words in each group. He then assigned one column to each group and told them to make sentences using these words. Each group had a good dictionary. I was uneasy about this procedure, as I had always considered that it was the teacher's job to introduce new words to the class, illustrate them well, and only then expect the pupils to use them. However, I was very interested to

see what happened. As usual, the teacher went round the groups as they were working and helped them. It will be noticed that the pupils were asked to use words not only from the section they had read but from all the other sections. In practice this meant that the whole class read the whole passage. After about fifteen minutes the teacher went to the board and asked the first group for a sentence using the first word. He wrote it on the board and asked if the rest of the class accepted it. If they did, they then copied it down in their notebooks. If it was challenged or if the teacher himself considered it wrong, it was discussed and a correct sentence produced either by the teacher or, preferably, by one of the pupils. It was easy to see from this which words were real difficulties to the class, not always the ones that the teacher might have expected. It was interesting also to notice that the list of new words provided by the class included some which the pupil were supposed to have learnt in previous lessons but which had obviously not 'stuck'. Some of the words listed in the reader as new words were already known to the class.

This is a very demanding exercise for pupils. I was surprised at the number of good sentences produced by the groups. Some, of course, they had misunderstood and those the teacher was able to deal with adequately, having saved time on the words with which the class itself had dealt. This type of exercise throws great responsibility on the groups and trains them in the use of the dictionary under guidance. I do not think that I would advocate this practice for every passage, but it is certainly stimulating as a change and does encourage the pupils to believe that they can find out the meanings for themselves. This exercise is sometimes usefully preceded by one in which the pupils are asked general questions on the passage to see if they have gathered the gist of it. I have so often met pupils who have got it into their heads that they cannot answer a question on a passage if there are a few words they do not know. It is important to build up their confidence in their ability to understand the language without the aid of the teacher, and these general questions and the exercise on finding the meanings of words can help to do this if suitable passages are chosen.

As has already been said in previous articles, when group work is used it is possible for the teacher to give a great deal more written work, for this method provides a solution to the burden of corrections. The pupils must of course sometimes be given individual work to do. This can be given in the form of a monthly test to the whole class, or, if the teacher wishes, he can set one group to work individually while the rest of the class work in

groups. This means that he has only about eight books from boys of varied ability to correct.

One last word remains to be said about the slower pupil in this set-up. As group work provides much more opportunity for supervised use of the language, even if the supervision is that of fellow-pupils and not that of the teacher, elementary mistakes of grammar and structure are mostly eliminated. The slower pupils learn a great deal from other boys in the group. It sometimes happens that another pupil will understand the slow boy's difficulty better than the teacher as his memory of his own difficulty in learning is often more vivid than the teacher's. I have noticed keen group leaders, anxious that their group should do well, spend some time out of school coaching weak members of their groups. An interesting development in the higher classes with boys who have had a few years' training in group work is to put the slower boys in a group of their own for some exercises. I have known this done with precis and composition work. These boys produced short simple sentences, but they had very few actual mistakes. They

were working to the level of their own ability. It means a great deal to such boys to produce work that does not receive a generous spattering of red ink from the teacher. Once they have learnt to have some confidence in their ability to express themselves in English there is hope for their continued improvement.

The teacher who is willing to try group work will find that there are endless possibilities. It does, however, take a little time for the class to settle down to this co-operative way of working, especially if they have previously been brought up strictly not to consult and copy. At first the teacher may feel that this is waste of time, but if he perseveres he will find that he has time in hand for revision. A chronic complaint among teachers is that they have too little time to finish the syllabus. The teacher who used the group method which I have described above with the book set for detailed study told me that he was able to go through the book three times in the year. The standard of English reached by his class justified his methods. What more can be said?